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**Femality TV: The Representation of Feminine Fantasy via Reality  
Television**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts by Research

York St John University

School of Humanities

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## Abstract

This dissertation aims to identify and validate a distinct style of reality television programming that originates from the late 2000s and was made with, for and by women. The following thesis will use a criterion that has been established through an evaluation of feminist theory, celebrity, film and television studies to prove the style's existence. These criteria will then be used as a template for which three reality television case studies from the period will be explored as a product of the style. These case studies being *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, *The Real Housewives* franchise and *Vanderpump Rules*. In addition to providing a greater understanding of the selected case studies relevance and the influence they have within the contemporary American cultural landscape; the research will also examine how we perceive gender through both reality television and the media associated with such. Through the understanding of Femality TV as a style of reality television that is created through cross-media narrative building, this research challenges the way RTV is viewed both casually and academically. The research compiled will ultimately provide a foundation for further study into the ongoing trend of reality television shows that profit from the gossip media complex and how this trend will continue to impact American society and beyond through its depiction of womanhood as a kaleidoscope of experiences and roles.

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## **Femality TV: The Representation of Feminine Fantasy via Reality TV**

This dissertation introduces “Femality TV” into the lexicon of reality tv and celebrity media studies. The research presented will define “Femality TV” as a new term to describe a unique style of reality TV that focuses on femininity and womanhood and is aimed toward a female/queer audience. Consequentially, intending to validate the style to expand upon existing ideas on femininity, fantasy and celebrity to greater understand the relationship between the former and reality TV (RTV). This will be done through a selection of case studies that will act as demonstrators of the style and, through the application of a newly crafted criteria, they will be used as successful/unsuccessful examples of the style to establish the boundaries of the style and accurately place the style among the varying existing sub-genres belonging to reality TV. Additionally, the case studies will provide arguments in relation to the style, its former success, and the future longevity of the style.

In 2013 Lucia Soriano alluded to what I am declaring to be “Femality TV” as part of their critical analysis of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and its part in constructing the idea of the female body through its projection of “skewed images” of the female body, which are disingenuously passed as “reality.” Soriano stated, “*Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is part of a significant shift in television culture in which there has namely been a proliferation of reality television programs that feature all women, distributed by channels geared for women, and is ultimately watched by women.”<sup>1</sup> This dissertation is an attempt to identify and create boundaries for that “significant shift.” In 2017, Caetlin Benson-Allott also recognised a “recent renaissance of feminist television by and about women.”<sup>2</sup> Successively, in 2018 Jaqueline Arcy focused her work on transmedia storytelling within the “female centred docu-series.”<sup>3</sup> Whilst these texts recognised a pattern, they do not articulate the style as a distinction within the RTV genre. Consequently, this is the closest definition to Femality TV that currently exists in academic research. Arcy identified the gap that Femality

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<sup>1</sup> Lucia Soriano, “‘Hey Doll:’ Keeping up with the Kardashians and the Construction of the Feminine Body.” *CGE & GSS Program Interdisciplinary Conference*, (2013), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Caetlin Benson-Allott, ‘No such thing yet: Questioning Television’s Female Gaze,’ *Film Quarterly*, 71, 2 (2017), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Jaqueline Arcy, ‘The digital money shot: Twitter wars, *The Real Housewives* and transmedia storytelling,’ *Celebrity Studies*, 9, 4, (2018), 487-502, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2018.1508951>, P.488.

TV fulfils and observed that there has been a lack of academic attention toward this area of reality television centred around women. Since Arcy's text there has been an increase in contributions to the field, however, the specificities of the style of programming that focuses on a female audience and the portrayal of representations of womanhood have not yet been defined.

### **Approach to Research:**

This research will be approached through the perspective of case study analysis in line with a criteria that will be established later on in this introductory section. Case studies will be used as a means of identifying a pattern within select RTV programming, of which, the style of RTV that this research is aiming to validate will be made evident. Through the usage of case studies, similarities can be highlighted and individual academic works on the topic of RTV and feminism can be interpolated to support existing arguments relating to the intertextuality of gendered entertainment. The approach of this research will be a textual analysis of television episodes, magazine articles, Paparazzi images and social media platforms. Secondary sources such as journal articles, online articles, chapters from edited collections and informal columns from online magazines have been collated to assist with the analysis of the aforementioned primary sources/case studies.

The television programmes chosen for the case studies are: *Keeping up with the Kardashians (KUWTK)*, *The Real Housewives* franchise (*TRH*) and *Vanderpump Rules (VPR)*. These series have been chosen for their intertextuality with one another and the way in which they share commonalities that confine them to a select style of RTV. This research seeks to prove the existence of the style of Femality TV and the aforementioned case studies have been selected due to shared themes and tropes that can be utilised to define and validate the style. These commonalities will be made identifiable through a criteria. The themes of this criteria are as follows: the centralisation of the female voice, hyper-feminine imagery, the subject of feminine fantasy, the female and queer audience and the concept of camp. Each chapter in this research serves as a case study for their respective television show and the chapters will simultaneously seek to prove the existence of the Femality TV

style through pattern recognition whilst also identifying notable topics of discussion within the style.

Branching off from Susan Murray and Laurie Outlette's work in 2004 on the sub-genres of RTV,<sup>4</sup> in 2006 Mina Tsay and K Maja Krakowiak dissected the viewing patterns and qualities of the different sub-genres of RTV. They identified nine distinct categories, one of which being the "docu-soap." They described the docusoap as the following: "docusoaps showcase individuals who are simply reacting to their natural environment, capturing real-life events that are edited similarly to soap operas."<sup>5</sup> Whilst it could be argued the selected case studies are not solely docu-soaps but rather a combination of "docu-soap" and "reality sitcom"<sup>6</sup> and "documentary" due to their split focus on actuality, drama and comedy, in existing research the selected case studies are commonly referred to as "female centred docu-soaps." Additionally, Arcy's recognition of the convergence between television and "new media" and the effect it had upon the docu-soap is a fundamental aspect of this research. Femality TV is an exploration of the exact point at which this convergence happens as the style is dependent on external media, working in accordance with the wider gossip industry in a mutually beneficial strategy that creates further engagement among its gossip-seeking audience. When locating the origin point for the Femality TV style within RTV, the period of the late 2000s and early 2010s stand out within this research, as RTV programming saw a shift from "scripted reality" towards the "docu-soap." Both *KUWTK* and *TRH* came to prominence in the late 2000s with similar approaches to the docu-soap sub-genre. There are other RTV programmes from this period that act as supporting texts to the thesis such as *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, *Jersey Shore* and *The Simple Life*. However, these shows lack the consistency shown by both *KUWTK* and *TRH* in conjunction with the Femality TV criteria. Both of these case studies are approached from the perspective of treating them as articles of the Femality TV style. These shows are dedicated to exploring the emotionality of women and catering to a female gaze that is preoccupied with visual taste and the representation of authentic relationships between women.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, (New York: NYU Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Mina Tsay, K. Maja Krakowiak, and Christine Kleck, 'Redefining reality TV: Exploring viewers' perceptions of nine subgenres,' *Conference Papers—International Communication Association*, (2006), p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Tsay, p.4.



To understand Femality TV, the term “Femality” must first be defined, as both a style and a quality. In the same vein as June Deery’s term “Reality Advertainment,”<sup>7</sup> used to describe the relationship between reality television and consumerism, and Brad Waite and Sara Booker’s “Humilitainment,”<sup>8</sup> a term used to reference the joy felt from humiliation in entertainment products such as RTV, “Femality TV” is female orientated entertainment via the medium of RTV. Diverging off existing research from feminist and media critics such as June Deery, Gloria Steinem and Brenda Weber around reality tv and its chokehold on female audiences, Femality is a term derived from the combination of “female” and “reality.” Therefore, at its core, “Femality TV” is RTV that is for and showcases women and femininity. However, there are many attributes and distinctions that mark Femality TV products as distinguishable from RTV that coincidentally is popular with women or merely features women. It has now been established that Femality TV as a style came from the late 2000s and is defined as “feminised RTV.” However, the criteria itself needs to be outlined to identify and clearly define what the term infers. Many RTV products boast a female audience but not all fall under the style of Femality TV. To establish a programme as an example of Femality TV, there are some key identifiers that will be outlined in the following sections.

### **The centralisation of the female voice**

The first aspect to consider when assessing a material as belonging to the Femality TV style is whether it favours and centralises the female voice. Historically, women have been constricted in terms of space, both physical and metaphysical. As Virginia Woolf outlined in *A Room of One’s Own*, for women to achieve equal intellectual and creative opportunity to men, would require not only financial stability but also a physical private space where she can write.<sup>9</sup> First wave feminists recognised the existence of a patriarchal system within society that prevented women from achieving autonomy and agency through physical, intellectual and cultural exclusion. This exclusionary approach to womanhood was

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<sup>7</sup> June Deery, ‘Reality TV as Advertainment,’ *Popular Communication*, 2, 1, (2004), 1-20, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15405710pc0201\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15405710pc0201_1)

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Booker and Bradley M. Waite, "Humilitainment? Lessons from 'The Apprentice': A Reality Television Content Analysis," *17th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Society*, (Los Angeles: 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London: Penguin, 2000).

due to an assumed inequality of intellect and ability (as will be discussed through the application of Emmanuel Kant's view on gendered reasoning) and thus led to distrust in a woman's competency to act as the narrator. This narrative bias remains prevalent throughout literature and film beyond Wolfe's initial observation, where the male voice is prioritised by an industry that is still dominated by men.

Femality TV satisfies this absence of female narration by providing a dedicated space for women to narrate their experience and emotionality through the form of the confessional. The lack of vocalisation of female narrative can be attributed to historical gendered exclusion of women. Historically women have held the position of the object of male viewership within visual media. This is a stance Laura Mulvey developed in her work "The Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." In the text, Mulvey places the woman as the object of male viewership and the man as the viewer.<sup>10</sup> Revisiting Wolfe's advocacy of the need for space to express intellect, Nancy J Hirschmann explored Kant's perspective on female autonomy and reasoning. Kant argued that rather than women "being unable to reason" they "should not reason" for it would compromise their "'beautiful' understanding needed to compliment men's 'deep' understanding of reason."<sup>11</sup> Thus accepting women can express intellect but that their value was better suited to evaluating beauty and the visual. Hirschmann states Kant's prescriptive vision is of "gender hierarchy, male privilege and male freedom, all of which are possible by female unfreedom" he "believes that all women are locked into the phenomenal realm because they cannot transcend the body."<sup>12</sup> This idea of women being bound by their physical body and men being free to ponder and conceptualise is reflective of the male gaze, whereby man is positioned as the viewer and woman as image for viewing.

The Kantian inequality in attitudes toward both the mind and body of the woman provides context for the continual success of Femality TV viewing. The skewed value in

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<sup>10</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'The Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,' *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Leitch, Cain, Finke, McGowan, Sharpley-Whiting and Williams, (W.W Norton & Company. Inc, 2018), pp.1597.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Hirschmann, *Gender, Class and Freedom in Modern Political Theory*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), p.204.

<sup>12</sup> Hirschmann, p204.

favour of a woman's appearance over her intellect has resulted in an absence of space within popular culture for products created *for* women and furthermore *by* women. Women within film and television have been marginalised as products reserved to the visual sphere and this absence has further propagated the idea that Hollywood and television prioritise the male gaze. In 2020 the campaign group "We are Doc Women" (WADW) researched the gender divide in factual television making in the UK and their findings concluded that women were disadvantaged in the industry with men having the opportunity to shoot earlier: "40% are offered camerawork while still at researcher level, compared with only 23% of women."<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, women remain in lower-paid positions longer and are less likely to be given a second chance to direct.<sup>14</sup> Although this research took place in the UK the issue remains the same in America with 21% of all film makers in America being women.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, a woman director has won the Academy Award for best director only three times since the award show began in the 1920s, the first of which being in 2008 by Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurtlocker*. Thus, validating the dynamic of women belonging in front of the camera lens and not behind it. However, *Bravo*, the production company behind *TRH* and *VPR* features many women within the production teams, operating over all levels of production including executive producers like Toni Gallagher and Lauren Eskelin.<sup>16</sup> Femality TV is that space where women can voice their opinion and be creative not only in front of the camera but also behind it.

The criticism of Hollywood's centralisation of the male voice can concurrently be attributed to the prevalence of male directed and produced content. Female audiences find dialogue written by men from the perspective of a woman to be inauthentic and unsympathetic to their experience of womanhood. This presence of women in the Femality TV production process confirms this notion through the higher satisfaction rates from the predominantly female audience. This can be applied to the case studies where the female

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<sup>13</sup> Vanessa Thorpe, 'Female Directors wait longer than men for their big break, report reveals,' *The Guardian*, (Oct 2021.)

<sup>14</sup> Thorpe, *The Guardian*.

<sup>15</sup> "Distribution of movie directors in the U.S. 2011-2021." Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/696871/movie-director-gender/>

<sup>16</sup> Emily Longeretta, 'Reality TV Power Players in 2023: Meet the Minds Who Changed Reality TV Forever: From "Love is Blind" to "Real World: Homecoming,"' *Variety*, (Apr 2023), <https://variety.com/lists/love-is-blind-real-world-reality-tv-impact/rod-aissa-2/>

stars themselves often function as executive producers and the female directors are dedicated to capturing the emotionality of the stars' experiences. This championing of the female voice is compounded by the emphasis on communicating the stars' emotionality and narrative through the confessional sequence which is an essential staple of the Femality TV style.

There are many examples of how female agency and creativity thrives within Femality TV, with the most prominent being through a "confessional" sequence. This is when the protagonist is framed in a shot where they are talking directly to the camera/viewer. The confessional is reminiscent of Eduard Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia*,<sup>17</sup> known for its female subject's "challenging gaze"<sup>18</sup> toward the viewer. *Olympia* drew criticism in France upon its release for the offensiveness of the gaze and Olympia's representation as a seemingly "dangerous seductress."<sup>19</sup> The trope of the woman as a "dangerous seductress"<sup>20</sup> is one that has penetrated through culture and becoming seemingly inescapable. The woman has historically often been portrayed as a two-dimensional overly sexualised figure (as referenced in Mulvey's work). However, through RTV and the programmes selected for this research, women who were victims of the tabloid industry's sexualised male lens<sup>21</sup> were given an opportunity to communicate their own narrative directly toward their audience. The need for space that is dedicated to voicing a woman's thoughts remains ever present in society and the confessional sequence can be seen as a marker of feminist ambition. RTV in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century became one of the most effective modes of communicating with an audience for women. In a period where discourse on celebrity women has been dictated by men who framed them under a sexualised light via cinema, tabloid media and even the RTV genre itself, the ability to directly communicate with the viewer was an opportunity that many women profited from, as seen with Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian. Misha Kavka described television as "the great guarantor of visibility."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Femality TV's

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<sup>17</sup> Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

<sup>18</sup> Phyllis A Floyd, 'The Puzzle of *Olympia*,' *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, 3, 1, (2004), 1-28, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring04/285-the-puzzle-of-olympia>.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, (Routledge, 2001), p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Bertens, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Clement Cheroux, *Paparazzi!, Photographers, Stars, Artists*, (Flammarion, 2014), p.16.

<sup>22</sup> Kavka, Misha. "Reality TV and the Gendered Politics of Flaunting" in *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality and Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, ed. by Brenda Weber, (Duke University Press, 2014) P.72.

significance is through making women, and various depictions of femininity, more visible within popular culture by providing a space for their voices and emotionality to be championed.

### **Hyper-feminine imagery**

Due to the influence of women within the production process as well as the focus of wealthy women who are living aspirational lavish lifestyles in Femality TV shows, there is often a focus on feminine imagery and iconography, with special reference to the hyper-feminine. Hyper-femininity refers to exaggerated visual signifiers of femininity such as hair extensions, false nails, elongated false lashes, plump lips and fashion trends that emphasise an hourglass figure. These signifiers appeal to the “ideal” of the female image as seen from a male’s perspective. Whilst the “ideal” image of beauty has shifted constantly throughout history across all cultures to a point where it cannot be identified as monolithic, American culture at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century celebrated thinness and blond-haired, blue-eyed young white women became the epitome of American beauty. This ideal seemingly solidified itself through icons of female sexuality within the 2000s such as Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, Anna Nicole Smith, Pamela Anderson, Christina Aguilera and Denise Richards: blonde, thin, sexualised American women. Misha Kavka discusses the relationship between “hyper-femininity” and RTV in her chapter “Reality TV and the Gendered Politics of Flaunting,” in which she uses the idea established by Judith Butler in 1990 that gender is “performative”<sup>23</sup> and contrived from stereotypes via emulation as opposed to any natural occurrence. Kavka goes on to equate femininity with visibility: “the requirement that women be visible means that femininity is accepted as socially normative only when it is heightened by the condition of being seen. Femininity must be flaunted... to accentuate a woman’s power of/as visibility.”<sup>24</sup> Simone De Beauvoir notably referred to woman as man’s “other”<sup>25</sup> in the 1949 book *The Second Sex*. Concurrently, she encouraged women to embrace their otherness as a means of gaining power over men who had created a

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<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender Trouble,” In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed by Vincent B. Leitch and others, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company. Inc, 2018), p.2387.

<sup>24</sup> Kavka, p.59.

<sup>25</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, ‘The Second Sex,’ in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed by Vincent B Leitch and others, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), p.1214.

patriarchal society, where men are favoured and women seemingly powerless and without agency. Hyper-feminine imagery can therefore be perceived as an attempt to balance inequality between sexes within the cultural sphere. The embracing of stereotypical depictions of femininity such as long hair and makeup that emphasises features like the lips and eyes serves as an example of identifying with the label of woman as man's 'other.' This argument can be extended to the case for Femality TV's existence. Through the feminisation of RTV, as seen through the selected case studies, women are reclaiming the genre that once profited from their demise and was exploitative toward them. As previously established, the RTV platform and specifically Femality TV style provided women with a narrative space and the imagery associated with such a space further solidifies the space as distinct from the broader genre.

Perhaps the clearest example of hyper-feminine imagery within Femality TV is the emphasis on fashion. Patrizia Calefato discusses the importance of fashion within culture as a means of translating meaning and socially nuanced concepts through visuality.<sup>26</sup> There is a coded history behind the idea of the woman and what a woman signifies. Furthermore, her clothes are indicative of her personal character as well as her association with the preconceived stereotypes and tropes assigned to women generally. Peter Munz explored the relationship between history and myth in 1956, describing the bond as being co-dependent as opposed to the difference between "fact and fiction."<sup>27</sup> He describes this pairing through the usage of the Latin terms "rea gestae" and "historia rerum gestarum," meaning "the totality of everything that ever happened" and "the narrative of the events that happened"<sup>28</sup> respectively. Calefato uses this term in reference to the role fashion plays in historical narrative, "clothes tell a story, understood in the sense of History – of Historia Rerum Gestarum."<sup>29</sup> Fashion is mythic in its ability to tell story and its usage in literary products as a tool to signify meaning. Clothing can be historically mapped; however, fashion transcends time and is not underpinned by specific dates but rather encompasses metaphysical eras. Fashion's fixation in the abstract area of narrative emboldens its

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<sup>26</sup> Patrizia Calefato, *Fashion as Cultural translation: Signs, Images, Narratives*, (Anthem Press, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Peter Munz, 'History and Myth,' *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 6, 22, (1956), p.2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2217333>

<sup>28</sup> Munz, p.2.

<sup>29</sup> Calefato, p.106.

relationship with fantasy. The fantasy of the ideal woman and what she wears is the narrative that is visible in Femality TV. If Femality TV is a performance of gender, then fashion is its costume and through the reading of hyper-femininity as a costume, inferences can be made regarding American culture and the current political climate in relation to codes of gender.

### **The subject of female-fantasy**

Andy Warhol stated in his autobiography: "Everyone has a fantasy."<sup>30</sup> This quote applies to Femality TV in the sense that part of the entertainment is derived from the projection of fantasy. However, the act of fantasising is often trivialised through the assumption that it is associated with idolism, procrastination and a signifier of emotional immaturity. These criticisms are often carried over to the audience of Femality TV, whereby the chosen case studies have been parodied and criticised for their artificiality through their focus on capturing lifestyles through scenery and materialism. Fantasy is aspirational desire; a wistful yearning for something currently untrue and no one is exempt from engaging with such. *TRH* can be compared against *Top Gear* in the sense that the predominantly male viewers fantasise about the materialism of owning the super-cars displayed on the show. To understand Femality TV, one's understanding of fantasy as not a detachment from reality but rather an inherent and inescapable aspect of life is essential. Femality TV offers its female audience a chance to upwardly assimilate or upwardly contrast<sup>31</sup> their consciousness onto the lives of those they deem successful or aspirational. This fantasy stems from an association of an engagement in consumption as a quantifiable demonstrator of success. Consequently, Femality TV depicts consumerism through a glamourised lens through the understanding that its female audience use it as a site to fantasise. The selected case studies have been criticised for their relationship with consumerist habits. Bravo's *TRH* is exemplary of this. Bravo relies on consumerism for not only its content and its ability to appeal to feminine fantasy but also as part of a business strategy to further profit from the audience it has cultivated. Bravo has created a universe of consumption through the usage of cross-

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<sup>30</sup> Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: from A to B and back again*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p.40.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.66.

platform promotion of “Bravolebrity” (Bravo celebrity) products, the development of spin-off series, the talk show *Watch What Happens Live* (dedicated to discussing Bravo programming), the usage of blogs in the early 2010s and finally the creation of Bravocon, a convention for their audience to engage with the product that is the Bravolebrity themselves.

Diane Negra explored the desire of a female audience in her 2008 text “Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism.” In the text Negra begins by exploring the trope of the domestic housewife and the romanticism of the “hometown,” however, in later chapters she focuses on “hyper-domesticity” and the concept of “self-care.” The notion of self-care has amplified in the recent decade as the importance of mental health has been centralised in public discourse. Self-care has now become interchangeable with “engaging in consumerism” as it refers to “treating” oneself by purchasing an item, food, experience or service in the name of bringing upon personal happiness. This is a topic that Nicole Cox and Jennifer Proffit developed upon. They observed that consumption is used as a suggestion that female happiness can be bought, thus the fantasy that is projected is an elaborate commercial. They suggest female happiness is central to the narrative as a guise for this theme of consumption, highlighting Bravo’s emphasis on encouraging their female audience to spend.<sup>32</sup> And if done in the name of female happiness, no expense is too costly thus encouraging a culture of self-improvement.<sup>33</sup> Negra used *InStyle* magazine as an example of the glorification of luxury material consumption propagated by celebrities’ “private lives.”<sup>34</sup> This connection between commodified fantasy sold within tabloid and gossip magazines (Femality media) suggests that the magazines serve as an advertisement for material industries. Pictures of celebrity outfits caught by the paparazzi are placed in conjunction with paid-for-advertisements for products that correlate with the fantasy sold by the celebrity image and caption. Using Negra’s assessment of magazines as advertisements for fantasy through capitalist modes of consumerism, Femality TV can be viewed as the manifestation of this targeted approach to commodify the female fantasy.

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<sup>32</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.299.

<sup>33</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.300.

<sup>34</sup> Negra, Dianne. “Hyperdomesticity, self-care, and the well-lived life in Postfeminism,” in *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, (Routledge, 2009), P.144.



To build upon Misha Kavka's musings on hyper-feminine imagery whereby exaggerate femininity is a site for feminine empowerment, she positions the depiction of overtly feminine imagery seen in RTV as a method of flaunting. Yajin Wang and Vladus Griskevicius present the argument that that the flaunting of luxury goods by men is to attract mates and the flaunting of wealth and commodities by women seeks to discern rival women.<sup>35</sup> Whilst this article makes a good argument for the relationship between men and luxury as a "sexual signalling system"<sup>36</sup> to attract romantic partners, the framing of women as in competition with each other is contradicted by the success of shows like *RHOBH* that focuses on friendships between married women. Flaunting is an essential aspect of the Femality TV style as it provides material for aspirational fantasy. For the viewer to *want*, the viewed must *display*. Producer for RTV shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, Carlos King, is quoted with saying "you have to show your wealth. You have to wear your wealth."<sup>37</sup> This showcasing of luxury is essential to the viewing experience of Femality TV due to its worth as a product marketed toward female fantasy.

Kavka's association of hyper-femininity as the flaunting of sexuality extends into RTV and thus intersects with the flaunting of wealth present in Femality TV programming. Misha Kavka states flaunting withing these shows operates on three levels: "the affective flaunting of women's emotionalism associated with catfights and meltdowns, the bodily flaunting of fake breasts and fake tans associated with image-conscious femininity, and the materialistic flaunting of mansions and cars associated with luxury lifestyles."<sup>38</sup> The bodily flaunting Kavka talks about in this paper is referred to in the sense of hyper-femininity. The flaunting of material wealth is described colloquially as "lifestyle porn," and the flaunting of emotionality relates to the idea of upward/downward comparisons made by the viewer, whereby through character the women on camera are seen as aspirational for their similarities to the audience (this will be explained in the following).

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<sup>35</sup>Yajin Wang and Vladus Griskevicius, "Conspicuous Consumption, Relationships, and Rivals: Women's Luxury Products as Signals to Other Women," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40, 5 (2014), p.834, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673256>.

<sup>36</sup> Wang and Griskevicius, p.834.

<sup>37</sup> *For Real: The Story of Reality TV*, Andy Cohen and Gil Goldschien, (Bunim Murray Productions, 2021)

<sup>38</sup> Kavka, p.56.

### The female/queer audience

For many, RTV is instinctually a female targeted medium. Brian Moylan views RTV as intrinsically female in its viewership<sup>39</sup> and for June Deery “gossip, celebrity and popular culture”<sup>40</sup> are feminised art forms. Therefore, Femality TV programming that highlights celebrity and gossip as a product of modern popular culture is a feminised art form. For Femality TV, this is proven to be true through various statistics such as the streaming platform demographics of *HayU*, a platform curated to female and queer viewing habits. However, RTV more broadly is not a solely female media. Viewership is relatively evenly divided with statistics from 2011 stating the ratio to be 60:40 in favour of female viewership.<sup>41</sup> Through a conscious awareness of this demographic the shows under Femality TV are produced with a female audience in mind and thus proposes the question of whether a female gaze applies to the framing of the camera à la Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze.” There are multiple approaches to the female gaze. Jessica Taylor interpreted the female gaze as being the inverse of the male gaze, with the female gaze favouring the sexualisation of male bodies.<sup>42</sup> Eve Psarras’s study of RTV audiences notes the large homosexual male following shows like *TRH* has.<sup>43</sup> Thus, credence is given to the perspective that the Femality TV lens sexualises the male body. Alternatively, however, the audience of shows like *TRH* are an educated audience”<sup>44</sup> and thus the appeal cannot be attributed to solely basal sexuality. The implementation of the “female gaze” within this research can be directly challenged by the significant homosexual male sectile of the audience. Therefore, the term “female gaze” is dismissive of a large section of viewership. Alternatively, the term “femme gaze” will be

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Moylan, “Gloria Steinem hates it – but is *The Real Housewives* secretly a feminist triumph?” *The Guardian*, (2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/jun/08/gloria-steinem-hates-it-but-is-the-real-housewives-secretly-a-feminist-triumph>

<sup>40</sup> June Deery, *Reality TV*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Marissa Guthrie and Lacey Rose, ‘Testosterone TV: What Shows Are Watched Most By Men,’ *The Hollywood Reporter*, (2011), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/television-shows-men-watch-222356/>

<sup>42</sup> Jessica Taylor, “Romance and the Female Gaze: Obscuring Gendered Violence in the *Twilight* Saga,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 14, 3 (2012), pp.388-402.

<sup>43</sup> Eve Psarras, ‘We all want to be big stars: The desire for fame and the draw to *The Real Housewives*,’ *Clothing Cultures*, 2, 1, (University of Illinois-Chicago, 2015), 51-72, <https://doi.org/10.1386/cc.2.1.51.1>.

<sup>44</sup> Nicole B. Cox, ‘Banking on Females: Bravo’s Commodification of the Female Audience,’ *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 8, 3, (2015), 466-483, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12091>, p.466.

utilised when referencing the material catering to a female and homosexual male audience. There has long-since been an interconnectivity between LGBTQ communities and culture that is created with a female audience in mind. It can be argued that the absence of sexualised female bodies can be attributed to this shared commonality in viewing habits as well as an appreciation of the hyper-femme aesthetic.

Nicky Lewis and Andrew J Weaver studied the psychological response from participants who were invited to watch a clip from RTV to gain a greater understanding of whether social comparisons to cast members influenced their emotional responses. They use Festinger's notes on social comparison theory to suggest the incentive of RTV is to compare oneself against those cast to gain a feeling of certainty about the self. They outline three types of comparisons: "lateral, upward and downward."<sup>45</sup> Downward comparisons see the viewer comparing themselves to those worse off to gain a more positive self-image, upward comparisons being the inverse. They suggest that those who use upward comparisons are self-affirmed, unlike those who make downward comparisons. They go on to use Smith who outlined four distinct social comparisons: upward assimilative, downward assimilative, upward contrastive and downward contrastive; with assimilative being a comparison of similarities and contrastive being a comparison of differences. Upward assimilative is where the idea of lifestyle porn can be applied. Those who view the elaborate depictions of wealth on *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* do so as a means of aspiration, they see similarities between themselves and Lisa Vanderpump and thus envision a similar life as being possible in their fantasy. However, some who see such depictions of success may make contrastive comparisons, convincing themselves they could not achieve such success as they do not see similarities. Conversely, those who make downward contrastive comparisons gain a sense of affirmation from their differences with those worse off. An example of a downward comparison would be watching *Vanderpump Rules* and gaining satisfaction from being unable to relate to cast members who cheat on their partners or display inappropriate behaviour. The study also notes the German word "schadenfreude,"

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<sup>45</sup> Nicky Lewis and Andrew J. Weaver, "Emotional Responses to Social Comparisons in Reality Television Programming," *Journal of Media Psychology*, 28, 2, (2016), P.66.

used to describe the “pleasant feeling”<sup>46</sup> gained from another’s failure. This idea that pleasure is derived from witnessing the trauma of others retorts back to “humilitainment.”<sup>47</sup>

## Camp

In her study into the viewing incentive of *TRH*, Eve Psarras featured responses from participants, with one summarising the appeal as “campy.” They stated of the Housewives: “they create drama because there’s nothing better to do. That to me is entertaining and so campy ... but it’s gratifying because you’re like, okay that makes me feel better about my own problems.”<sup>48</sup> Susan Sontag defined camp in her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” she describes camp as a quality as well as a product. For example, something can be camp or have elements of camp or as stated by the respondent be “campy.” Sontag states the purpose of camp to be to “dethrone the serious [...] it is playful, anti-serious.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, its relationship to Femality TV must be made evident through the presence of the absurd and lack of rationale; thus, “creating drama because there’s nothing better to do.” The concept is bizarre and not a logical conclusion to having nothing to do. Camp moments are a fundamental quality for Femality TV viewing and to understand why absurdity is so pleasurable for an “upscale, educated audience,”<sup>50</sup> the relationship can be perceived through a guilty pleasure lens. This relationship between camp and guilty pleasure viewing is explored by Charles Allen McCoy and Rosco Scarborough.<sup>51</sup> This argument can be expanded upon with the addition of the aforementioned “humilitainment.”<sup>52</sup> The positioning of Femality TV as a “guilty pleasure,” thus citing it as a source of embarrassment, is suggestive that those who consume the programmes are interpreted by others as to reflect the characteristics and qualities of those who participate. It is, therefore, not only those who star in RTV that are humiliated for entertainment, but also the viewer who is humiliated by the assumption they partake in such schadenfreudian activity.

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<sup>46</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.67.

<sup>47</sup> Waite and Booker.

<sup>48</sup> Psarras, p.59.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, (Partisan Review, 1964), p.10.

<sup>50</sup> Nicole B. Cox, ‘Banking on Females: Bravo’s Commodification of the Female Audience,’ *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 8, 3, (2015), 466-483, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12091>, p.466.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Allen McCoy and Rosco Scarborough, ‘Watching Bad Television: Ironic Consumption, Camp and Guilty Pleasures,’ *Poetics*, 47, (2014), 41-59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2014.10.003>.

<sup>52</sup> Waite and Booker.

Camp is directly connected to the audience of Femality TV through not only its presence in the programmes but also through their connection and overlap with other cultural products that relish in hyper-feminine iconography. There is a significant overlap between the audience for Femality TV and queer culture such as drag, ball and fashion. All have been embraced by the queer and feminine presenting community. Eve Psarras supports this argument in favour of watching RTV through its “campy” qualities; as already stated, she makes note of the largely homosexual fan base for *TRH*.<sup>53</sup> Kavka discusses the relationship between RTV and its camp quality as a progression from RTV as an exhibitionist performance.<sup>54</sup> She uses a quote from Samuel Chambers to express how conscious representations of gender like drag queens and the Housewives expose the inconsistencies of gender and sexuality: ““Often the characters on the show work so hard to preserve normality that in the process they reveal the workings of gender and sex norms.” This is also, no surprise, the camp revelation of the drag queen, and it could easily be extended to *The Real Housewives*, which locates potential subversiveness precisely in the act of flaunting the means by which femininity is endowed with social visibility.”<sup>55</sup>

These themes are the criteria that support Femality TV’s existence as a distinction from the broader genre of RTV. However, when placing Femality TV as a style separate from reality TV, the current understanding of reality TV and the feminine must be acknowledged. When examining RTV from a historical perspective, the point of origin is one of contention. For many, the premiere reality show was *An American Family* (1973). Stylistically very similar to a documentary, the show followed a typical nuclear American family in their day-to-day lives and acted as a precursor for later shows. When identifying programmes as belonging to the reality TV category the distinction must be made from the documentary. This is a topic Arild Fetveit explored in his text “Reality TV in the Digital Era: A Paradox in Visual Culture?” Fetveit refers to “actuality material,” this being visual products that depict reality in an authentic manner, as seen in the documentary style.<sup>56</sup> Fetveit uses Dziga

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<sup>53</sup> Psarras, p.52.

<sup>54</sup> Kavka, p.58

<sup>55</sup> Kavka, p.65

<sup>56</sup> Arid Fetveit, ‘Reality TV in the digital era: a paradox in visual culture?’ *Media, Culture and Society*, 21, 6, (1999), 787-804. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344399021006005> p.791.

Vertov's *Kino Pravda* "to catch life's 'unawares' and from the *verité* movements of the 1960s to give an objective view of life as it unfolds,"<sup>57</sup> ultimately arguing that the purpose of evidential photography is present in RTV. However, Fetveit's text comes from 1999, therefore acting as a precursor to the RTV boom of the 2000s. The perspective that "actuality material" was favoured over "dramatization" post war is outdated and converse to the current opinion on RTV as being overtly dramatized to the point of absurdity. Modern perspectives of RTV, such as Eve Psarras believe a key quality of the genre to be the dramatization of mundanity and the maintenance of authenticity<sup>58</sup>. Therefore, through applying Psarras' understanding of RTV, *An American Family* is closer to the documentary than the Femality TV style.

This contrast between "actuality" and "dramatization" is evident within Femality TV through the embracement of that which is camp. As previously mentioned, camp is an important aspect of Femality TV as it counteracts the elements of RTV shared by the documentary. Such elements being "actuality material" and "evidential purpose of photography." Shows like *TRH*, *KUWTK* and *VPR* aim to display the actuality of famous or privileged lives, however, their purpose is not to do so in a vacuum or controlled setting. Entertainment and fun are an integral part of viewing and thus the talent selected for the shows must themselves be entertaining. This source of entertainment is often through the lens of camp. The participants are often absurd in their personal delusion or actions and thus entertaining to watch. The shows are not completely unserious as they often tackle issues on morality that are complex and dark in nature. This will be explored through the chapters with instances such as Taylor Armstrong's struggles in her marriage with accusations of domestic abuse and suicide in *RHOBH* as well as the public transitioning of patriarchal figure Bruce Jenner (now Caitlyn) in *KUWTK*. However, they largely remain playful. Brad Wait and Sarah Brooker's concept of "Reality Humilitainment," whereby RTV acts to humiliate and degrade those who participate for the most part appears to be absent

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<sup>57</sup> Fetveit, p.794.

<sup>58</sup> Eve Psarras, "'It's a mix of authenticity and complete fabrication'" Emotional Camping: The Cross Platform Labour of *The Real Housewives*, *New Media & Society*, 24, 6, (2022), 1382-1398.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820975025>.

from Femality TV style, rather there is an encouragement of empowerment towards the stars, with the cast often acting as a support group for those affected by tragedy.

This criteria will be used to analyse the selected case studies over three chapters focusing on different aspects of the criteria and how it relates to the case study. Chapter one will be an exploration of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, analysed from the perspective of how women relate to depictions of the female body within visual entertainment. *KUWTK* and the Kardashian family are synonymous in popular culture for creating issues with self-image through the growing influence of celebrity bodies upon young women. The cast's status as celebrity figures is amplified the most in this case study as their new brand of celebrity perforated American culture in the 2010s. *KUWTK* was chosen partially due to this elevated status of the cast members. The chapter will lay foundational work on the topic of self-branding and the reality tv star which will be further developed upon in chapter two through the theme of commercialism. The breakout star Kim Kardashian draws parallels from former friend and fellow RTV star Paris Hilton whose own show compliments the Femality TV style. This comparison is a site for the argument that Femality TV is co-dependent upon its relationship with gossip media, specifically the paparazzi and social media. This theme is influential to the episodes chosen for analysis. Episodes focusing on the impact of the paparazzi's lens upon the family are drawn upon to corroborate this perspective that Femality TV relies upon "Femality media" in a cyclical manner, whereby celebrity is both created and destroyed through the relationship between tabloid media and television.

Chapter two will refocus the argument in favour of Femality TV's existence by analysing Bravo's formulaic approach to feminised RTV. Bravo's franchise model of *TRH* titles pushes the argument that Femality TV is a distinction of RTV, with clear boundaries that can be replicated and marketed towards the same audience that engage with *KUWTK*. The chapter builds upon the argument made in chapter one relating to the existence of a relationship between the RTV star and gossip media, by framing the relationship as transactional and a central component of the Femality TV style. The chapter explores the commercial viability of both the style and the stars it produces. Where chapter one frames the stars as the attraction, *TRH* positions the stars as fledgeling celebrities or fleeting

celebrities (celetoids, as described by Chris Rojek.)<sup>59</sup> The Housewives use the show as a platform to create their self-brand and cultivate individual commercial endeavours. The chapter will also advocate for the style as a powerful tool for positive representations of womanhood and female ageing. The chapter will focus on the franchise as a model as opposed to the value of individual entries and, therefore, moments and quotes will be utilised from a range of episodes across multiple locations within the franchise. This leaves room for further investigation into Femality TV in relation to *TRH* as each location has a unique approach to the formula and can be studied further. Episodes are selected from the differing entries to the franchise to illustrate the differences and similarities across the franchise, primarily relating to femininity and identity.

*Vanderpump Rules* has been chosen as a case study because of its dissonance with the criteria of Femality TV style. This case study is used as an opportunity to investigate the potential and the boundaries of the style. The presence of the male voice adds limitations to the show's ability to enforce Bravo's message of feminine empowerment and advocacy of triumphing women's success. The case study also acts as an example of the commercial endeavours Bravo-lebrities partake in. Serving as an extended advertisement of Lisa Vanderpump's LA restaurants, the show enforces her brand as an aspirational woman and site for feminine fantasy. Whilst this thesis ultimately takes a favourable approach to the Femality TV style for what it offers women in terms of agency and representation, this chapter takes a more critical perspective of *VPR*. *VPR* operates under a dynamic where sexual relationships are at the forefront of the narrative and both the men and women are seen through an overtly sexualised lens. Whilst chapter one and two argue in favour of sexuality being absent from the female gaze, *VPR* contradicts this. In many ways the male voice complicates the Bravo formula, however, the show maintains the same audience as the other case studies. The male cast members reflect arguments made in relation to male RTV stars and their personal relationship with stereotyped expectations of masculinity. Consequentially, this case study's purpose is to challenge the criteria of Femality TV and whether the style is distinctly feminine.

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<sup>59</sup> Arcy, p.488.



These case studies have been selected for their relevancy to both RTV and Femality TV. *TRH* franchise, for example, already has an abundance of research on its cultural impact on the female psyche and portrayal of women in both the RTV genre and television and celebrity media more broadly. Critics such as Eve Psarras and June Deery have analysed the relationship between the viewer and the housewives chosen to entertain them and there is an increasingly growing presence of criticism and praise of the shows in newspaper articles. Through the volume of broadsheet articles alone it is evident of a lasting cultural impact and future continuation of success. Brian Moylan's research on the topic of feminism and supposed clash of values within *TRH* franchise presents the argument that RTV is often looked down upon and classified as a "guilty pleasure" or "dumb" because of its position within culture as a "low brow media"<sup>60</sup> and ultimately this is a fundamental misunderstanding of what insights the show can offer, and the following research will seek to disprove this. Annette Hill has written extensively on the topic of RTV and its audience. In 2005 she posed the question "why do people love, and love to hate reality TV?" She outlined RTV as "shorthand for what people think is wrong with modern culture – time-wasting, low grade, rubbish."<sup>61</sup>

Hannah Ewan, writing for *RollingStone* observed growing popularity in the article "Why young British women love the *Real Housewives*."<sup>62</sup> The piece from autumn of 2022 noted the rise in viewership among young British women over the lockdown period due to Covid-19, highlighting such statistics as "77% of British people had heard of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*"<sup>63</sup> and "9 out of 10 *HayU* subscribers are female"<sup>64</sup> (*HayU* being the streaming platform in the UK that streams all of the selected case studies). Additionally, recognising the arguments made by feminists such as Camille Paglia that the franchise is to be "honoured" as "intelligent and sophisticated documentary film making."<sup>65</sup> These articles are surface level introductions to the current research carried out on the *Real Housewives* and the discourse around the cultural impact caused by its relatively recent growth in

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<sup>60</sup> Moylan, *The Guardian*,

<sup>61</sup> Hill, Annette. *Reality TV: Performance, Authenticity, and Television Audiences*. Routledge, 2005. P.3.

<sup>62</sup> Hannah Ewens, 'Why young British women love "The Real Housewives"', *RollingStone*, (2022), <https://www.rollingstone.co.uk/tv/features/why-young-british-women-love-the-real-housewives-23319/>

<sup>63</sup> Ewens, *RollingStone*.

<sup>64</sup> Ewens, *RollingStone*.

<sup>65</sup> Ewens, *RollingStone*.

popularity. However, their existence further cements the idea that the *Real Housewives* is a gateway into sophisticated and intelligent viewings of reality television under the context of viewing the feminine. Annette Hill also recognised the audience of RTV as fluid, referring to “roaming audiences” in 2019.<sup>66</sup> However, the popularity of these case studies, *TRH* specifically, counters this perspective of the audience. There is a sense of loyalty from Bravo fans, this is most evident through the popularity of *RHOA* and its popularity amongst black women. *RHOA* saw some of the highest viewing figures across all the whole franchise and this has been attributed towards its black female audience.<sup>67</sup> However, the way in which the content is engaged with does share this “roaming” quality. The introduction of trans-media narratives within Femality TV means that fans can engage with the content through not just RTV but through complimentary material like tabloids and social media platforms.

Differing to *TRH* franchise, *KUWTK* has less academic material on the show and rather more material that focuses on the women themselves and their personal brand. Maria Pramaggiore and Diane Negra discuss the family’s brand in relation to their role on RTV in their chapter “Keeping up with the Aspirations: Commercial Family Values and the Kardashian Brand.”<sup>68</sup> There have been notable examples of critics deconstructing the relationship between the Kardashian-Jenner family and the impact their influence has had upon young women and their personal self-image. Amy Nathanson and Renee Botta explore this impact; they recognise the association between visual media and eating disorders “by promoting unrealistic images of thinness and beauty.”<sup>69</sup> Thus confirming the relationship between image and female gaze. The Kardashians transcend the reality tv platform where the housewives are bound to it. Kavka’s usage of hyper-femininity is most evident in this case study as the women of the family have profited most from their image. Kim Kardashian and her sisters are now synonymous with body augmentations and during the 2010s they act as the posterchildren for a growing trend in injectables and cosmetic surgery. In the same vein as Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian and her family used the platform of RTV to

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<sup>66</sup> Hill, Annette. *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television*, Routledge, 2019. P,3.

<sup>67</sup> *For Real: The Story of Reality TV*, Andy Cohen and Gil Godschien, (Bunim Murray Productions, 2021).

<sup>68</sup> Maria Pramaggio and Diane Negra, ‘Keeping up with the Aspirations: Commercial Family Values and the Kardashian Brand,’ in *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality and Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, ed. By Brenda Weber, (Duke University Press, 2014), pp.76-96.

<sup>69</sup> Amy Nathanson, and Renee Botta, “Shaping the Effects of Television on Adolescents Body Image Disturbance,” *Communication Research*, 30, 3 (2003), pp.304-331.

undermine the paparazzi and tabloid complex. Their image was widely distributed whilst their personal narrative also being made readily available. *KUWTK* serves as an opportunity to outline how Femality TV differentiates from RTV in terms of the exploitation of female talent. Nathalie Heinrich made note of the difference between paparazzi culture in Europe and America.<sup>70</sup> It is this disconnect that can be attributed to the variation between RTV from America and the UK and how Femality TV is an intrinsically American cultural product, which can be further supported through an analysis of the consumerist themes established by the myth of America.

### **Obstacles and Limitations:**

The challenges within this research primarily come from the breadth of material on RTV programming and women's studies. There are many avenues this research can take when broadly relating the female audience to female-targeted media. Some sources have been excluded from the final thesis as, whilst they complement or provide an insightful perspective of the argument in favour of Femality TV as a valid style of RTV, they cannot be thoroughly explored within the word limit of this thesis and serve as too large of a deviation from the thesis itself. An example being with chapter one and *KUWTK*, the secondary sources chosen to textually analyse the case study relate to the female body in the corporeal sense. Whilst the chapter would benefit from an exploration of how the case study approaches different topics such as commercialism, which is discussed heavily in chapter two, this thesis requires the topic to be contained to avoid distraction from the thesis argument for the existence of Femality TV. Due to this method in approaching the case studies, there is room for the research to be further explored from many angles including further examination of the intertextuality between the case studies themselves.

Therefore, the sources used within this research are loosely restricted to works related to the case studies themselves. This was a choice made in order to condense the material toward the newly coined style of Femality TV. There is a wide breadth of existing

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<sup>70</sup> Nathalie Heinrich, 'Paparazzi: Agents of Visibility Capital,' in *Paparazzi!, Photographers, Stars, Artists*, ed. by Clement Cheroux, (Flammarion, 2014), p.100.

research on RTV that covers a range of topics, primarily the association with a female and queer demographic. However, there is not enough room in this thesis to extensively explore the research that has been done on the genre of RTV itself, therefore, the thesis relies on a select roster of theorists for contextual insight into the genre on a broader scale.

Resultantly, there are many aspects where this research can be developed further into separate branches. There is room for further exploration of the interactivity between the style and its international counterparts. For the purposes of this research the style is approached as a quintessentially American enterprise due to its origins and notable entries being American products. However, there have been successful examples of European counterparts that can be further investigated as well as the utilisation of tropes established by European RTV of the 2000s. The style would also benefit from a queer reading of case studies such as *VPR* and *TRH*. Whilst this research recognises the substantial queer audience of the case studies, there is room for further exploration of the overlap between RTV orientated toward a female gaze and its passive appeal to a queer audience. Further examination can also be made regarding the ethicality of the style with many of the case studies being accused of exclusionary casting when it comes to trans women and women of colour which is touched upon in chapters two and three, however, is deserving of more material.

Conclusively, this research has outlined there is an aperture within studies on reality television regarding female orientated docu-soaps deriving from 2000s gossip culture. Research from Jaqueline Arcy and Nicole Cox has suggested there is a relationship between new media and reality television whilst June Deery has observed the connection between gossip media and reality television. The following case studies will further prove that this research can be compiled to evidentially prove that there is a distinct style of RTV I present as “Femality TV” that focuses on the female condition and conversations around: the woman as sexualised object, the woman as mother, daughter, friend, entrepreneur, and the woman as narrative voice of both reason, rationality and irrationality. Femality TV according to this paper should: centralise and celebrate the female voice, showcase varying representations of womanhood and femininity (usually with an emphasis on the hyper-feminine aesthetic), be a source that represents and engages with feminine fantasy, be created with a female/queer audience in mind and finally embrace camp qualities and be a

site for camp moments within pop culture. By applying these established criteria of Femality TV to the following selected case studies, the limitations and boundaries of the Femality TV style will become apparent and the style will become consecrated. The style will, therefore, be applicable to any future discussions regarding the selected case studies and other products of reality television in addition to research regarding self-promotion, depictions of the self and the conflation of self-image with commercial value.

## Chapter One

### Keeping up with Femininity: *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*' placement within the Femality TV formula through an exploration of its relationship with hyper-feminine imagery

This chapter functions as a case study in the validation of Femality TV as a formulaic style of reality TV (RTV) that, through a variety of elements, propagates the notion that female orientated media is not only indicative of societal beliefs around gender but also challenges modern discourse on gendered concepts. *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (*KUWTK*) will be analysed for its role in both re-enforcing stereotypes associated with female imagery and challenging such tropes. The Femality TV criteria as established in the introduction will be applied to the case study, with a focus on the presence of hyper-femininity and what that infers regarding the relationship between Femality TV and both the male and female gaze. The other criteria of the Femality TV style (centralised voice, feminine fantasy, a female audience and camp quality) will be explored and their relevance to *KUWTK* will be evaluated to determine whether they are essential objectives or if they are flexible indicators that are not always necessary for proving a media's placement within the style. In this case study the presence of the aspirational quality of Femality TV fluctuates as the show progresses from humble toward unattainable and therefore provides an indication toward the placement of Femality TV in contemporary culture and whether the formula has subsequently been solidified since *KUWTK* started in 2007 or whether the Kardashian-Jenner's have deviated from Femality TV as their popularity has grown and their self-brand has become indistinguishable from their personality. The influence of the show will also be explored, with academics like June Deery and Lucia Soriano agreeing that the show's cultural impact goes beyond the boundaries of the RTV format. This transcendence from the format of RTV therefore poses the question of whether the term Femality TV is strictly limited to the RTV platform or whether it can be expanded to cover other media such as: gossip columns (such as Perez Hilton's and Bravo's blogs), social media platforms (like *Instagram*), or the paparazzi system (as seen through sites like *TMZ* and *People*). Thus, belonging to a greater Femality sub-culture where various media communicate with one another and profit from external engagement.

*Keeping up with the Kardashians (KUWTK)* is a reality television programme that ran from 2007-2020, produced by Ryan Seacrest and Bunim/Murray Productions. *KUWTK* follows aspiring celebrity Kim Kardashian and her well connected family as they traverse various family and professional dramas and the mundanity of a “normal” family life in the affluent suburb of Calabasas in Los Angeles. Andrea Ruehlicke suggests, “while the celebrity must exude a seemingly authentic aura of being extraordinary, the reality television contestant must exude an aura of ordinariness.”<sup>71</sup> The Kardashian-Jenners fall in the overlap of this dichotomy, enticing viewers with relatable family bickering yet falling into the category of “celebrity” and thus representing extraordinary lifestyles. For the first few seasons the show maintains its guise of a familiar nuclear family in an American sitcom, whereby episodes follow a formulaic pattern of trivial domestic dispute (usually arguments between the sisters over things like not evenly dividing chores or not being respectful of each other) and then an inevitable resolution. This is reminiscent of the sitcom; Pramaggiore and Negra referred to *KUWTK* as a “reality sitcom,”<sup>72</sup> suggesting the programme took aspects of the sitcom and reframed it under the reality tv lens. The style of *KUWTK* is also evocative of the documentary, with co-creator of *KUWTK* Johnathon Murray acknowledging that through *The Real World* (Bunim/Murray’s first venture into factual RTV) “we took the documentary form and commercialised it.”<sup>73</sup>

As the introduction outlined, however, current academic discourse regarding both *TRH* and *KUWTK* refer to the shows primarily as “docu-soaps.” Docu-soaps are unscripted yet highly produced. *KUWTK* is often manipulated by producers to create narratives that follow a fable-istic trajectory, whereby the family face a moral obstacle and by the end of the episode they have come to a resolution that provides the viewer with some semblance of wisdom. The origins of the “docu-soap” can be directed to *An American Family* (1973). Referred to by some as the origin of reality television, the show could be identified as a point of inspiration for the sub-genre of docu-soap and consequently the style of Femality

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<sup>71</sup> Andrea Ruehlicke, ‘Everything Old is New Again: Reality Television Celebrity, The Hollywood Studio System and the battle for control of one’s image,’ *Celebrity Studies*, 13, 1, (Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1787856>, p.41.

<sup>72</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, p.77.

<sup>73</sup> Deery. P.4.

TV. Within *KUWTK*, there is some reference to the capturing of actuality (as per Fetveit)<sup>74</sup> through the documentation of the family carrying out domestic tasks such as taking the kids to school, working at their family-owned store and booking jobs for fledgling model/actress Kim. However, this approach is more evocative of the paparazzi and tabloid culture of the time than a homage to the origins of RTV. The incentive to viewing *KUWTK* was to gain an insight into the lives of familiar celebrity figures. This is illustrative of the motivations behind Femality TV programmes; they are void of disinterestedness. The viewer must be interested and encouraged to engage in the voyeurism of the celebrity or Rojek's fleetingly famous "celetoid."<sup>75</sup> Through the capturing of actuality material that is paired with performances of emotionality by the female stars,<sup>76</sup> the family feel authentic to the viewer more so than their depiction in the gossip media circuit. This can also be attributed to the confessional sequence where the characters add narrative upon their image.

Bunim and Murray pioneered the confessional sequence within RTV in *The Real World* and this method of narration has continued through to contemporary RTV, becoming a staple of Femality TV as a means for centralising the female voice as a narrative tool. The success of this adaptation lies at how the viewer consumes television: *are they watching for the visuality of the performance or the emotionality?* As previously stated, *KUWTK* is evocative of the images taken by the paparazzi, of which Kim Kardashian was a profitable target. The usage of the confessional sequence within *KUWTK* is also reminiscent of the fleeting interviews conducted by the paparazzi in busy public settings. Within *KUWTK* and Femality TV more broadly, actuality is acquired through emotions rather than surveillance. The footage shown is edited to fit with the narrative of the episode, the audience is communicated with directly rather than being a fly on the wall. This direct communication is evident through the confessional sequence. This direct communication with the viewer is a means of reclaiming the narrative ascribed to the stars personal image. Resembling a salacious, tell-all interview from a gossip magazine, the celebrity figure is given the chance to precede the narrative regarding the actuality of the celebrity body. This is a significant

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<sup>74</sup> Fetveit, 793.

<sup>75</sup> Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> Rachel E. Dubrofsky, 'Fallen women in reality television: a pornography of emotion,' *Feminist Media Studies*, 9, 3, (2009), 353-368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770903068324>, p.355.



motif of Femality TV, whereby ownership of the female body is reclaimed through overlaid commentary.

To understand where *KUWTK* fits in the timeline of Femality TV, an understanding of Bunim and Murray's direct precursor, *The Simple Life* (2003-2007) is required. *The Simple Life* is essential viewing for understanding the success *KUWTK* saw in the late 00s. The premise of the show was to relocate heiress Paris Hilton and friend Nicole Richie (daughter of musician Lionel Richie) from their lavish reality and place them in an economically paradoxical environment. This format appealed to RTV trends at the time as the American public's viewing habits favoured examples of economic hardship. Thus, serving as a contradictory approach to the aspirational quality of Femality TV. The looming recession resulted in Americans wanting television that didn't glorify the rich, with "hixploitation" becoming a prominent genre at the time; creating entertainment from poor Americans with shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Extreme Couponing*.<sup>77</sup> This focus on economic hardship and the endearing quality of being content with simplicity was traded in for a focus on commercial excess as the years progressed and Americans increased their engagement with consumerist habits. This desire to consume will be discussed in depth in chapter two. The recent release of *Crappie Lake* by Bravo is suggestive of RTV transgressing back to the comfort of hixploitation as Americans once again find themselves in economically uncertain times. Returning to the significance of *The Simple Life* in relation to Femality TV, *KUWTK* acts as a canonical successor to *The Simple Life* through the relationship between Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian. Both were favourites of the paparazzi tabloid system and utilised the RTV platform and social media as a means of reclaiming their narratives. It is this similarity that can be identified as the origin of Femality TV.

Hilton was a favourite of the paparazzi and surrounded by salacious accusations throughout her era as the "It girl." Femality TV profits from this concept of the It girl. She is the target of public discourse and gossip and thus exists as a celebrity primarily within the universe of the gossip system; she is "famous for being famous." This gossip circuit is

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<sup>77</sup> Rebecca Stephens, 'Supersizing the family: nation, gender and recession on Reality TV,' in *Reality Gendervision*, eds. By Brenda Weber, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), pp.170-191.

created from the cross-platform communication between the different media dedicated to spreading gossip and scandal. They are tabloid magazines, the paparazzi, social media sites and reality television. Together they will be referred to in this research as “Femality media”; media dedicated to creating and absolving female celebrity. As will be detailed in chapter two, Jaqueline Arcy argues that these media are used as vessels for transmedia storytelling within the female centred docusoap.<sup>78</sup> Femality TV fits into this system due to its association with gossip and the creation of female celebrity. Femality media are a window into the domestic lives of celebrity women but displayed to the public as a form of voyeuristic entertainment; consumed by women but often created by men.

The paparazzi and tabloid system of the early 00s is the most visually prominent example of the male gaze<sup>79</sup> in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The term “paparazzi,” although disputed, is often credited to Federico Fellini’s work on the 1960 film *La Dolce Vita* in reference to a particularly intrusive photographer. However, his wife Giulietta Masina claims to have inspired the name by associating “papatacci” with “ragazzi,” which in Italian means young men.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the term outwardly places men behind the camera and, although, there is no rule stating women can’t be paparazzo’s, the definition is inferential to a camera controlled by men. Consequently, the act of paparazzi-ism is quintessential of the male gaze; a media where there is a camera that is controlled by men and the aim is to capture titillating and expositional images of the female body. The tabloid industry has historically been male dominated and thus the exploitation of celebrity female bodies fits succinctly into the patriarchal dynamic De Beauvoir speaks of. “The picture takers have indeed always been men since the beginning of the profession [...] if historically and statistically the majority of the paparazzi are men, their victims are, on the other hand, more generally women and it must be noted, women who overtly assert their femininity.”<sup>81</sup> Through this association of the paparazzi with the male gaze, the paparazzi are read as the antagonists within Femality TV, despite their contributions to the renewal of interest in the style that tackles gossip content. The paparazzi are a useful tool in the curating of self-brand when

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<sup>78</sup> Arcy, p.489.

<sup>79</sup> Mulvey, p.1957.

<sup>80</sup> Cheroux, p.12.

<sup>81</sup> Cheroux, p.16.

paired alongside other media dedicated to developing upon the content released by them. It has been stated there is “no such thing as bad publicity” and this attitude is what propels celestoids such as Hilton and Kardashian into the realm of celebrity. Hilton’s success can be directly association to the paparazzi’s interest in capturing her candid image and Kim has since revealed she sought to replicate this interest through the manipulation of the paparazzi by informing them of her location to be photographed and commented upon in the gossip media industry. Kardashian has attributed her success to Paris Hilton’s pioneering usage of social media as a complimentary media in the creation of her public persona, or façade.<sup>82</sup>

Clement Cheroux describes the concept of celebrity as being a “glamorous facade” with paparazzi images being the antithesis of such. Cheroux’s description of modern paparazzi-ism where celebrities “were no longer shown on their good days” and “a different iconography developed that was bleak, even belittling”<sup>83</sup> echoes the criticism around RTV in that trauma and suffering function as a source of voyeuristic taboo entertainment. However, Hilton’s manipulation of the media, including the RTV platform, counters this view of the paparazzi as “unmaskers” of celebrity. Hilton has since admitted her on-screen and to-paparazzi appearance was a persona used to distract the camera lens from the truth as a means of protection.<sup>84</sup> This undermining of the media was instrumental for what Kim Kardashian would go on to do with regards to *KUWTK*. Paris Hilton found a way to control the narrative surrounding her at a time before social media and celebrities had no means of communicating their actuality with the public outside of the tabloid media system. This is exemplified via Cheroux’s comparison of Nick Ut’s photograph of Paris Hilton crying in a car in response to a recent conviction for speeding to his earlier work in Vietnam of a girl fleeing a napalm strike evokes a sense of credibility for the paparazzi’s lens.<sup>85</sup> Noting back to Feveit’s outlining of entertainment residing in actuality,<sup>86</sup> the work of the paparazzi is received as closer to factual documentary than fiction. Consequently, what Ut believed to

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<sup>82</sup> ‘The Real Story of Paris Hilton | This is Paris Official Documentary,’ *YouTube*, uploaded by Paris Hilton, (14<sup>th</sup> September 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOg0TY1jG3w>.

<sup>83</sup> Cheroux, p.192

<sup>84</sup> ‘The Real Story of Paris Hilton | This is Paris Official Documentary.’

<sup>85</sup> Cheroux, p.192.

<sup>86</sup> Fetveit, p.794

be a documentation of actuality has since been undermined by the revelation that Hilton's entire presence around the paparazzi and the public was a cultivated facade.<sup>87</sup> Hilton subverted the opinion that the paparazzi unmasked a "glamorous facade" by presenting them with a secondary facade.

Cheroux described Hilton as a *"public persona [who deified] the traditional boundaries between the public and private spheres [...]* The case of Paris Hilton is symptomatic of a new era in media iconography. Images are no longer confined to the printed press. They are omnipresent ... demonstrating the growing role of the internet and amateur photographers in the distribution of celebrity images."<sup>88</sup> Referred to by USA Today as "the original influencer,"<sup>89</sup> Hilton's application of the internet as a means of distributing her image foreshadowed the media revolution whereby personal cameras threatened and complicated the paparazzi's role in the modern culture system, of which her prodigy Kim Kardashian became a leading figure. Hilton's fade from the public discourse was resultant of the public eye shifting from the tabloids, where she dominated, to the phone, a tool that she didn't utilise to its full effect. Social media is at the core of the durability of the Kardashians. Acting as a companion guide to Femality TV, social media offers the opportunity for the viewer to further engage in the RTV product by gaining additional insights and commentary. Engaging in Femality TV no longer means an opportunity to detach from cognitive thinking, the rise of forums and live discussions has strengthened the style as a community endeavour and a social activity that has become almost an event and public moment. This will be discussed greater in chapter two through the recent evolution of Bravo's viewing habits and commercial success from such. Within the Bravo model, other media are complimentary to the format, promoting further engagement with the core content within the programmes themselves. However, with *KUWTK*, cross-platform promotion is used to further the self-brand rather than draw attention to the show.

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<sup>87</sup> 'The Real Story of Paris Hilton | This is Paris Official Documentary,'

<sup>88</sup> Cheroux, p.138.

<sup>89</sup> Jenna Ryu, "'This is Paris:' Ten powerful quotes that made us change the way we perceive Paris Hilton,' *USA Today*, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/movies/2020/09/16/this-is-paris-documentary-paris-hilton-best-quotes-trauma-trust/5809541002/>

Kardashian used her platform as an RTV star to re-calibrate the narrative of public opinion. The paparazzi who she had once anonymously called to photograph her candidly<sup>90</sup> and “unassumingly” would become the villain in her personal account of events. Due to the success of *KUWTK* and her position as a protagonist known for her appeal toward the male gaze, Kim soon became the face of exploitative paparazzi throughout the 2010s; she discusses the topic numerous times on *KUWTK* being vocally critical of the laws regarding the issue of personal privacy when it comes to paparazzi images. The issue peaked in 2013 when a then pregnant Kim expressed her discomfort and anxieties surrounding the behaviour of the paparazzo in an episode. Stepfather Caitlyn (formerly-Bruce) Jenner observed “they [the paparazzi] want that picture of Kim even more now that she is pregnant.”<sup>91</sup> In the episode Kim uses her position of vulnerability as a pregnant woman to emphasise the danger the practise poses. Kim occupied the stance of a victim yet success of paparazzi culture. She utilised the media system as a means for fame and growth in notoriety whilst also appealing to the increasing popularity of the notion that the media was exploitative of the female image. Kim recognised that in Europe the paparazzi are not allowed to photograph minors, this issue is brought up again by sister Kylie Jenner in the episode who states: “If five guys are following me and I’m 16 shouldn’t that be illegal?”<sup>92</sup> “It is hardly surprising that sexuality is at the top of the list of the most popular topics for the paparazzi and their audiences. Capturing these activities unquestionably involves the most aggressive acts of intrusion into private life.”<sup>93</sup> Heinich compares the nature of paparazzi in America with France, using Brad Pitt as an example. They state American practises as being “brazen,” whereas in France Pitt thanked the paparazzi for “taking their shots from a distance using telephoto lenses” as it allowed him to live “almost normally.”<sup>94</sup> This distinction between the methodology behind American and European practices suggests that paparazzi-ism in America goes beyond the act of surveillance and rather becoming interference. This argument intersects with the conversation around the relationship between consumption and the consumer within American culture. Paparazzi-ism became as

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<sup>90</sup> ‘Kim Kardashian,’ *True Hollywood Story*, (E!, Oct 2019).

<sup>91</sup> ‘Paparazzi and Papas,’ *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, (Ryan Seacrest, Bunim/Murray Productions, Oct 2013) S8, E17.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Paparazzi and Papas’

<sup>93</sup> Heinich, p.100.

<sup>94</sup> Heinich, p.100.

problematic and culturally influential as it did because of the consumerist proclivity to commercialise every opportunity, including the commodification of the body and celebrity as a concept. Therefore, Femality TV is further proven a nicheness of American culture as a symptom of invasive paparazzi culture.

Additionally, the representation of the paparazzi within *KUWTK* adds to the conversation around hyper-femininity and the performance of gender as a defensive tactic by women. In season 12 sisters Khloe, Kendall and Kylie use prosthetics to disguise themselves from the paparazzi's lens.<sup>95</sup> This contributes to the idea of makeup as armour, this sentiment is shared across Femality TV products and is verbalised by Lisa Rinna in *RHOAH* when she says "we all have this armour in a sense that we wear."<sup>96</sup> This observation views make-up as a protectorate to hide vulnerabilities and without such they appear weak. This approach is counter-intuitive to the idea of hyper-feminine imagery being utilised as a tool for empowerment as it suggests rather it is used as a collective tool to portray women who don't partake as less of a woman. This leads to the argument against *KUWTK* as a source of female empowerment through the embracement of hyper-feminine imagery but rather as a propagator of unrealistic expectations of the female body. Referring to the inference of competitive femininity behind flaunting,<sup>97</sup> this concept was propagated by the paparazzi and celebrity gossip media. There are frequent references toward the Kardashians bodies within tabloid media that compare bodies against one another. Examples of headlines include "It's On! Kim Kardashian in Weight Loss War with Kourtney and Khloe"<sup>98</sup> and "Kate the Waif VS Kim the Whale,"<sup>99</sup> a reference to Kim's body during her first pregnancy when compared against Kate Middleton. Kim's body has been a particularly hot topic within celebrity gossip media from her initial introduction in *KUWTK* to present day. The leaked sex tape prior to the release of *KUWTK* cemented Kim as a sexualised figure in popular culture and celebrity gossip circles treated her as such. Carmen Winant states

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<sup>95</sup> "Fake It Til' You Make It," *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, (Ryan Seacrest, Bunim/Murray Productions, May 2016) S12, E5.

<sup>96</sup> 'Life's a Pitch,' *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, S6, E1 (Bravo, 2015).

<sup>97</sup> Wang and Griskevicius, p.834.

<sup>98</sup> 'It's On! Kim Kardashian In Weight Loss War With Kourtney and Khloe,' *Radar Online*, (2016), <https://radaronline.com/photos/kim-kardashian-kourtney-khloe-weight-loss-fat-bikini-butt-boobs-kuwtk-photos/>

<sup>99</sup> 'Kate the Waif and Kim the Whale,' *You Magazine*, (2013).

“locating the boundary between the erotic-as-power and the erotic-as-bondage can be a complex task.”<sup>100</sup> Kim Kardashian’s flaunting of her sexuality and representation of a hypersexual figure struggles with this distinction between empowerment and pornography. Simultaneously to being read as a sexualised body, Kardashian was also subject to frequent criticism over her appearance. Unflattering pictures were recurrently displayed on the front page of gossip magazines and websites with titles like “Alone and Binge Eating,”<sup>101</sup> “I Can’t Stop Eating,”<sup>102</sup> “Paid to Get Fat,”<sup>103</sup> “Kim’s Body Crisis”<sup>104</sup> and “Weight-Loss Cheater.”<sup>105</sup> Kirsty Fairclough commented upon this trend of shaming female celebrity bodies in their text, observing that gossip media has created a culture of hyper-scrutiny.<sup>106</sup>

The notion of becoming “famous for being famous” has been reiterated in reference to the Kardashians. However, as Andy Warhol mused “You should always have a product that’s not just you.”<sup>107</sup> This is where Kim Kardashian and her sisters flourished where others faltered as “part of her brand was built the old way with products and endorsements.”<sup>108</sup> They have utilised the fame gained through Femality media and RTV and they have capitalised from through the sale of physical products. In contrast to Rojek’s “celetoid,”<sup>109</sup> Kim has built an empire of sustainable wealth. Kim made a lot of her revenue from her mobile game, her clothing company and cosmetic brand as well as many endorsements for other brands. The television show serves as an advertisement campaign for their personal brand as opposed to their sole source of income. This will be further developed in chapter three with the Bravo model. Kardashian’s coffee table book *Selfish*<sup>110</sup> featured a variety of images of the self with erotic undertones yet the purpose wasn’t sexually driven. Kardashian successfully commodified her sexuality with a female audience who didn’t view her through a sexualised lens. Carmen Winant explores the rise of Instagram in correlation with feminist

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<sup>100</sup> Carmen Winant, ‘Our Bodies Online,’ *Aperture* 225, (2016), p. 143.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Alone and Binge Eating,’ *Star Magazine*, (2014).

<sup>102</sup> ‘I Can’t Stop Eating!’ *In Touch Weekly*, (2013).

<sup>103</sup> ‘Paid to get fat,’ *In Touch Weekly*, (April 10, 2013).

<sup>104</sup> ‘Kim’s Body Crisis,’ *OK USA*, (Feb 21, 2014).

<sup>105</sup> “Weight-loss Cheater!” *Life & Style*, (Dec 2, 2013.)

<sup>106</sup> Kirsty Fairclough, ‘Nothing less than perfect: female celebrity, aging and hyper-scrutiny in the gossip industry,’ *Celebrity Studies*, 3, 1, (2012), 90-103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2012.644723>.

<sup>107</sup> Warhol, p.85.

<sup>108</sup> “Kim Kardashian,” *True Hollywood Story*, (E!, Oct 2019)

<sup>109</sup> Rojek.

<sup>110</sup> Kim Kardashian, *Selfish*, (Universal Publishing, 2015).

photographers who take erotic photographs of the female body without the intention to forward them to romantic partners.<sup>111</sup> It is through this understanding of the erotic as art that we can understand how she commodified her sexualised figure from an absence of the male gaze. Winant demonstrates how women are “reclaiming the female body by utilizing the techniques and tools of the male gaze.”<sup>112</sup> Lucia Soriano interpreted *KUWTK* as a representation of “skewed images” of the female body,<sup>113</sup> further contributing to the idea that women view themselves through an assumed male gaze and thus stylise themselves accordingly to satisfy this perspective.<sup>114</sup> They suggest the Kardashian’s stylisation caters to this assumption of a male gaze but also infers that the female audience view themselves in the same way they would assume a heterosexual male would view the Kardashians. Consequently, there is an overlap between the male gaze and the female gaze making the female gaze difficult to articulate and clearly identify.

*KUWTK* is a commercial endeavour for any tangible products the family are affiliated with, however, Pramaggiore and Negra describe the product as being the presence of the Kardashian body itself in relation to public appearances.<sup>115</sup> This can be extended to encompass the body as being the product for all commercial success through the view of the Kardashian body as a hallmark of their personal brand. Therefore, the stylised appearance of the Kardashian body (reflective of a hyper-femme trend in aesthetics) has become the “brand” of *KUWTK* and consequently the Femality TV style as an extension. In *KUWTK*, the body is seen as a site for which culture is mapped upon.<sup>116</sup> The body itself is not only a representation of cultural trends but also what is adorned on the body via fashion and the Kardashian family are exemplary of both. The Kardashian family’s relationships with their bodies are seen as either problematic or empowering in contemporary discourse. Their ambiguous usage of plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures like filler is argued to have created a culture where young girls and women have unrealistic ideas around expectations of the female body. Amy Nathanson and Renee Botta detail this issue in their article

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<sup>111</sup> Winant, p.141.

<sup>112</sup> Winant, p.142.

<sup>113</sup> Soriano.

<sup>114</sup> Soriano.

<sup>115</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, p.82.

<sup>116</sup> Louise J. Kaplan, ‘The Fetishism of Commodities,’ in *Cultures of Fetishism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.131.



“Shaping the Effects of Television on Adolescent’s Body Image Disturbance.” They recognise the association between visual media and eating disorders “by promoting unrealistic images of thinness and beauty.”<sup>117</sup> This criticism of propagating an ideal beauty standard is not unique to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rather it has been a topic of contention since before mass media. The concept of an ideal woman has existed for centuries and perforated art, music, science and politics. Mass culture encouraged the proliferation of thinness as an ideal toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 2000s and many studies have detailed the negative impact this had among young women’s self-images.

However, the Kardashians, Kim particularly, were not criticised for their thinness but rather their “fakeness.” The Kardashian figure is seen as an impossible beauty standard due to the artificiality of their appearances. Additionally, the financial cost of the procedures they are believed to have undertaken is an example of flaunting. The illusiveness of the Kardashian figure is not limited to cosmetic surgery, however, as it is also present in the self-distributed images on sites like *Instagram*. Kim Kardashian and her sisters have been exposed for digitally altering their images on many occasions, often to accentuate the hour-glass figure associated with female sexuality. This is an example of where an increase in control over one’s image has resulted in a loss of authenticity and actuality. With the criticism of altered images in mind the question is posed: is this embracement of hyper-feminine aesthetics a reflection of the societal pressure to reflect beauty ideals enforced by the likes of the Kardashians on social media, who knowingly cater to the male gaze? Or is it reflective of a new wave of feminist ideology whereby the feminine is embraced as a demonstration of social and economic independence?

In a postfeminist landscape Femality TV shows were, and are still, often used as a tool to attack the female stars who brandish a hyper-feminine style. Gloria Steinem has described them as “minstrel shows for women”<sup>118</sup> and whilst they are a performance of gender, the inference that they are harmful to the perception of women and femininity is reductive and reflective of the unconscious association of femininity with unintelligence.

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<sup>117</sup> Nathanson and Botta, p.306.

<sup>118</sup> Moylan, *The Guardian*.

These shows are attacked for their focus on heightened emotionality and as such the female stars are critiqued for enforcing stereotypes of woman as man's unintelligent "other."<sup>119</sup> The combining of gendered performance with consumption via fashion and products relating to a hyper-feminine aesthetic has resulted in the assumption that feminine equates to shallow and artificial. Feminists such as Gloria Steinem perceive female empowerment as a rejection of gendered stereotypes. Consequentially, this perspective evolved into a culture where those who partakes in such stereotypes are shunned for catering to a male gaze for sexualising their own bodies. It is this culture that has made hyper-femininity a taboo style within cinema or deeply rooted in the unserious and unintellectual. This postfeminist perspective on how to visualise female empowerment and strength will be further analysed in the subsequent section on the female gaze which has become difficult to articulate within cinema.

Carmen Winant's notes on the female body captures the liminal space between Soriano's view that women perceive themselves through a sexualised lens and the perspective that they engage with feminine imagery as a means of gaining agency (through revelling in their otherness). "Locating the boundary between the erotic as power and the erotic as bondage can be a complex task."<sup>120</sup> Hyper-femme does not directly equate to a sexualised woman. However, in the Kardashian sense of hyper-femininising the female body, this connection can be assumed. The hyper-femme style within culture is almost exclusively tied to a sexualised female body. Within cinema almost every example of hyper-femme is an actress who fits succinctly into the American beauty ideal: blond, thin and costumed in pink. Therefore, it can be inferred the corporeal body is as intrinsic to the hyper-femme aesthetic as costume is.

Soriano's perspective that women operate under the assumption that they are being viewed under the male gaze is particularly relevant to Femality TV in the sense that the overwhelmingly female (and homosexual male) audience contradicts the imposition of a male gaze influence. With the audience being female, it would be assumed that the

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<sup>119</sup> De Beauvoir, p.1214.

<sup>120</sup> Winant, Carmen. "Our Bodies Online." *Aperture*, 225 (2016), p.143.

programmes would cater to a female gaze. However, as Soriano argues, *KUWTK* is shown via the lens of the male gaze. There is frequent reference to sexuality and the lens of the camera favours the bodies of the women. An example of such being the first scene of S01E01, where matriarch Kris makes a comment on Kim's body "she's got more junk in the trunk these days."<sup>121</sup> This statement would foreshadow the most dominant theme in discourse around the Kardashian family: have they had body augmentations or cosmetic surgery? With this question at the centre of the discourse around the Kardashians and posed by both men and women alike there is an argument to be made that the focus on their bodies on the show is to further propagate the gossip surrounding this question, therefore, appealing to a female gaze via a scandalised lens. However, Soriano's view that the female gaze is somehow reliant on the assumption of a male gaze can be supported using Wang's ideas on flaunting as a sexual signalling system.<sup>122</sup> They argue that men flaunt to gain approval from women as potential sexual mates, however, women flaunt to gain a sense of dominance over other women through the evocation of jealousy. It is diminutive of the feminist movement to insinuate that the female gaze is simply to judge in accordance with an economically hierarchical chain of status. However, it is evident through the success of *Femality TV* that women enjoy watching other women compete for social dominance and they themselves enjoy placing themselves among the women for personal evaluation. Retorting back to the introduction where the modes of viewing RTV were discussed, viewers do judge themselves against those on television.<sup>123</sup> Consequently, there is an element of jealousy within *Femality TV* production and viewing, however, a more fitting approach would be to place it within the realm of fantasy viewing.

As established with Tsay, the transposition of oneself upon those who star in RTV a la fantasy voyeurism is an essential aspect of viewing within *Femality TV*.<sup>124</sup> One of the most explicit examples of the projection of fantasy within *Femality TV* is through the commodities and luxurious lifestyles depicted on screen. As previously referred to through the presence of hyper-feminine imagery, fashion is a site for which viewers of *Femality TV* engage with

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<sup>121</sup> 'I'm Watching You,' *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, S1 E1, (Bunim/Murray and Ryan Seacrest Productions, 2007).

<sup>122</sup> Wang, p.834

<sup>123</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.66.

<sup>124</sup> Tsay, p.4.

through the perspective of aspiration. Thinking back to the idea of fashion as costume, the ability to engage with fashion due to its accessibility connects the viewer with those they are viewing and thus offers the opportunity to emulate their lifestyle via re-enactment of visibility. Many aspects of aspirational viewing is out of reach for their audience such as sports cars or luxury mansions in gated communities. However, fashion is expensive yet attainable. A designer bag adorned by billionaire Kim Kardashian usually costs a four-five figure sum or alternatively dupes can be bought for less, this therefore places fashion within the realm of attainable luxury. Fashion resides in the assumption that one has an individual sense of taste, thus the saying “money can’t buy style” is often retorted. It can be argued the way in which fashion is flaunted on Femality TV is problematic for young women who have become reliant on high-end fashion as a means of personal validation. Additionally, creating body image issues among young viewers who aspire to replicate celebrity bodies.<sup>125</sup> However, in contrast, it can be argued fashion is an outlet for female creativity and autonomy. This is especially pertinent when relating back to the history of the woman. In some aspects of history, the only control a woman had, was her attire.

This focus on fashion is once again another example of the way Femality TV is intrinsically linked to consumerist habits. Pramaggiore and Negra quote Anita Harrison to argue that consumerist habits shape femininity in the sense of a social tier system that is built upon self-betterment via fashion.<sup>126</sup> They articulate the traditional American concepts of aspirational fantasy as gendered, with men subscribing to the “American Dream narratives of meritocratic upward mobility” and “rags-to-riches Cinderella transformation” for women.<sup>127</sup> They recognise the post-feminist landscape within contemporary culture where “gender equality is synonymous with “girl power” and can be enacted through luxury consumption and the cultivation of a fashionable self-image.”<sup>128</sup> This is supported by Nicole Cox and Jennifer Proffit’s inference of female happiness as a quality that can be bought through consumerism.<sup>129</sup> This connection between consumerism and female fantasy will be

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<sup>125</sup> Nichole Egbert, ‘Reality Bites: An Investigation of The Genre of Reality Television and Its Relationship to Viewers Body Image,’ *Mass Communication and Society*, (2012), 407-431, p.408.

<sup>126</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, P.77.

<sup>127</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, P.79.

<sup>128</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, P.79

<sup>129</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.300.

developed in chapter two in relation to Bravo's reliance on creating fantasy viewing. Wang's suggestion that this flaunting of wealth is indicative of an undercurrent theme of social dominance through economical flaunting<sup>130</sup> can be countered by the influence that female fantasy has upon the RTV genre, particularly Femality TV. The significance of It girls like Hilton and Kardashian becoming emblematic of the Femality TV style infers rather that there isn't an attempt at cultural dominance via fashion but rather a legacy or precedent established through the style. The desire to emulate the women on Femality TV screens who are deemed as "fashionable" and "successful" through the acquisition of luxury clothing is evidence of women seeking personal reassurance, with fashion acting as a gage for their own success. The focalised image of the hyper-feminine body in Femality TV is dominant due to its concurrent attempts at emulation. A trend is not a trend until others follow and to gain followers, the image or voice must be centralised on a platform.

So far, this research has made a connection between visual imagery and personal styling with the success of *KUWTK*. This relationship is further propelled through the relationship between the Kardashian-Jenners and the concept of camp. The Kardashians achieve their moniker of "camp" through their bodily presentation and enforced depictions of the gendered female body. The most explicit form of flaunting in relation to bodily image is the medium of fashion. Fashion's importance in contemporary society is most exemplified by the *Vogue* funded annual Met Gala. Functioning as a means of raising funds for the costume department of the museum, the purpose of the gala is to combine fashion and celebrity in a way that elevates the two and creates a co-dependency between one another where both are offered the opportunity to reach their capacity. "High fashion and the most extraordinary expression of this medium, when paired with celebrity, becomes something bigger than both."<sup>131</sup> The 2019 Met Gala employed Sontag's 1964 essay *Notes on Camp* in its theme: "Camp: Notes on Fashion." Of which Kim Kardashian was in attendance wearing Thierry Mugler. Mugler dressed Kardashian in a skin-tight nude gown with an extreme corset, as seen in his late 90s collections. Fashion and culture critics have interpreted the collaboration as the perfect representation of camp due to Kardashian's status as a visual

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<sup>130</sup> Wang, p.834.

<sup>131</sup> *The First Monday In May*, (Andrew Rossi, Magnolia Pictures, 2016)

icon and the embodiment of excess. The dress referenced “the Hollywood siren,”<sup>132</sup> with Mugler using Sophia Loren as inspiration for the outfit, another star of the tabloid’s intrusive lens. This echoes the relationship between the depiction of women and the reliance on tropes/stereotyped roles, especially in relation to their sexual value. Thierry Mugler’s work is defined by the concept of hyper-femininity, as well as fetishism and the hyper-masculine. Hyper-femininity was a key theme in Mugler’s collections and is particularly visible in his 1995 and 1998 collections where corsets were central to his designs and an emphasis of the female figure was exaggerated. Revisiting the inference that tropes of hyper-femininity (the usage of makeup or surgery) act as armour for women, the corset can also be seen as such. It projects an image of strength at the cost of mobility. Mugler’s dresses were not designed with the mobility of the wearer in mind. “There are fashion designers who see women as beautiful flowers they want to put in a vase – but that vase is not always comfortable.”<sup>133</sup> When paired with the idiom “fashion is pain,” the conundrum of whether fashion that prioritises visual image over comfort is an expression of female empowerment or entrapment emerges. This idea of femininity as emotional armour is supported through Mugler’s interviews, he declared “I have constantly worked to ensure that women are more respected, that they feel powerful. Linda Nochlin, the great art historian and figure of feminism, said that my models went from “woman as object” to “woman as subjects”!”<sup>134</sup> Once again the topic of the male gaze resurfaces, this specific reference to the development of women’s place in art relates back to Femality TV whereby the women are not visual objects but rather narrative subjects.

This chapter has explored the way women are commodified by the culture system. Models are often seen as interchangeable with mannequins, however, designers like Mugler, understand the women who model his creations are multi-faceted beings who represent more than simply “woman.” This is manifested through the utilisation of celebrities as models. This understanding of female celebrities as multi-dimensional subjects can be contrasted against Cheroux’s observations of the paparazzi, where he describes the

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<sup>132</sup> Alanna McKnight, ‘The Kurious Kase of Kim Kardashian’s Korset,’ *Fashion Studies*, 3, 1, (2020), p.3.

<sup>133</sup> Arthur Dreyfus, ‘I have always worked to make women feel powerful: Thierry Mugler on his career,’ *French Vogue*, (2022), <https://vogue.fr/fashion-culture/article/thierry-mugler-interview-exposition-paris>

<sup>134</sup> Dreyfus, *French Vogue*.

celebrity subjects as inhibiting a “strangely one-dimensional universe.”<sup>135</sup> Femality TV countered the portrayal of women as one-dimensional by adding depth via narrative voice in the same way fashion designers modelled their clothes through culturally significant women.

McKnight supports the argument that Kardashian has been unjustly held with the burden of society’s relationship with issues around the female image, proving in her article *The Kurious Kase of Kim Kardashian’s Kloset* that “Kardashian is shouldering the weight of over a century of accumulated outrage over corsets, and misdirected hate at a ‘famous for nothing celebrity’ for her decision to create a hyper-feminine form.”<sup>136</sup> Noting the Mugler Met Gala look, McKnight makes the observation that Mugler is not criticised for “repressing women and creating an unhealthy image for girls to mimic, as Kardashian is.”<sup>137</sup> Once again, relating back to the friction between high and low culture. Kardashian, as a product of RTV, is held under the accusatory lens that she occupies a position of responsibility and should act morally as a role model for impressionable young woman. She suggests that this heightened criticism of Kardashian is due to her figure being outside “the accepted standard”<sup>138</sup> of Hollywood. However, this research suggests the differential treatment is due to her relationship with low brow culture as Mugler is heralded for his relationship with the style that is synonymous with Kardashian’s brand.

In conclusion, *KUWTK* fits succinctly into the Femality TV style. In accordance with the criteria there is an emphasis in highlighting the female voice. In this instance, the confessional sequence is used to contradict rumours and discourse propagated by other media (i.e., the paparazzi and gossip columns) and thus profits from the traditionally one-way conversation between these media and celebrities by making them an antagonist in the Femality TV formula. This usage of other media that focus on the female image and have historically profited from the criticism of such results in an amplified fantasy for the viewer, whereby the aspirational element is multidimensional through the inclusion of more

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<sup>135</sup> Cheroux, p.165.

<sup>136</sup> McKnight, p2.

<sup>137</sup> McKnight, p.5.

<sup>138</sup> McKnight, p.3.

media attention. Additionally, the assumption of a female audience is fulfilled due to the level of engagement between the stars and the viewer. Women are more likely to consume these female-targeted media and, therefore, their means of engagement is heightened. They are more likely to be aware of the criticism and relevance of the Kardashians at any given time and therefore are enticed to gain more scope on the information they have consumed elsewhere. Moreover, the emphasis on hyper-feminine imagery via the physicality of the Kardashian bodies and their relationship with fashion results in a type of fantasy that is accessible yet still aspirational. However, it is through their relationship with the hyper-feminised body that, finally, the element of camp is achieved. The increasingly unrealistic proportions of the Kardashians “real” bodies places them within the realm of camp. For they have become cartoonishly artificial in popular discourse. To the consumers of *KUWTK*, the idea that these women believe the audience would accept their bodies are natural is absurdly naïve to a humour degree. The ethicality of such a dynamic is not for review in this case study, therefore, ignoring the criticisms of the morality of rejecting claims of plastic surgery and body augmentations, this exaggerated physical representation of gender when paired with the metaphysical representation of femininity as heightened emotionality makes *KUWTK* a clear representation of the Femality TV style and its evolution from 2007 to 2021.



## Chapter Two

### The *Real* American Dream: How, through the application of the Femality TV criteria, *The Real Housewives* franchise acts as a utopia of feministic ambition

The American Dream is an allusive concept within American culture that underpins the American psyche and can be used to not only read Femality TV but to greater understand the motivations behind the intended American female/queer audience. The inherent belief that success is a certainty, and that the American individual is entitled to such, perforates all aspects of American culture but most prevalently through consumerist behaviours that are associated with being quintessential of American culture. The act of consumption is commonly seen as the tangible signifier of success; for, to engage in acts of consumerism, one must be economically comfortable. This goes beyond the acquisition of physical commodities such as land, real estate, fashion or home goods and extends to cover experiences such as vacations, meals with friends or the hosting and attending of parties/events. The latter of which is indicative of social capital and the former of cultural capital. Consequently, when reading *TRH* as an example of Femality TV, the intentions behind the style become clearer. The franchise is a creation of feminine fantasy and appeals to the aspirations of American women; to be economically, socially and culturally rich. Therefore, the audience that has been “cultivated”<sup>139</sup> by Bravo has a reliance on consumerist habits and as such the Bravo formula plays upon this relationship by providing opportunities to engage with the programming through consumerist methods, thus commodifying both the audience and the Housewives. Yael Levy presented the argument that the franchise has a matrixial structure, describing the x and y axes in relation to individual entries to the franchise and subsequent entries within the franchise (you can’t read one without considering the others).<sup>140</sup> Through the use of Femality TV as a template, it can be argued there is an additional z axis that involves transmedia storytelling. As Jaqueline Arcy<sup>141</sup> and Nicole Cox<sup>142</sup> proved, cross-platform promotion and engagement are

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<sup>139</sup> Nicole Cox, p.466

<sup>140</sup> Levy, p.373

<sup>141</sup> Arcy, p.489.

<sup>142</sup> Cox, p.466.

an essential aspect of *TRH* formula and therefore the franchise must be read in conjunction with other external media. This idea is a continuation from the previous chapter whereby *KUWTK* transcended the reality television genre and created a co-dependent relationship between the reality television programme and tabloid, gossip and social media. *TRH* is an attempt to profit from female fantasy by presenting opportunities for the female audience to “upwardly assimilate.”<sup>143</sup> Moreover, this argument can be transposed upon Femality TV as a style and how to fully understand *TRH*, *KUWTK* or *VPR*, a familiarity with the others is complimentary. Thus, creating a tapestry of the female condition that reflects the complexities behind womanhood and what motivates a female audience’s gaze.

In the previous chapter, *KUWTK* was used as an example to indicate what Femality TV looks like through its various identifiable properties. One of the key aspects was the usage of reality television as a platform to promote entrepreneurial endeavours. Consequently, innately coupling Femality TV with the concept of commercialism. By understanding Femality TV as a relationship between the female psyche and capitalist modes of consumption, the style becomes further evident and useful as a source of insight into the political climate surrounding gender identity in the present day. Referencing back to Kant’s perspective of women as beholders of beauty and the dictators of what is beautiful,<sup>144</sup> there has historically been a strong association between women and visual culture. From the dissonance between the male and female gaze to the relationship with grooming and commercialist consumption, it is evident women have a close relationship with visual aesthetics of taste. This chapter will argue that this relationship with taste is what underpins Femality TV as television production companies found a way to concentrate this interest and create a system which further profits from visual and physical consumption through the exploitation of feminine fantasy. *TRH* will be utilised as the case study for proving such due to its sheer size and its reliance on consumption behaviours. Bravo’s creation of a commercial universe that surrounds the franchise is an explicit example of the way RTV profits from creating celebrities out of its stars. The relationship with consumption goes beyond the production and is an essential aspect of the show as the women flaunt

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<sup>143</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.66.

<sup>144</sup> Hirschmann, p.204.

their lifestyles that are rich with consumption. The concept of flaunting is inherent with *TRH* and, as previously discussed in chapter one, feeds into the viewing incentive to project oneself upon the subject in a vicarious manner. Ultimately this chapter will argue that *Bravo* has commercialised the female condition through its focus on consumer habits that often overpower the sentiment of giving a platform to voice concerns of the female experience.

*The Real Housewives of Orange County* (RHOC) was the first entry into the *Real Housewives* franchise. Produced by the production company Bravo and first airing in 2006, the *RHOC* followed six wealthy white women in the affluent Californian suburb of Orange County. The OC had already been established as a RTV hotspot in the early 2000s due to the success of *Laguna Beach*. Amanda Klein argued shows such as *Laguna Beach* and its spin-off *The Hills* were reflective of an artificial fantasy world.<sup>145</sup> Klein suggested the popularity of *Jersey Shore* was a rejection of the image portrayed by wealthy Californians in a financially turbulent time, in favour of authenticity;<sup>146</sup> much like the hixploitation genre in the previous chapter. However, the success of *RHOC* and its contemporary *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (RHOBH) directly counter this. Otherwise, the success of *RHOC* does prove there was a desire for a more authentic approach to reality television, specifically gossip-orientated docu-soaps. *RHOC* was like *Laguna Beach* in its structure (placing emphasis on the wealth of its cast and their habits of consumption) but rather than following the children of rich and famous families, *RHOC* focused on the women who raised such children. They found these older women were living more entertaining and scandalous lives than previously imagined and thus the franchise was born.<sup>147</sup> Fairclough observed that popular culture “vilifies” older women.<sup>148</sup> By reframing the focus of gossip culture on older women, *RHOC* appealed to the audience’s desire for more authentic depictions of reality. The women discussed the topic of ageing and due to the stigma of the ageing woman within society, the show had a unique angle to tap into an unrepresented market and thus create new fantasy for women with specific reference to older demographics. As Hannah Ewens observed, it is not only older women who revel in the depiction of these middle-aged

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<sup>145</sup> Klein, p.149

<sup>146</sup> Klein, p.150

<sup>147</sup> *For Real: The Story of Reality TV*, Andy Cohen and Gil Goldschien, (Bunim Murray Productions, 2021).

<sup>148</sup> Fairclough, p.92.

married women but also young women.<sup>149</sup> The women within Bravo's various Housewives entries offer an opportunity for young women to fantasise about their own future in the youthful sense of "when I grow up, I want (or don't want) to be like them."

*TRH* soon became a larger franchise within reality television. The franchise is produced by the production company *Bravo*, who have become exclusively known for their reality television endeavours. The company has a formulaic approach to their productions, with the likes of Andy Cohen spearheading the brands recognisability. In addition to this formula that is reflected across the Femality TV trend, *Bravo* also produces a range of shows within the RTV spectrum such as: *Project Runway* (RTV competition), *The Millionaire Matchmaker* (dating show) and *Watch What Happens Live* (talk show). It is, however, the shows that fall under the Femality TV style that have proven their worth to *Bravo* and sustained an audience for the longest period. *Project Runway* saw impressive ratings at its height in the late 2000s but in the last decade has seen its audience dwindle.<sup>150</sup> Bravo's formula for creating successful female orientated programming is multifaceted and reliant on multiple factors such as the strength of their casting choice, the talent of their production crew and their focus on audience engagement through pushing advertisements through other media. Bravo's utilisation of cross-platform promotion has resulted in a universe of programming and varying modes of engagement.

RTV as a platform has pushed the boundaries of "famous for being famous," the platform has become self-sufficient through its focus on interconnectivity between texts. *Project Runway* featured appearances from the Housewives as part of an episode where the competitors had to design gowns for their respective reunion shows.<sup>151</sup> Housewives have also appeared on the likes of competitive RTV such as *The Celebrity Apprentice* and *Dancing with the Stars* as well as other docusoaps. *Summer House* saw appearances from the *VPR* cast and an episode dedicated to its promotion, in the same manner that *VPR* was referenced (or advertised)<sup>152</sup> on *RHOAH*. Phaedra Parks transitioned from *RHOA* to *Married*

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<sup>149</sup> Ewens, *RollingStone*.

<sup>150</sup> Roxana Hadadi and Jason P. Frank, 'Project Runway is Falling Out of Fashion,' *Vulture*, (2023), <https://www.vulture.com/article/project-runway-all-stars-judging-dated-critique.html>

<sup>151</sup> 'The Real Housewives of Project Runway,' *Project Runway*, S19, E10, (Bravo, 2022).

<sup>152</sup> Deery, p.1.

to *Medicine* due to her certification as a licenced mortician. Taylor Armstrong also swapped franchises from *RHOBH* to *RHOC*. And through the creation of *Ultimate Girls Trip* and *Bravocon*, this intertextuality of Femality TV is further strengthened. Cynthia Davis discussed how audience engagement meant: “Given six degrees of separation, it is likely that anyone who wishes to do so has connected with at least one of the stars, which is an important element in the show’s success.”<sup>153</sup> This is compounded through the cyclical rotation of celestoids within RTV, where the “all stars” category is growing and utilising established celestoid’s legacies to create impactful new RTV programming for an increasingly bemused audience.<sup>154</sup>

As argued in this research, the *Housewives* and Femality TV fit into the broader context of the gossip media system. Jaqueline Arcy supports this argument through her work on transmedia storytelling.<sup>155</sup> She argues online displays of emotional conflict is a necessary aspect of being a reality tv star (specifically a *Housewife*) and thus used as a navigator toward news media sites. She describes this as being Bravo’s “trans media strategy”<sup>156</sup> for *TRH* franchise. Arcy discusses the requirement of Bravo stars to create an online “money shot” to strengthen the relevancy of the *Housewives* franchise. The reality television docusoap has, therefore, transcended the silver screen and is now reliant upon online presence. She describes this transmedia storytelling as “convergence culture.”<sup>157</sup> An example of this cross-platform convergence of culture beyond the Bravo sphere is Lady Gaga’s 2013 music video for “G.U.Y.,” from her third studio album *Artpop*.<sup>158</sup> The video is a celebration of pop culture and Americana with references to Minecraft, Lego, American apparel and features appearances from the *RHOBH* cast. The video stages the *Housewives* as Muses whilst Andy Cohen watches over them as a deity in the clouds. The feature reflects the influential impact the show has had within popular culture and further contributed to the creation of pop culture, proving the two are symbiotic and do not exist in isolation but rather constant communication. Developing from Yael Levy’s argument that the *Housewives*

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<sup>153</sup> Davis, p.76.

<sup>154</sup> Arcy, p.144

<sup>155</sup> Arcy, p.487.

<sup>156</sup> Arcy, p.487.

<sup>157</sup> Arcy, p.489.

<sup>158</sup> ‘G.U.Y.’ Lady Gaga, *Artpop*, (Interscope Records, 2018).

exists within a matrix, the franchise can be placed on an axis against popular culture more broadly whereby to understand one fully, an understanding of the other is required.<sup>159</sup> They must not be treated as “monolithic texts,”<sup>160</sup> but rather interpreted in conjunction with one another.

Bravo has become so successful in their “trans-media strategy”<sup>161</sup> that within Bravo’s cultural circle exists a plethora of content for fans to engage with. *Watch What Happens Live*, although being a talk show, shares a similar trajectory to the popularity of the *Housewives* series. Airing from 2010 to present day, *WWHL* sees host Andy Cohen interview two guests within, or familiar with, the *Bravo* cultural universe. The interviews are brief and often focused entirely around shows within the *Bravo* company. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Cohen’s appearance during reunion episodes and as a faux investigative journalist tasked with revealing the *Bravo* stars secrets whilst simultaneously not detracting from the core content of the shows themselves supports the argument that Femality TV is supported by a grander system of Femality media that serve to propel the show’s success via increased engagement. Cynthia Davis states: “much of *RHOA*’s appeal stems from the ability of the audience to comment instantaneously, through social media and the Bravo website, on the circular, multistrand plot lines that revisit the same conflicts.”<sup>162</sup> In his interviews on *WWHL*, Cohen teases, analyses and provokes his interviewees into giving the audience gossip in a manner not dissimilar to the tabloid media system. *Bravo*’s usage of Cohen, therefore, can be seen as a further manifestation of this idea, established through Paris Hilton, that through RTV you can reclaim narratives formerly dictated by an external source. The presence of *WWHL* in conjunction with *Bravo* produced Femality TV consecrates the relationship between consumerism and the Femality style. To be fully immersed in the lore around the programming you must engage further with their products, whether it be buying merch attending *Bravocon* or simply watching more programming like *WWHL*, *Bravo* have created a system of consumption that profits from the feminine. In turn, the argument presented in the previous chapter that the Kardashians used reality TV to commodify the

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<sup>159</sup> Levy, p.372.

<sup>160</sup> Levy, p.373

<sup>161</sup> Arcy, p.489

<sup>162</sup> Davis, p.74.

female body can be taken further to argue that Bravo created a system that profiteers from the commodification of femininity and the female experience.

Nicole Cox argued in 2015 that Bravo has commodified not only its stars but also its audience through this expansion of opportunity to engage via external media. She supports the argument of transmedia promotion, stating “Bravo has proven itself to be a leader in both cultivating and growing an engaged audience through savvy social-media strategies, promoting interactivity between audience and talent, and developing multi-platform brand extensions.”<sup>163</sup> Arcy cites the following media: “blogs hosted on Bravo’s official website, videos on Bravo’s YouTube channel, and social media posts on stars’ Instagram and Twitter.”<sup>164</sup> However, since the time of writing Bravo has expanded in other areas such as the creation of Bravocon in 2019; a convention for fans of Bravo programming. Through the creation of Bravocon and the development of Bravo themed merch the commercial aspect of Femality TV has revoked some of the authenticity of the representations within the programmes themselves. At Bravocon, the Bravolebrities are treated like actors playing a character whilst also being encouraged by ring master Cohen to “perform” in artificial scenarios. Whilst the promotion Arcy and Weber describe is one of cross-platform promotion of products and business ventures tied to self-branding, the self has become the product in recent years. The forced performativity of Bravocon and the increase in Bravo stars usage of the Cameo platform as a means of using their presence as a commercial endeavour insinuates the Bravolebrities have become the tangible product with a monetary value ascribed to their physical presence. “The production of the ‘branded self’ involves casting oneself as a saleable product with economic value, in sum, turning the self into a commodity. For women, online self-branding is a gendered endeavour that involves promotion through the spectacle of fashion, beauty, intimacy, and emotion, much like the women-centred soap opera, gossip industry, and consumption that came before.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Cox, p.466.

<sup>164</sup> Arcy, p.489.

<sup>165</sup> Arcy, p.492.

The commodification of the self relates to Kavka's thoughts on gendered performativity.<sup>166</sup> Bravocon positions the Housewives as performers and this stylized performativity can once again be relayed back to consumerist habits. On *TRH*, the women encourage their audience to spend and focus on "self-improvement" in the name of female happiness.<sup>167</sup> As argued by both Negra and Cox and Proffit, for the female audience happiness is equated with consumerism, therefore, portraying it as something that can be bought.<sup>168</sup> Referring back to the American Dream's legacy; where consumerist behaviours are seen as a tangible product of success, this applies to Femality TV where purchasing is a physical manifestation of happiness and femininity. This belief that every American is capable of exceptionalism and individual success has perforated American culture in a manner so immeasurable that the result has become a society obsessed with social, economic and cultural ascension. This is often expressed through the usage of consumerism as a quantitative motif of excess. Consequently, the women who appear on the show must "flaunt their wealth"<sup>169</sup> by engaging in consumerism.

Yajin Wang and Vladus Griskevicius present the argument that the flaunting of luxury goods by men is to attract mates and the flaunting of wealth and commodities by women seeks to discern rival women. Whilst this article makes a good argument for the relationship between men and luxury as a "sexual signalling system"<sup>170</sup> to attract romantic partners, the framing of women as in competition with each other is contradicted by the success of shows like *TRH*. Within these shows, the women are celebrated by a female audience for their wealth and their commodities are seen as vital to the entertainment value of the show via upward assimilation.<sup>171</sup> As Evie Psarras observes: "confirming voyeurism and the vicarious experience, respondents mentioned the money, glamour and lifestyles documented on the show as reasons for watching RTV. Additionally, there seems to be an aspirational quality to viewing these shows."<sup>172</sup> Insinuating that women flaunt luxury to deter other women from

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<sup>166</sup> Kavka, p.63.

<sup>167</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.297.

<sup>168</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.295.

<sup>169</sup> *For Real: The Story of Reality TV*, Andy Cohen and Gil Goldschien, (Bunim Murray Productions, 2021)

<sup>170</sup> Wang, p.834.

<sup>171</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.66.

<sup>172</sup> Psarras, p.58.



“poaching”<sup>173</sup> their husbands diminishes female independence and suggests that a heightened appreciation of taste comes from insecurity. Although this might be true for some, many women who are not in relationships or feel secure in their relationship partake in the consumerist interest of fashion. Wang’s article suggests men’s flaunting of wealth is primitive in its success as a mating technique as it shows security and the ability to provide for possible partners. Therefore, the flaunting of wealth by women, who have no expectation for being able to provide for their partners becomes a reflection of their position as well-provided-for wives. This notion of women perceiving women through the lens of male keepers is rather archaic. To watch *RHOA* or *RHOBH* under the premise that the women are posturing to reflect their relationship’s stability removes all jovial and natural aspects of female friendship. An alternative approach to viewing displays of women posturing luxury is through appreciation; when women divulge in fashion, home interiors or real estate, they are praised by their peers for their level of taste or success and this is what this research on Femality TV argues the female gaze entails.

Consumerism, manifests itself within Femality TV through the manipulation of upward ascension. This ideology correlates to the upward assimilation<sup>174</sup> of viewership upon RTV stars and it is done so through a feminised lens. Thus, tapping into a feminised fantasy. Femality TV has created a method of consumption that is reliant on the fantasies of women and such fantasy resides in consumption of products designed to be visually pleasing. This emphasis on taste and the viscosity of aesthetic appearance within Femality TV echo’s Kant’s sentiment that women occupy the realm of the beautiful and as such they understand visual beauty more-so than men. Arguments could be made in favour of this belief in biological differentiations that result in a heightened appreciation of visual beauty in a pure form. However, there is evidence to support the association of women with visual beauty as a cumulative by-product of cultural stereotyping and gendered behaviours. Historically and contemporarily, in many cultures a woman and her children’s chance of survival relied upon her ability to secure a man who could provide a comfortable life for them and consequently this led to a hegemonic culture which put great emphasis on a

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<sup>173</sup> Wang, p.834.

<sup>174</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.66.

woman's attractiveness and her ability to groom herself.<sup>175</sup> Whilst women no longer rely on a husband for financial support, this pattern of encouraging daughters to invest in their appearance remains. Additionally, so does the aspiration to acquire a desirable husband. *TRH* uses the term Housewife, once dedicated to a woman whose life was resigned to the home, and they assigned it to women who had successful careers, were established in their designated fields and often had a non-conventional and/or unprioritized home life. Cynthia Davis noted "it seems almost tongue-in-cheek to describe these women as "housewives,"" due to many of the women being unmarried, however "the subtext of marriage as an ultimate goal is undeniably present."<sup>176</sup> Dianne Negra explored the rejuvenation of domesticity as a site for fantasy and glamour within popular culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>177</sup> The housewife is once again fashionable as domesticity has become popularised through consumption and to be married to a successful husband remains a prominent aspiration.

The female gaze has been a point of contention in cinematic studies with some, like Jessica Taylor viewing the female gaze as an inverse of the male gaze. However, Femality TV as a style supports the idea that the female gaze is not reliant on female heterosexuality like the male gaze. The success of Femality TV programmes with queer audiences counters the inference of a sexualised female gaze and presents the idea of a femme-gaze. With the male gaze, there are often instances where sexuality is displayed unnecessarily. Sexualised female characters may be introduced that serve no purpose to the narrative, only as an opportunity for a male audience to gain "visual pleasure."<sup>178</sup> It is this consistency that forms the male gaze and the same cannot be said for the femme gaze. This will be strengthened by a discussion on the rejection of male characters within *TRH* later. Both *KUWTK* and *The Real Housewives* prove this is not an essential aspect and contrastingly they often omit male bodies in general. The men who do appear do not dictate the gaze. As Wang suggested, the husbands' factor into a sexual signalling system<sup>179</sup> whereby the women flaunt their domestic stability more so than their sexuality. This will be discussed further in chapter three through Ken Todd's role as Lisa Vanderpump's husband.

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<sup>175</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.295.

<sup>176</sup> Davis, p.74.

<sup>177</sup> Negra, p.140

<sup>178</sup> Mulvey, p.1957

<sup>179</sup> Wang, p.834.

Returning to Soriano's perspective that women perceive themselves through a sexualised male gaze,<sup>180</sup> there is a disconnect between *KUWTK* and *TRH*. *KUWTK* seemingly caters and is consciously aware of the male gaze more so than *TRH*. This is arguably due to where the value is placed in each programme. In *KUWTK*, the visual image is often the product/primary incentive for watching. The physical body is at the core of the brand that the Kardashian-Jenners have built and as such it often takes centre frame. The control of the camera lens during filming further reflects this difference in intent and it is most evident through shots of the body. In *KUWTK*, the body is shot through a sexualised lens which is then paired with sexualised context. Examples including Kim's *Playboy* photo shoot<sup>181</sup>, or the sister's *Girls Gone Wild* scene.<sup>182</sup> Even casual commentary includes the sexualisation of the sister's bodies by one another. This can be compared against wide angle shots in *TRH* where often the emphasis is on what is adorned on the body rather than the body itself. When the camera lens focuses in on a Housewife, it does so with the intent to highlight fashion/taste, to capture emotion or to compliment/contrast the narrative of the episode. Whilst *KUWTK* focuses on the visual as a product, *TRH* concerns itself with contextual materials, often focusing on verbal content with the visual acting as supplementary to the narrative. This can be taken further to argue that commercialism, although intrinsic to *Bravo's* model, is complimentary to the content and the female voice is the primary attraction. The height of the camera in *TRH* is indicative of this, as the women are often eye-level to the lens and as such the viewer feels included in the conversation. Consequently, this welcoming lens can be attributed to fulfilling the fantasy aspect of Femality TV. Therefore, irrespective of what gaze the camera is catering to there is a theme of commonality through the employment of fantasy and projection. *KUWTK* is a flaunting of female sexuality, and *TRH* is the flaunting of lifestyle and consumption.

Using Mischa Kavka's formerly outlined categories of flaunting, there are three distinct ways of reading flaunting: "the bodily flaunting of fake breasts and fake tans

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<sup>180</sup> Soriano.

<sup>181</sup> 'Birthday Suit,' *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, S1, E4, (Bunim/Murray, 2007).

<sup>182</sup> 'Brody in the House,' *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, S1, E3, (Bunim/Murray, 2007).

associated with image-conscious femininity,”<sup>183</sup> this is the primary mode of flaunting within *KUWTK*. Secondly, “the affective flaunting of women’s emotionalism associated with catfights and meltdowns.”<sup>184</sup> This flaunting of emotionalism is most prevalent within *TRH*; however, it will be discussed further in chapter three when compared against masculine stoicism. And finally, “the materialistic flaunting of mansions and cars associated with luxury lifestyles,”<sup>185</sup> otherwise referred to as “lifestyle porn.” Within *TRH* all forms of flaunting are present to immerse the audience in the fantasy of Femality TV. As argued in the above, the female gaze is rooted in the ability to fantasise through visual extravagance. Consequently, the audience of Femality TV admire housewives for their taste levels or as an example of female empowerment through the accumulation of commodities. When viewing *TRH* from a hyper-feminine perspective Lisa Vanderpump is essential to the relationship between consumption, camp and femininity. Vanderpump associates herself and her brand with the synonymously feminine colour pink. Her house is called Villa Rosa, her dog given the title “pink dog” and as she states in season five “even [her] pussy [hair] is pink.”<sup>186</sup> Vanderpump is fondly thought of by viewers as the quintessential Housewife. She has a luxurious lifestyle, a comical sensibility, quick wit and has a strong relationship with the queer community. Those who enjoy Vanderpump see her through the lens of upward projection. She is emblematic of the fantasy element of Femality TV. The audience overwhelmingly admire her for her commercial success as a restaurateur, her long-lasting relationship with husband Ken Todd or her taste levels. Vanderpump’s closet is given multiple feature shots in both *RHOBH* and *Vanderpump Rules* due to its popularity as a site for feminised consumer-led fantasy.

The bodily flaunting associated with “image conscious femininity” has already been outlined through the women’s relationship with body augmentation and fashion. Like *KUWTK*, fashion is often a focal point of the narrative in *TRH*. *TRH* also differs from *KUWTK* in that there is not a template for expressing oneself as a woman. The cast engage with their femininity through varying ways and not all of them use fashion or makeup and

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<sup>183</sup> Kavka, p.63

<sup>184</sup> Kavka, p.63,

<sup>185</sup> Kavka, p.63.

<sup>186</sup> ‘Guess Who’s Coming to the White Party?’ *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Scott Dunlop, S5, E1, (Bravo, 2014).

cosmetic surgery as a means of empowerment. It is, however, a common theme. One example of where cosmetic surgery is seen explicitly as a tool for feminine empowerment is through Dr Wendy Osefo on *The Real Housewives of Potomac (RHOP)*. In season six of the series Osefo voices her discontent at her body after having children. She explains how cosmetic surgery and augmentations helped her feel more positively about her own body.<sup>187</sup> This then spurred a narrative around the legitimacy of her claims and whether her intention was instead to appease her husband, connoting Wang's "sexual signalling system,"<sup>188</sup> due to alleged infidelity. This is an example where performance of gender has been weaponised to attack other women through an engagement with the hyper-feminine aesthetic. There are many examples within the franchise of women seeking a more enhanced feminine appearance. However, they are often overlapped with resistance to an ageing body. The women on *TRH* are older than their counterparts on other Femality TV shows like *KUWTK* and *VPR* and as such counteracting ageing takes a centre focus more so than an interest in achieving an exaggeratedly gendered look.

In *RHOBH*, Adrienne Maloof and husband at the time Paul Nassif served as an insight to the culture within Beverly Hills that shuns ageing women. Nassif as a cosmetic surgeon offers and encourages women on the show to alter their appearance to prevent or reverse visible signs of ageing. One example being Kim Richards undergoing a rhinoplasty in the episode 'Kim Nose Best.'<sup>189</sup> Another example of Paul's work whilst on the show is his recommendations to Taylor Armstrong, who at the time was in an abusive relationship with then husband Russel Armstrong. In a scene where Taylor has just condemned Camille Grammar for mentioning the abuse, she is seen at Lisa Vanderpump's lavish gateway receiving advice from Nassif about areas of her face that require filler through a closed gate. The scene would be considered camp was it not for the serious undertone set by the assumption that Taylor was underweight from the emotional trauma of her marriage. Surgery within *TRH* is seen as a tool for fixing emotional struggle, as seen with Osefo. This relationship with surgery is indicative of a broader societal issue regarding self-image, whereby women have attributed sex appeal to the notion of self-care. As discussed through

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<sup>187</sup> *The Real Housewives of Potomac*, (Bravo 2022).

<sup>188</sup> Wang, p.834

<sup>189</sup> 'Kim Nose Best,' *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Andy Cohen and Alex Baskin, S3, E12, (Bravo, 2013).

*KUWTK*, there is an inherent association of hyper-femininity with artificiality. This artificiality of visual appearance is directly juxtaposed against the raw quality of the content. Situations such as Taylor Armstrong's is in direct contest with Lisa Vanderpump's storyline about hosting her daughter's pink extravagant wedding. Femality TV is always straddling the line between traumatic and blissful, the ordinary and extraordinary, and the comedic and concerning.

Femality TV occupies an emotional purgatory, where emotions are not fixed. The scenes are complex and despite production's involvement in suggesting tones for scenes humour can be found where it was not intended and simultaneously sadness and empathy evoked from unassuming commentary. In *The Real Housewives of New York (RHONY)*, when Luanne learns of fiancé Tom D'Agostino's infidelity the cameras are present for a highly emotional scene where it is apparent that her perspective of her life with him is in crisis, yet, there is something morbidly comedic about her text to speech message to him which she signs off with an audible "question mark."<sup>190</sup> This absurdity of jarring moments like that is part of the entertainment value of the format as a whole. This scene with Luanne can be compared against a scene from *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City (RHOSLC)* in which Mary Cosby details a car incident which a woman from her church died. Cosby is asked if the woman survived, and she responds bluntly with "no" quickly followed by "I'm happy to be here" paired with a joyful dance that is then bookended with a warning to "wear your seatbelt." Cosby's response comes across as completely unserious to a concerning degree, yet it is entertaining because it is emotional absurdity. Fans of the franchise refer to *RHOSLC* as a parody of other Housewives shows. In the three seasons the show has been on air it has witnessed: a Housewife married to her deceased grandma's ex-partner, a Housewife whose husband wanted a sister wife to birth more of his children whilst remaining married to her and a national fraud scandal resulting in the incarceration of a Housewife for six years.<sup>191</sup> *RHOSLC* is less preoccupied with lifestyle porn and upward assimilation. The audience do not relate to a leader of an evangelist church, an ex-Mormon or a criminal, nor are they expected to. Like *VPR*, *RHOSLC*'s cast aren't sympathetic characters in the way other

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<sup>190</sup> 'Tom Foolery,' *The Real Housewives of New York*, S8, E19, (Bravo, 2016).

<sup>191</sup> 'Real Housewives star Jen Shah sentenced to over six years in prison,' *BBC News*, (January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-64190355>

franchise entries are. It falls closer to “car crash tv”<sup>192</sup> than aspirational, with its viewer appeal being the “same ghoulish and voyeuristic impulses which draw gawking crowds to road traffic accidents.”<sup>193</sup> *RHOSLC* does also offer some interesting insights into religion, however, and thus contributing to the tapestry of female experiences. The women who participate in these shows offer a vulnerability that despite any monetary incentive, is authentic and the vital source of entertainment. Many criticisms toward the programmes under Femality TV revolve around the assumption the women are arguing out of idleness. That they are demonstrating heightened emotionality artificially for attention and to secure a place on the next season. And to some extent this may be true, however, the opportunity afforded to the female audience to see representations of the female condition that greatly resemble their own outweighs any exaggerative or artificiality.

*TRH* is a perfect example of camp within pop culture. The women on these shows are some of the most whimsically absurd accidental comedians. The delusion of someone like Camille Grammar with confidence stating the successful women who she is in dispute with are jealous of her husband’s success<sup>194</sup> or the Countess being shocked that the phone operator for a pizza fast-food business doesn’t recognise her title is quintessential camp.<sup>195</sup> In the season six finale of *RHONY*, Aviva Drescher, whilst passionately arguing a case for the validity of her diagnosis of asthma, presents the women with an x-ray of her chest in an impassioned speech which cumulates in her throwing her artificial leg across the room proclaiming “the only thing fake about me is this [leg].”<sup>196</sup> The following moments sees the camera follow the facial expressions of the women and fellow onlookers who attempt to continue their conversations and ignore the absurd chaos surrounding the artificial leg in the centre of the room. Another demonstration of camp is Giggy “sex monster” Vanderpump, the hairless Pomeranian, being carried around by Ken Todd dressed in matching outfits to various high calibre events. These moments are all playful and naïve in a way where the women are often oblivious to their own comedic effects. Lisa Vanderpump is

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<sup>192</sup> ‘A word of warning on shock tv,’ *The Herald Scotland*, (June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1995), <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12104844.a-word-of-warning-on-shock-tv/>

<sup>193</sup> *The Herald Scotland*

<sup>194</sup> *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Alex Baskin and Andy Cohen, S1, (Bravo, 2008-present).

<sup>195</sup> *The Real Housewives of New York City*, Andy Cohen and Megan Estrada, (Bravo, 2008-present).

<sup>196</sup> ‘The Last Leg,’ *The Real Housewives of New York City*, Andy Cohen and Megan Estrada, S6, E20 (Bravo, 2008-present)

aware of how comical it is for her dog and husband to be always dressed in matching attire, however, if the cameras were not rolling the situation would remain the same. There is a genuine authenticity in the absurdity of the camp moments Femality TV provides popular culture with. The intent is not to be camp but rather it is a by-product of these moments and make the shows highly entertaining for it.

Camp is “good because it’s awful”<sup>197</sup> and this is how Femality TV falls into the dichotomy of being exploitative yet wildly entertaining. In *RHONY*, Carole Radziwell states of cast mate Dorinda: “when Dorinda is bad, she’s so good.”<sup>198</sup> This is indicative of the appeal of “messy” Housewives who viewers shun for their poor behaviour yet are enthralled and amused by their sincerity of character. *RHONY* reflects this through its cast’s sequential faux pas’ whereby they concurrently offend marginalised groups. Examples include Luanne’s Halloween costume of Diana Ross that has been interpreted as black face by the audience,<sup>199</sup> or Ramona Singer’s recurring references to the staff as “the help.”<sup>200</sup> These problematic moments are often countered by statements from other Housewives (those cast as the voice of reason) alerting the audience as to how inappropriate they are. It is this problematic side, however, that questions the Housewives’ place in culture today and whether the franchise has further longevity or whether it will become a staple of the past. If, as established, the style is intrinsically consumerist and commercial success is propelling the format forward then a reliance on public support is integral and an audience boycott becomes more likely the more controversial the figures are. Cynthia Davis recognised this problematic content and suggested it was an attempt to maintain authenticity: “Of course, political correctness is not a feature of *RHOA*, or any reality television program, so one must assume that the attitudes displayed on the show are part of a desire for authenticity and to “keep it real.””<sup>201</sup>

Bravo is subject to criticism over its representation of fantasy viewing in relation to race particularly. There is a tokenisation of franchise entries whereby *RHOA* and *RHOP* both

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<sup>197</sup> Sontag, p.13.

<sup>198</sup> *The Real Housewives of New York City*, Andy Cohen and Megan Estrada, (Bravo, 2008-present).

<sup>199</sup> ‘Ghouls Just Wanna Have Fun,’ *The Real Housewives of New York*, S10, E1, (Bravo,2018)

<sup>200</sup> *The Real Housewives of New York*, Andy Cohen and Megan Estrada, (Bravo, 2008-present).

<sup>201</sup> Davis, p,76.



feature a black ensemble cast, however, other entries in the franchise also feature all white casts. This segregation between black and white casts can be attributed to a distinction between black and white fantasy. Adria Goldman explored the representation of black women in RTV. She commented on the expectations of black beauty standards as being “defined as a woman who was thin with large breasts, an appropriate body distribution (e.g., curvaceous figures), smooth skin, a youthful appearance, lighter skin tone, and non-Afrocentric features. If she had a darker skin tone, it was combined with more Eurocentric standards such as long hair”<sup>202</sup> The racial tokenisation of *TRH* entires has been criticised by Goldman and others such as Allison Samuels<sup>203</sup> and Sophia Nelson.<sup>204</sup> However, Cynthia Davis proposed the platform of RTV as a source for black feminine success and empowerment.<sup>205</sup>

Jaqueline Arcy used Leonard and Negra’s assessment of “female self-actualisation through self-branding” as a counter to the suggestion that female success via these programmes is empowering for women as the private life is commercialised. This suggests the implications of opening one’s private life to public judgement negates the opportunity afforded to be a centralised voice, be seen, heard and supported on a national stage. Whilst some of the Housewives understand the dynamic between *Bravo* and its Bravolebrities (*The Real Housewives* being a platform for personal advertisement of product), many misunderstand the opportunity afforded to them and rather are enticed by the opportunity to have their voice centralised; conversely, for them the appeal is to be seen and heard. There are some Housewives who, as opposed to advertising their endeavours, focus on their own narrative and their chance to speak. Housewives such as Camille Grammar, who was not reliant on *Bravo* for money, nor in search of promotion but rather saw the platform as an opportunity to be seen in her own regard, away from her famed husband’s spotlight. Camille’s run on the *RHOBH* appeared to act as a form of therapy and catharsis, viewers saw

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<sup>202</sup> Adria Goldman, ‘Constructing African American Women’s Identities in Reality Television Programming,’ *Media Report to Women*, 41, 4, (2013), 12-19, p.14.

<sup>203</sup> Allison Samuels, ‘Reality TV Trashes Black Women: An unsettling new formula: Eye rolling, finger-snapping stereotypes,’ *Newsweek: New York*, 157, 19, (2011).

<sup>204</sup> Sophia A. Nelson, *Black Woman Redefined: Dispelling Myths and Discovering Fulfilment in the Age of Michelle Obama*, (Dallas, Texas: BenBella Books, 2011).

<sup>205</sup> Cynthia Davis, ‘The Semiotics of Fashion and Urban Success in The Real Housewives of Atlanta,’ in *Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability and Black Women in Reality TV*, eds by Jervette R Ward, (Rutgers University Press, 2015), pp.68-85.

her hubris of narcissism and she responded in a way which saw her gain autonomy and confidence in herself. Her flaunting of her wealth and privilege was overshadowed by her insecurities in both her marriage and her-self. Whilst viewers “loved to hate” Camille for her approach to the other women, they ultimately sympathised with her when it came to her more powerful husband’s adultery. This response signified the power of a female audience. Due to his elevated status as a talent-based celebrity Camille’s perspective would have been unlikely to have been told, aside from in the tabloid magazines, of which many do not believe nor read for its controversial reputation. The relationship between the Housewives and the women and gay men who watch them is para-social in nature and as such viewers feel a sense of report with the women. As Cynthia Davis recognises, “viewers identify intimately with the housewives.”<sup>206</sup>

This sense of intimacy can be attributed to the emphasis on creating ways for the audience to engage with the Housewives through the cross-platform promotional strategy. However, it could also be attributed to Lewis and Weaver’s observations on viewing habits.<sup>207</sup> Amanda Klein analysed the popularity of more authentic RTV over scripted reality, referencing Chuck Kleinhans’ creation of the subgenre of RTV “projective dramas.” Coined as such because “the dramatic presentation of a situation that the core audience views in anticipation that they will be in a similar situation sometime in the future.”<sup>208</sup> This term could apply to some aspects of viewing *TRH*. Whilst it is essential for the housewives to be rich and/or socially powerful, there is a relatability that the audience recognises. Many of the narrative plots within *TRH* are serious in nature, voicing issues regarding addiction, suicide, domestic violence and divorce. These issues cannot be avoided through wealth and affect all class boundaries. There may be a disconnect between the lifestyles of the subject and the viewer, however, the content that is discussed is mutably intelligible for both. The viewer doesn’t have to relate and fully comprehend what it’s like to be married to a famous actor to understand the trauma of their partner cheating on them and going through a divorce. Divorce affects both the rich and the poor alike and whilst there is a correlation

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<sup>206</sup> Davis, p.75.

<sup>207</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.65

<sup>208</sup> Klein, p.149

between higher earnings and a higher chance of divorce, it is a universal experience that affects many Americans.<sup>209</sup>

Returning to the second season on *RHOBH*, Taylor Armstrong's storyline and the ethicality of airing the footage regarding Russel's abuse after his suicide was a discussion point in the reunion episodes. In terms of the voyeuristic nature of reality TV this season is one of the most indicative of the discourse between what is private and public as it highlights the taboo nature of someone's personal trauma being marketed as entertainment. The issue of privacy is discussed by the Housewives in the reunion episode and the question is posed whether they believe the series should have aired due to its distressing plot lines. RTV revels in its authenticity but is there a limit to how authentic the images displayed can be? Camille Grammer suggested the season shouldn't have aired out of respect for the pair's children, whilst Brandi Glanville was in support of recently deceased Armstrong who no longer had the chance to defend himself against public scrutiny. However, Taylor herself wished for it to be aired to draw attention to domestic abuse victims and as a tool to provide support.<sup>210</sup> This brings up an argument in support of explicitly private and restricted topics to be displayed to the public as a means of educating on topics that often don't get the recognition they deserve. As has been rehashed many times on the franchise, the women offer their private lives in return for monetary compensation, personal advertisement and the opportunity of fame. As such, they are expected to be authentic and open with any personal issues that an audience would benefit from seeing. Cynthia Davis highlighted "the chance to view African American women occupying public spaces" as a significant benefit of *RHOA*. This can be extended to apply to all conditions of womanhood.

Caetlin Benson-Allott discusses the "recent renaissance of feminist television by and about women<sup>211</sup>" and whilst her examples are outside of reality television, the sentiment remains the same. Ultimately, the visibility of women via television to a female audience is

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<sup>209</sup> Leah Fessler, 'The occupations with the highest and lowest divorce rates in the US,' *Quartz*, (2017), <https://qz.com/1069806/the-highest-and-lowest-divorce-rates-in-america-by-occupation-and-industry>

<sup>210</sup> 'Reunion – Part 1,' *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Scott Dunlop, S2, E21 (Bravo, 2012).

<sup>211</sup> Caetlin Benson-Allott, "No such thing yet: Questioning Television's Female Gaze," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 2 (2017), p. 65.

instrumental in the development of modern feministic movements. She further stated, “the sheer fact of women talking, being paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else public is the most revolutionary thing in the world.”<sup>212</sup> This further supports the cultural significance behind *TRH* (and *Femality TV*) in its centralisation of the female voice and its credence toward the female experience. In *TRH*, the female stars often speak on behalf of women as a collective, with broad references to experiences such as motherhood or the role of a wife. It is this focus on the female condition that distinguishes *Femality TV* from other RTV that boasts of a female audience. *TRH* directly tackles conversations around the roles of women as well as issues of femininity. Yael Levy argued that the structure of *TRH* had “the potential to disrupt not only narrative but also patriarchal order.”<sup>213</sup> She suggests that the relentless continuation of the feminised soap opera carries over, in part, to *TRH* franchise. The aversion of narrative solution over continual episodes creates a sense of “disorder” that signifies “a feminist resistance to return of order.” The example used to represent this disorder is the season three finale of *RHOC*, which cumulates in a fairy-tale wedding. The expected order would be for the man and woman to be the focus, yet the emphasis is on the group of women and thus is a deviation of narrative patriarchal order. Levy suggests the reunions offer some narrative catharsis. However, within the seasons themselves, this sense of disorder exists.

Levy also argues that the *Housewives* must be read vertically in accordance with one another to understand the complexities behind the representation of womanhood. She uses the example of Teresa Giudice’s comments on personal performativity being overlayed onto her daughter Gia’s dance performance to emphasise that performativity is a quality of femininity that is learnt from adolescence and continued into womanhood. This messaging is then compared against Ramona Singer and Heather Thompson’s cross sequence scene on being a businesswoman. Where Thompson recognises the performativity of physical appearance (in reference to her shapewear collection that appeals to the pressure on women to conform to societal standards on their bodily appearance) and Singer references the multiplicity of the roles of women. She quotes Singer: “I have it all; I’m a career woman,

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<sup>212</sup> Benson-Allott, p. 65.

<sup>213</sup> Levy, p.371.

I'm a great mother, and a great wife."<sup>214</sup> This quote summarises the appeal of *TRH* as a platform for the female condition and the advocacy of all representations of womanhood and the roles women have. Levy's argument that the franchise must be read as a whole, and not isolated entries being treated as monolithic texts distinct from one another compliments the thesis.<sup>215</sup> Texts within Femality TV communicate with each other to create a kaleidoscopic view of femininity and womanhood. To understand the nuances and climate of *TRH* a background familiarity with *KUWTK* is required as that programme established many of the ideas heralded within *TRH* franchise. When *RHOBH* first aired, there was a focus on Kyle Richard's connection to Paris Hilton, however, as the seasons progressed and the popularity of *KUWTK* grew unprecedentedly Kyle's relationship with matriarch Kris Jenner was referenced more, with Jenner making an appearance. Additionally, the usage of Andy in the final episode of *KUWTK* further cements this relationship of interconnectivity across different production companies.

To conclude, this chapter has proven the argument for *TRH* as being a product of the Femality TV style through its shared properties with other reality television shows from the same period that also focus on the female experience. *TRH* caters its content toward a female audience who desire to see depictions of lavish lifestyles as a site for indulgence of fantasy. The audience may watch the content for a plethora of reasons such as: its depiction of privilege, its comedic qualities, its cultural relevance, its portrayal of older women, an interest in gossip or to make judgements upon taste. Femality TV projects a fantasy and for *TRH*, this fantasy is constructed from capitalistic methods of consumption. The audience are encouraged to engage with commercialised products to an extent where the stars of the show become commodified for their emotional performances. The women on screen project the notion that consumerism results in happiness and consequently the audience buy into this belief, purchasing items related to the show but also externally under the interest of being stylish. Ultimately, Femality TV is created from the female gaze and that gaze is preoccupied with commercialised commodities paired with narratives surrounding

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<sup>214</sup> Levy, p.373.

<sup>215</sup> Levy, p.373.

the female experience. When approaching reality television with this objective in mind Femality TV becomes more apparent and identifiable.

### Chapter Three:

#### It's a Man's World? An exploration of *Vanderpump Rules* and the gendered exclusivity of the Femality TV formula

The previous research has concluded that there is a distinct audience and identifiable objective within the Femality TV formula: to broadcast various examples of womanhood to a female/queer audience. So where do heterosexual men fit into the format? Using *Vanderpump Rules* (VPR) as a case study, this chapter will serve as an exploration around the boundaries of the style and its relationship with gendered performances, particularly for its usage of heterosexual men as protagonists alongside the female Bravolebrities. Through using the same criteria from the previous case studies, VPR will be assessed under the Femality TV style and whether its representation of masculinity detracts from its qualification as a product of the Femality TV style. Where Misha Kavka argued that femininity is performed,<sup>216</sup> this chapter will also question the performativity of masculinity and the hostile treatment of heterosexual men, especially when compared against homosexual men, who are overwhelmingly welcomed by the style. Amanda Anne Klein associates the self-grooming of heterosexual men with the concept of camp and bodily flaunting that results in gendered subversion that is quintessential of new gender identities.<sup>217</sup> VPR not only gives a greater focus toward depictions of masculinity (both traditional and unconventional), but it also differs from the previous case studies in that the cast are not wealthy and thus their lives are aspirational in a different sense. The cast also, despite their accessible lifestyles, lack a sense of relatability common with the housewives or even *KUWTK*. In contrary, with VPR it is difficult to be fans of the stars and fault can be found with almost every participant. Ultimately, there is a cyclical theme to the show that gives an insight into the viewing habits of the Femality TV audience. Much of the draw can be attributed to Sontag's perspective of being "so bad its good"<sup>218</sup> that relates to the concept of "car crash television."<sup>219</sup> The cast of VPR are so cartoonishly villainous, they are

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<sup>216</sup> Kavka, p.63.

<sup>217</sup> Klein, p.151.

<sup>218</sup> Sontag, p.13.

<sup>219</sup> *The Herald Scotland*

entertaining in an unserious way. The way in which season ten's "Scandoval" storyline perforated popular culture and became omni-present in the Bravo sphere is evocative of the relevance of RTV in 2023 and how gossip culture is still pertinent to today's female audience.

*VPR* has been hailed by many media outlets such as *Vogue* and *The Guardian* as being "America's perfect reality show,"<sup>220</sup> "the greatest reality tv show of the 20<sup>th</sup> century"<sup>221</sup> and "the best reality tv show of all time."<sup>222</sup> However, do these accolades (related to RTV) correlate to Femality TV? *VPR* is a spin-off from Bravo's *RHOBH* (2010), that first aired in 2013. The show serves as a behind-the-scenes introspective into the Los Angeles restaurants owned by Housewife *Lisa Vanderpump*. Focusing primarily on the location of *Sur* in West Hollywood, the show sought to highlight the lives of young aspiring entertainers making ends meet through hospitality jobs. *VPR*, unlike the previous case studies, is not explicitly identifiable as a Femality TV product. There is a noticeable absence of "lifestyle porn" (physical consumption) due to the income difference of its stars when compared with the likes of *KUWTK* and *RHOBH*.

The cast of *VPR* partake in consumerism through being the advertisement themselves. Where the women are the brand/product in the previous case studies, in *VPR*, the stars lack a self-brand. Thus, the sense of agency is diminished. Vanderpump's business model for her restaurants relies upon the employment of aspiring entertainers. She hires young, attractive and charismatic people who are familiar with the concept of performing as an attempt to increase the appeal of her restaurants through appealing to the sexualised variants of male and female gaze. Throughout the series there is frequent reference to the stars being requested to perform their sexuality for the customers' gaze. Such as Vanderpump's various events targeting the gay community of West Hollywood. In the first episode of season four, Jax Taylor claims he has been tasked with chores at the back of the

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<sup>220</sup> Betty Squires, 'Vogue Thinks *Vanderpump Rules* is "America's Perfect Reality Show,"' *Vulture*, (2018), <https://www.vulture.com/2018/11/the-vogue-profile-of-vanderpump-rules-is-trash-art.html>

<sup>221</sup> Bridget Read, '48 hours with the cast of *Vanderpump Rules*,' *Vogue*, (2018), <https://www.vogue.com/projects/13547011/babes-in-pump-land-vanderpump-rules-bravo>

<sup>222</sup> Katie Cunningham, 'Horny, horrifying and unhinged: why *Vanderpump Rules* is the best reality tv show of all time,' *The Guardian*, (2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/mar/14/horny-horrifying-and-unhinged-why-vanderpump-rules-is-the-best-reality-show-of-all-time>



restaurant because he's "not pretty to look at" due to surgery recovery on his face.<sup>223</sup> Thus confirming there is a value to his appearance. The female staff also refer to their revealing outfits, with Stassi describing them as "napkins."<sup>224</sup> The nature of the *VPR* stars as entertainers is indicative of the connection between entertainment and the commodification of people through performance.<sup>225</sup>

A discussion regarding whether *VPR*'s camera favours a male or female gaze isn't as pertinent to the study of *VPR* due to the sexualised nature of its cast. As performers and hospitality staff hired explicitly due to their appearance, the stars are outwardly presented as the objects of viewership. Due to the demographic (mostly heterosexual women and homosexual male viewers), the examples of male sexuality are highlighted by production as being visually pleasing for the viewer. The men on *VPR* almost take on the role of women in old Hollywood; they are trivialised, assuming the role of comedic relief or a plot device for scandals such as cheating. The men are also repeatedly commented upon for their appearance as models/entertainers. Contrastingly to *KUWTK*, where "masculinity has lost its commercial value, and men's fit bodies are not as valuable as women's sexualized ones,"<sup>226</sup> the men in *VPR* are valued for their appearance and contribute to the concept of a sexualised female gaze, whereby man becomes the object for visual consumption by woman. Jessica Taylor and Eva Marie Jacobson<sup>227</sup> have suggested the female gaze to be a sexualised viewing of male bodies in sources such as the *Twilight* films and *Fatal Attraction*.<sup>228</sup> This placement of men as visual and narrative props is confounded by the matriarchal power structure within *VPR*. Vanderpump is first introduced as a matriarchal figure in *RHOBH* where, despite her children living independently at boarding school and with a partner respectively, she is depicted in a mother-son dynamic with "friend of" Cedric. Cedric lived with Lisa and her husband and repeatedly referred to their relationship as being a replacement for his missed experiences with his own mother. This positioning as a

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<sup>223</sup> 'Playtime's Over,' *Vanderpump Rules*, Alex Baskin, S4, E1, (Bravo, 2015).

<sup>224</sup> *Vanderpump Rules*, S1, (Bravo, 2013).

<sup>225</sup> Kavka, p.63.

<sup>226</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, P.82.

<sup>227</sup> Eva Marie Jacobson, *A Female Gaze?* (Stockholm: 1999).

<sup>228</sup> Taylor, p.389.

matriarchal figure is, therefore, established from Vanderpump's first Bravo endeavour and is used as a commercial opportunity on with *VPR*.

There is a subverted power structure within the Bravo sphere. Feminist theory argues there is a patriarchal hierarchy within society<sup>229</sup> and men are often thought of as primary and women secondary, or other.<sup>230</sup> *TRH*, however, puts the emphasis on the Housewives and the husbands are secondary to the narrative, often functioning as narrative props or comedic relief. This treatment carries over into *VPR* through Lisa's positioning as the matriarchal figure. Both Vanderpump and husband Ken Todd act as executive producers for the show as well as being equally responsible for the management of the restaurants. However, to reference Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023), "she's everything, he's just Ken."<sup>231</sup> The show is created in her image, she is the owner, voice of reason and narrative director of the show and Ken is secondary, acting as a trophy husband for Vanderpump to flaunt her domestic stability. Contrastingly to the *Real Housewives*, however, on *Vanderpump Rules* the women don't receive the same treatment as the housewives. They are portrayed as equal worth to their male castmates and serve the same function within the formula. Whilst there is an element of the male roles being typecast as villains more so than the women for their repeated infidelity, the men are given the same opportunity to voice their opinion as the women. Ken, however, is still "just Ken" thus maintaining the housewife/husband dynamic of the Housewives franchise. As an executive producer, his appearance onscreen is to co-sign Lisa's voice of reason and compliment the portrayal of her perfect lifestyle by being a doting husband who never disagrees with her opinion. This further establishes the matriarchal dynamic between Vanderpump and cast. If Lisa is the mother figure for the young staff, Ken is the exhausted and disinterested father who is often absent from the drama.

This dynamic between the woman as a central figure and her husband as an accessory to her lifestyle is upheld within Femality TV and evident in both *KUWTK* and *TRH*. Within the style men are thought of as not valuable to the content due to the audience's

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<sup>229</sup> De Beauvoir, 1214.

<sup>230</sup> De Beauvoir, 1216.

<sup>231</sup> *Barbie*, dir. by Greta Gerwig, (Warner Bros Pictures, 2023).

disinterest in the male perspective, that generally overwhelms other aspects of culture. *RHOA* had a greater emphasis on husband involvement than other entries to the franchise. A special episode after the season six reunion was dedicated to the husbands/boyfriends of the Housewives. The episode entailed the men discussing the events of the season in a more relaxed reunion setting, thus offering the male perspective to a female audience. Whilst this was an interesting twist on the format, the episode did not prove popular with the audience who, as acknowledged, viewed the content through a female gaze and thus value the female perspective of events over a masculinised reading. The men are valued for their contributions to the franchise, whether it be comedic effect or as an accessory or insight into the lives of the female stars, but there is no desire from the audience for their voices to be centralised in the same manner as the women. The unpopularity of any suggestions of a husband orientated derivative from *TRH*'s formula contradicts the success of *VPR*, however, which shares the same audience within the *Bravo* sphere of entertainment. Bravo understands the demographic of their audience and as such "there are no items currently marketed for men,"<sup>232</sup> this can be attributed to *VPR*'s reluctance to encourage promotional ventures with its male stars.

The shared audience demographic with *TRH*<sup>233</sup> encourages a conversation around whether Femality TV is inherently female or whether it benefits from an audience pre-curved by male aversion to RTV that has been feminised. RTV as a genre of television is skewed towards a female audience and thus its neutral state is perceived as feminine. Marissa Guthrie argues that the RTV that men participate in must be "masculinised"<sup>234</sup> to entice male viewership. Using this approach, it can be argued that Femality TV is RTV that has been *feminised*. Guthrie outlines four reasons for male viewership of RTV as the following: "to prepare themselves for battle; to feel rebellious; to connect to a passion (mostly sports, music or cars; and to be mentally challenged)."<sup>235</sup> This can, therefore, be inverted and applied to Femality TV: "to prepare for social battle" (the projection of oneself

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<sup>232</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.303.

<sup>233</sup> Psarras, p.59.

<sup>234</sup> Marissa Guthrie and Lacey Rose, "Testosterone TV: What Shows are Watched Most by Men," *The Hollywood Reporter*, (2011), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/television-shows-men-watch-222356/>

<sup>235</sup> Guthrie, *The Hollywood Reporter*.

into the narrative via upward contrastive projection<sup>236</sup>), “engage with rebellious material” (watching scandal unfold or the act of gossiping), to connect to a passion (fashion, interior design or music) and to be mentally challenged (the plot points of Femality TV create interesting questions around morality and prove themselves to be an exercise in judgement).<sup>237</sup> Kavka discusses how masculinity is incorporated in RTV through *Deadliest Catch*. She states it is, for Stanley, a “male dreamscape”—a fantasy for and about men—precisely because the display of male stoicism is a vehicle for the revelation of strong emotions. As Stanley wryly notes, the show could be called “The Real Housewives of the Bering Sea.” In terms of accepted masculine codes, this is the closest that male-oriented reality programs come to affective flaunting.”<sup>238</sup> Contrary to Brian Moylan’s belief that RTV is inherently female in its neutral state, Femality TV approaches femininity in the same manner as masculinity is approached in the aforementioned programming; it is a female dreamscape – a fantasy for and about women, with the only distinction being the flaunting of gender through emotional temperament. Where masculinised RTV projects stoicism, Femality TV embraces emotionality.

Returning to Caitlyn Jenner and the performance of masculinity on RTV through reservation and disinterest, there is an association between femininity and emotionality. Femality TV stars find success not only through visual performance but “emotional performance.”<sup>239</sup> Rachel Dubrofsky discusses this topic in their text, where they transpose the concept of the “money shot” from pornography to media made by and for women; referring to the “money shot” as a performance of excessive emotion.<sup>240</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra referred to Caitlyn (then Bruce) Jenner in 2014 as a one-time sporting hero “whose most consistent position in the series is to emblemize an earlier era’s norms for earned celebrity and to articulate a more traditional morality system.”<sup>241</sup> They identify Bruce’s presence through a postfeminist lens and make arguments surrounding the stifling of his masculinity and belittling of his emotionality and contributions to the family dynamic. This

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<sup>236</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.66.

<sup>237</sup> Guthrie, *The Hollywood Reporter*.

<sup>238</sup> Kavka, p. 67.

<sup>239</sup> Arcy, p.489.

<sup>240</sup> Dubrofsky, p.365.

<sup>241</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, p.83.

perspective gains nuance from the revelation that Bruce was dealing with gender dysphoria and thus his position as patriarch was forced, consequently this masculinity wasn't muted but rather never inherently present. As Caitlyn, Jenner has been more vocal about her experiences as a trans-woman and her issues with body dysmorphia. She has also been more vocal when it comes to family drama. Where once she was the embodiment of stoic, cold masculinity, she now demonstrates emotionality through active engagement. Taking part in a widely covered interview with Dianne Sawyer as well as releasing an autobiography regarding her experience. Caitlyn's vocality on family drama, her relationship with matriarch Kris in particular, was a point of discussion in the seasons post their divorce. The family voiced their concerns over Caitlyn's interviews that invited criticism toward the family and Kris.

In contrast to the previous chapters where the case studies were used as examples of the style, *VPR* is presented to show discrepancies with the style. Throughout the former chapters, questions around Femality TV have arisen such as the position of men within the style. *TRH* have a male presence through the husbands, sons, gay friends and Andy Cohen himself. *KUWTK* also has a male presence along the same lines with the sister's partners playing into narratives and characters like Scott acting as the comedic narrator. But the question is also posed about the female condition. Whilst Judith Butler and Misha Kavka were used to suggest femininity is performed through the stereotyped costume of hyper-femininity in an earlier passage, Amanda Klein argues that shows such as *Jersey Shore* present a hyper-masculine image.<sup>242</sup> Unlike Guthrie's examples of masculinised RTV, in *VPR* the format and production are not masculinised. Episodes often read the same as Bravo's more notable endeavour: *TRH*. Which is, according to the thesis, feminised RTV. However, the characters in *VPR* are consciously masculinised. Klein observes that within *Jersey Shore*, when the men "adopt the styles, behaviour, and interests that US culture has enforced as appropriate to women's or gay men's bodies (such as tanning, grooming, and wearing jewellery), they feel *more* masculine."<sup>243</sup> Klein builds upon Kavka's notes on the flaunting of gender as performance, arguing that within *Jersey Shore* both femininity and masculinity are

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<sup>242</sup> Klein, p.150.

<sup>243</sup> Klein, p.151.

performed within strict boundaries and whilst they may subvert gendered expectations through the aforementioned examples of grooming, they will lose their place on the show if they fail to flaunt their specifically curated ethnic, gender identities.<sup>244</sup>

The longevity of problematic characters like Jax Taylor, Tom Sandoval, Tom Shwartz and James Kennedy can be attributed to their camp qualities. Amanda Anne Klein discussed compulsive masculinity regarding reality television.<sup>245</sup> She used *Jersey Shore* as an example but many of the themes of the article can be overlaid upon *VPR*. In both shows, the appeal is voyeuristic entertainment of watching young, attractive people being sexually promiscuous and acting like irresponsible young adults, with themes of gossip and infidelity paired with comedy. Klein's focus on the Guido figure does not directly apply to *VPR*, however, the men share similarities in the sense of bodily flaunting. Klein argues that the Guido borrows from gay culture and the camp aesthetic, this can be expanded to the metrosexual men of *VPR*, who are often shirtless, tanned and boasting an "exaggerated he-man-ness."<sup>246</sup> Within confessional sequences, there are frequent comments made upon Tom Sandoval, Tom Shwartz and Jax Taylor's dedication to the act of self-grooming. Paired with insinuations they are feminised figures due to the stereotyping of self-grooming as being a feminine trait associated with women and homosexual men. The men visit spas together, get their eyebrows threaded and get spray tans to maintain their appearance as working models/actors. Bravo boasts of a large homosexual male audience<sup>247</sup> who are known to engage with femininity and are welcoming of the removal of gender boundaries. Yet the heterosexual men who appear on Femality TV receive criticism for any behaviour that detracts from their masculinity. Whilst femininity is something to be flaunted and ever present, masculinity comes across as a quality that is possessed but can be lost.

One of the ways these men flaunt their masculinity is through their sexual exploits. Sexuality and promiscuity are central to *VPR*, Lisa introduces Sur as a place "where you bring your mistress."<sup>248</sup> Therefore, many of the plotlines revolve around sexual relationships and

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<sup>244</sup> Klein, p.152

<sup>245</sup> Klein, p.152.

<sup>246</sup> Klein, p.153

<sup>247</sup> Psarras, p.52.

<sup>248</sup> *Vanderpump Rules*, Alex Baskin, S1, (Bravo, 2013).

infidelity. However, for characters like Jax Taylor, sexuality is a crutch for his performance of masculinity and placement on the show. Season one sees him cheat on girlfriend Stassi Schroeder, he then starts a relationship with co-worker Laura Leigh that includes engaging in sex acts at *Sur*. He subsequently leaves Laura Leigh for Stassi before it is revealed that he also cheated on Stassi with Kristen (Stassi's close friend and Jax's close friend Tom Sandoval's girlfriend). This reflects Jax's role on *VPR* and even when engaged to wife Brittany Cartwright, he maintained this appearance of a perpetual cheater. Male sexuality is used as a narrative crutch for *VPR* throughout its run. Most recently with "Scandoval" which saw Tom Sandoval engage in an affair with Raquel Leviss whilst involved with long term girlfriend and co-star Ariana Madix. Scandal and gossip content are at the core of the appeal of *VPR* and *VPR* has made it to ten seasons almost exclusively from the cast's adulterous habits. Viewers enjoy authentic moments in RTV, and the revelation of bad behaviour from when the cameras were not rolling reads as genuine authenticity. The viewing of *VPR* is closer to voyeuristic intrigue than the former case studies due to the representation of sexuality. This is where the gossip aspect of Femality TV becomes the primary draw. Like *KUWTK*, *VPR* has a close relationship to tabloid media and as such much of the excitement comes from offscreen events. In *TRH*, the interactions are usually displayed in front of the camera, situations are artificially created through the obligatory dinner parties, trips abroad and the arrangement of other emotionally tense settings. Whilst the drama that unfolds might be authentic, there is a greater expectation to perform. With *KUWTK* and *VPR*, the performance is not necessary to a greater extent because much of the drama is authentic. The cast are always in situations that are emotionally tense through their naturally occurring relationships as co-workers, partners and close friends. The storylines often revolve around sex, with the main cast often cheating on each other in a cyclical pattern yet remaining in the same circle of friends, bound together by Bravo.

The women within *VPR* discuss complex social dynamics and the intricacies behind relationships, both sexual and platonic. Their narratives resort around trust, authenticity, loyalty and betrayal. However, for the men, their storylines are usually in relation to sexuality. This is the most explicit example of Wang and Griskevicius' argument for the flaunting of relationship stability as a means of asserting social dominance among

women.<sup>249</sup> The dynamic between Stassi and Laura Leigh in season one as both vie for the attention of antagonist Jax is central to the season's plot and is also indicative of the way women socialise in *VPR*. Relationships are navigated around who is in favour of who at the current time and alliances are formed with allegiances pledged to those in feuds. The characters, the men especially, are each perceived as the villain in various rotations, within *VPR* there is so much criticism of the characters that there is a constant shift between who is the current villain. None of the cast are especially admirable for their morality and the only example of a consistent voice of reason is Vanderpump herself. Consequently, rather than championing the success of its stars, *VPR* is too preoccupied with gossip and shifting friendship dynamics to fully subscribe to Bravo and *KUWTK*'s commercialist strategies of promoting personal businesses.

Femality TV as a style is a commercialisation of the private realm of celebrity and celestoids. As creator of *The Real World* and contributor to *KUWTK* Jonathon Murray stated: "we took the documentary and commercialised it."<sup>250</sup> There is no distinguishable line between private and public and there are repeatedly references to this in *TRH*. When details regarding Adrienne Maloof's usage of a surrogate were revealed in season three, she refused to attend the reunion. Lisa Vanderpump commented on the situation that: "if you sign up to do a reality show, you have to be prepared to open up your life and you made your life the viewer's business."<sup>251</sup> This was later reversed on Vanderpump who refused to attend the filming of the season eight reunion due to her feud with the cast members.<sup>252</sup> In both instances Andy shamed the Housewives for their absence, stating that Adrienne "refused to speak directly" about her secret and suggested she was missing an opportunity to "tell her side of the story" and directing the audience to the tabloids for context.<sup>253</sup> Thus, strengthening the argument made in chapter one that within Femality TV, women are open to speculation from the tabloids and cannot protect their public image. It is expected for participants to be completely transparent with their lives and any attempt to withhold information is contradictory to the agreement between Bravo and the star. *VPR* rarely

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<sup>249</sup> Wang, p.834

<sup>250</sup> Deery, p.4.

<sup>251</sup> 'Reunion – part 3,' *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Scott Dunlop, S9, E24, (Bravo, 2019).

<sup>252</sup> 'Reunion – part 3,'

<sup>253</sup> 'Reunion – part 1,' *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Scott Dunlop, S3, E20, (Bravo, 2013).



recognises this expected transparency to the viewer. There is focus on transparency within relationships, however, with many of the narratives revolving around trust and dishonesty. When the cast aren't truthful to each other their reliability as narrators is not trusted nor expected and it is this ambiguity that maintains the gossip fuelled entertainment.

Due to this unstated assumption of viewing an omniscient perspective of the stars' lives, the fourth wall is maintained more-so than in the former examples. This could be attributed to ego and the existence of self-brand. The Housewives and Kardashian-Jenners have more to lose by presenting their lives in their entirety because of pre-existing public images. The stars of *VPR* have no public image, their celebrity is confined to the limits of Bravo and the gossip media circuit and as such the fallout of their actions is kept relative to their co-stars and the restricted view that *VPR* operates under. Within *VPR*, the commercial endeavours of the cast are seamlessly integrated to the narrative. With *KUWTK* and *TRH*, promotions can come across as contractually forced such as the promotion of Gizelle Bryant and Robyn Dixon's podcast "Reasonably Shady" or Bethenny Frankel's jean line. However, in *VPR* the opening of "TomTom" and the "Something About Her..." are naturally occurring narratives. Even the inclusion of Stassi and Scheana's podcasts are seamless due to the narrative context that is provided through them. The authenticity of the casts relationship as genuine friends/partners/co-workers is what appeals to the audience the most about *VPR*. Many of current and former cast members now live in the same neighbourhood, this is what makes their narratives investable and their gossip and scandals with heightened stakes.

The show has become insular and is a peculiar product of RTV in that it is seemingly authentic because its stars are stagnant in the mindset of their youth. The cast has not seen a drastic overhaul despite the show being in its eleventh year. Therefore, the appeal of watching young people navigate their 20s is no longer there, but the audience is. The original cast members are approaching their Housewives era in terms of age, yet *TRH* is a celebration of female agency, *VPR* in comparison, criticises female agency. Through methods of production characters such as Kristen Doute, Stassi Schroeder and Katie

Maloney have been portrayed as erratic and excessively emotional.<sup>254</sup> The same emotionality that built the *Real Housewives* is a site for criticism in *VPR*. Stassi's response to the infidelity of boyfriend Jax Taylor was criticised by castmates who believed she was over-reacting. Similarly, the treatment Kristen received when she struggled to adjust to ex-partner Tom Sandoval's new relationship with Ariana Madix, after her accusations of their affair, was rooted in accusations around her mental instability, thus coining the nickname "crazy Kristen." Furthermore, Katie's vocality of her opinions whilst under the influence of alcohol, of which most scenes in the show take place, granted her the moniker of "Tequila Katie." Through the confessional sequence the male stars take control over the narrative by perpetuating these nicknames, thus undermining the women's agency and turning the audience against them. As Dubrofsky argued, by representing these women's natural emotional behaviour as "excessive and, therefore, dangerous and threatening" bars them from "having it all."<sup>255</sup>

Season three is an example of this targeted degradation of women as being irrational or mentally insane. In the season, a scorned Kristen assists a fellow woman wronged by Tom Sandoval in confronting his refusal to acknowledge an affair they had. Sandoval describes "Miami girl" as a "fucking crazy stalker" and "fucking psycho."<sup>256</sup> This is compounded further by Jax Taylor and Tom Shwartz describing Kristen as "crazy." Kristen is believed by both her friends and the audience to be mentally unstable and ostracised for her behaviour. In season 10 as part of the aftermath of 'Scandoval' it was confirmed that this affair did happen and there is a moment of catharsis for Kristen who was ultimately vindicated. This vindication does not negate the complex forced upon Doute, however. Doute gained support from the fans for her irreverent nature and ignorance to social cues such as repeatedly turning up to events without an invitation. Despite the attempts made to tarnish her character, Doute went on to find success with her clothing line "James Mae." This success could be attributed to Doute's personal resilience as the problematic usage of terms like "crazy" and "psychotic" would have been enough to permanently damage her career both on and off-screen. Another victim of this collective targeting was Raquel Leviss.

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<sup>254</sup> Dubrofsky, p.355

<sup>255</sup> Dubrofsky, p.354.

<sup>256</sup> 'Miami Vices,' *Vanderpump Rules*, S3, E13, (Bravo, 2015).

‘Scandoval’ saw Levis subject to intense public criticism for her part in her relationship with Tom Sandoval. Levis was described as a “disgusting,” “sub-human” and “truly insane”<sup>257</sup> by fellow co-stars as well as by fans on public forums and social media sites. In a move that echoed victims of celebrity from the 2000s, Raquel was admitted into a mental health facility as a response to the effect the public response had on her mental health.<sup>258</sup>

*VPR* acts as an advertisement of Vanderpump’s various business ventures, advertising both her restaurants, self-branded alcoholic drinks and dog shelter in the same manner as the previous case studies. Vanderpump as an executive producer expands upon the Bravo formula of RTV as a platform for endorsement, further conflating her self-brand with her economic prospects. The Scandoval storyline is exemplary of the dangers of the formula whereby personal finances are reliant upon self-brand and popularity. As Arcy warned, celebtoids should not rely upon popularity for their income across all ventures, for it can easily be dismantled.<sup>259</sup> This was demonstrated not only through the mental toll upon Raquel Levis but also through the struggles of the *TomTom* and *Shwartz and Sandy’s*, Tom Sandoval’s bar endeavours. In response to the cheating scandal, fans of *VPR* not only abandoned the locations as a tourist attraction of sorts but also taking their scorn further by damaging property and leaving negative reviews. This conflation of business and self-brand poses the question of what is the incentive for men to partake in Femality TV? Pramaggiore and Negra noted that the men who featured on *KUWTK* profited from the fame afforded to them from their appearances. Kim Kardashian’s marriages to both Kris Humphries and Kanye West are indicative of such.<sup>260</sup> This mutually beneficial collaboration for the sake of RTV, therefore, has proven there is an incentive for men to be on the Femality TV screen, despite a female audience. However, if commercial endeavours are impacted by public opinion, there is a struggle between this incentive and the desire for visibility. As outlined previously, male stars are not treated sympathetically by this demographic, but is their presence necessary to maintain the authenticity of RTV?

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<sup>257</sup> ‘Reunion Part 3 (Extended),’ *Vanderpump Rules*, S10, E18, (Bravo, 2023).

<sup>258</sup> Beth Shilliday, ‘Where is Raquel Levis after “Vanderpump Rules” finale? What she’s been up to since cheating scandal,’ *Life&Style*, (2023), <https://www.lifeandstylemag.com/posts/where-is-raquel-levis-after-vpr-finale-rehab-updates/>

<sup>259</sup> Arcy, p.488.

<sup>260</sup> Pramaggiore and Negra, p.77.

The cast of *VPR* are relatable for their authenticity and economic disparity from the housewives, however, they are not sympathetic characters. The focus on relationships and the expectations upon such when paired with personalities that create entertaining RTV through gossip and scandal, ultimately results in an overall dialogue that is not generous to depictions of both the men and women. The men are criticised for their lack of masculinity whilst the women are criticised for their emotionality. *VPR* amplifies the frustrations of navigating the issue of gendered stereotypes whereas *TRH* and *KUWTK* directly challenges these stereotypes. This is to be expected due to the age difference, however, through analysing the criteria of Femality TV, *VPR* would not be an exemplary case study but rather material that is on the periphery of the style. *VPR* projects an image of fantasy but not one that many would aspire to recreate. It is chaotic and entertaining but not aspirational viewing and not dedicated to celebrating femininity but rather enforcing boundaries upon it. The parentification of Vanderpump as an employer, treating the frequently misbehaving staff as adolescents; scolding and guiding them to their aspirations, establishes the show as being a product that champions women. However, through this inclusion of the male voice as opposition to the female voice, the material often re-enforces stereotypes about both women and men. Ariana's aversion to marriage is met with criticism and was used as a point of contention within her relationship with Sandoval. However, this perspective and demonstration of personal will and autonomy is celebrated in the other case studies.

As established previously, Femality TV is an exploration of the experiences of women. But, to echo Monique Wittig, *what makes a woman?*<sup>261</sup> *TRH* has been largely exclusionary to those outside of the gender binary. Drag queens are often featured and femme men but there is a distinct lack of conversation regarding androgyny and gender identity within the Housewives. *KUWTK* focalises Caitlyn's story, but the situation was one that required addressing due to familial ties as opposed to a casting decision. Producers within Femality TV have decided there is a commercial value to cis-women and

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<sup>261</sup> Monique Wittig, 'One is not born a woman,' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds. By Vincent B Leitch and others, (New York: W.W Norton & Company. Inc, 2018), pp.1821-1823.

repositioning the lens onto queer figures could potentially jeopardise this profitable industry reliant on female viewership. *VPR*'s mixed gender cast allows for representations outside of the gender binary more than *TRH*. Season seven saw the introduction of Billie Lee. Lee did not have a long or impactful run on the show due to dynamics between herself and the female castmates. It is noteworthy, however, the way her storyline played out. Lee was subsequently rejected by the women on the show for her comments surrounding female genitalia and the implication there is a "perfect" vagina. Whilst the issues between the cast and Lee are more nuanced than that, for this to be the topic on which she is ostracised reads as unsympathetic from both the cast and Bravo's production. With Billie Lee, Bravo had the opportunity to expand what a Bravolebrity looks like and move toward a more inclusive model that included a broader definition of woman. However, Lee's representation on-screen was as the antagonist of female empowerment. Serving as a narrative device for broader commentaries upon womanhood. Lee is used as a narrative tool to emphasise women should feel comfortable with the appearance of their vagina and not feel shame. Lee's usage in this manner would not feel so significant if Bravo had a broader history with trans cast members. However, in isolation, it is not a flattering portrayal and reflects badly on the format. Therefore, this attempt to reinforce a narrative of feminine empowerment becomes more of a criticism of the politics regarding trans women and sends an exclusionary message regarding representations of women.

The focus of *VPR* is the content relating to gossip and the dynamics between friends, partners and co-workers who are authentically connected externally from Bravo's lens. The show focuses on the unglamorous lives of the beautiful people who, as models and actors, are hired to sell a false fantasy of luxury. Returning to the introduction to the thesis, where it was outlined that *Femality TV* is a docu-soap targeted toward women, about women and positioned from a female point of view, *VPR* would not be an obvious example of the style. However, ultimately *VPR* can be read under the *Femality TV* style due to its shared demographic and the matriarchal power structure. Despite having a depleted focus on consumption, the show itself acts as an extended advertisement for Lisa Vanderpump's commercial endeavours and whilst those on the show don't engage in consumption in the accumulation of luxury sense, they do represent feminine fantasy to some degree. They are socially rich, they go on trips, display levels of taste and create joint ventures together. The

former research would suggest Femality TV uses consumption and images of luxury as a crutch for its commercial strategies and to satisfy a femme gaze, however, *VPR* proves there is an alternative perspective to the depiction of feminine fantasy. Fantasy may not be an essential aspect of the style, with Lewis and Weaver observing that some view RTV from a position of downward contrastive comparison.<sup>262</sup> For some viewers, entertainment is derived from commentating upon the complicated dynamics of relationships and the scandalisation of promiscuity. Consequently, men do have a place in Femality TV; they provide scandal through the expression of sexuality. Whilst the husbands of *TRH* and *KUWTK* are segregated from the main cast, their contribution to the shows is unmistakable. Yael Levy's observation that the shift in focus from men to solely women (the heterosexual wedding being used as an example)<sup>263</sup> is a demonstration of a rejection of patriarchal order. It can therefore be proposed: is *VPR* a return to order? The presence of men within *VPR* does not undermine the female centred power-structure Bravo has created primarily because *VPR* upholds a matriarch dynamic. In the absence of Lisa Vanderpump, *VPR* would be read as external to Femality TV, however, her presence is instrumental in not only the success of the show but also its contribution to culture. *VPR* is a product of Bravo's cross-platform engagement strategy and thus its existence and continued success works to serve Vanderpump's self-interest and self-brand as a Housewife.

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<sup>262</sup> Lewis and Weaver, p.66.

<sup>263</sup> Levy, p.373.

## Conclusion

The compilation of this research has cumulatively proven that there is a distinct style of reality television that arose in the mid to late 2000s that focused on womanhood and the female experience. As Lucia Soriano,<sup>264</sup> Catelyn Benson-Allot<sup>265</sup> and Brzenchek and Castaneda<sup>266</sup> implied, there was a distinct style of reality television that came out of the mid 2000s and through the exploration of the selected case studies this style can be identified and conclusively defined as “Femality TV.” A style pre-occupied with satisfying the stylistic taste of the female gaze (as opposed to an assumedly sexualised female gaze) by focalising hyper-feminine imagery, exploring the female condition and pandering to the philosophical debate around what it means to be a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Femality TV features visual representations of women from all vantage points of American culture, spanning across ethnicities, sexualities, disabilities and professional industries. The commonality between all Femality TV is the focus on women and the experience of being a woman, whether universal or individual. Femality TV acts as a tapestry of the female condition that is constantly shifting and being contributed to. And as the definition of woman has changed over the years so should the representation.

The origins of Femality TV can be attributed to the growth in paparazzi culture of the early 2000s and thus establishes an undertone of commercialism regarding the commodification of the female body as well as laying the foundations for a more elaborate discourse over the boundary between the private and public sphere regarding celebrity but also more contemporarily, women. The association of women with domesticity was seemingly inescapable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet, as Cox and Proffit note, *The Real Housewives* “is about spending money, and lots of it. Being a “housewife” is about designer jeans, massive mansions, and international vacations; it is rarely about child rearing or chores.”<sup>267</sup> This association of femininity with the act of spending can be applied across Femality TV as a

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<sup>264</sup> Soriano.

<sup>265</sup> Benson, p.65.

<sup>266</sup> Alison Brzenchek and Mari Castaneda, “*The Real Housewives*, gendered affluence and the rise of the docusoap,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 17, 6, (2017), 1022-1036, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1283342>

<sup>267</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.295.

style, where consumption is pushed as essential to the female gaze. There is the criticism that this model propagates the role of woman “relegated to private sphere responsibilities” as “the designated “shoppers” of the household.”<sup>268</sup> However, through the commercialisation of the format personal agency and autonomy is afforded to the female stars of Femality TV through the branding of the self and the promotion of commercial endeavours.

With the unprecedented growth of social media, the concept of celebrity has altered. We now have a new celebrity; one born from self-exposure. Through social media women can promote their own image under their own narrative and as former examples have proven, women’s voices have often been stifled or censored. This idea of the female voice being centralised and promoted is the underlying principle of Femality TV. The confessional sequence acts as a manifestation of *A Room of One’s Own* and thus is a demonstration of the position women have within society. The women are free to voice their opinion that, although subject to intense public ridicule, is authentically their own. Social media contributes to the success of this centralised narrative by further stressing the agency of the women performing. Through the evolution of Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian as founders of the modern influencer model, the cultural impact of Femality TV becomes apparent.

This research has concluded that Femality TV is constructed via the utilisation of cross-platform promotion of the self. Jaqueline Arcy’s argument that Bravo has created a system whereby both the Bravo-lebrity and Bravo profit from the consumerist undertones of the format and new media, further emphasises this commercial success by solidifying established narratives regarding self-image. Nicole Cox also argued in favour of Bravo’s audience being cultivated from a marketing emphasis on cross-platform promotion and the encouragement of engagement via consumption of product. This strengthens the thesis that Femality TV is created from a reliance on other “Femality” media. With reference to the *Housewives*, Bravo contractually obliges the women to participate in online blogs as well as engage with fans and discourse around the show on social media sites, in addition to

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<sup>268</sup> Cox and Proffit, P.308.



providing further drama by provoking co-stars in these public settings. When Nicole Cox and Arcy referred to transmedia, however, they focused on (now discontinued) Bravo sponsored blogs. Whereas this research proves a strong relationship between RTV and the tabloids, gossip sites and the paparazzi practice. There is a synergy between the paparazzi and Femality TV. If Femality TV creates celebrity, as Arcy argues,<sup>269</sup> then it attracts the paparazzi, however, many Femality TV stars are known to the paparazzi prior to their appearances on the respective show due to either familial connections or self-branding through online presence.

Through both the influence of Hilton and Kardashian as self-commodified visual products and the usage of consumerism as a business strategy by Bravo, the Femality TV style is rooted in cross-platform promotional material. The style utilised the gossip industry as a tool for increasing engagement with its core content and simultaneously giving credence to external methods of self-brand-promotion. A key identifier of the Femality TV style is the utilisation of the self as a commodity through both physical appearance and personality. The self-branded female personality and body are centralised throughout Femality TV, and a commercial value is attributed to their worth as a Femality TV star. Through the expansion of their personal brand by using their on-screen personalities and image as a platform to venture into other industries, Femality TV stars have conflated the self with the fictionalised self and suffer from a condition where their celebrity (economic and cultural worth) is reliant upon public opinion more-so than celebrities of the past who were famous for their talents. Thus, the idiom “famous for being famous” is symbolic of the Femality TV model. The trans-media storytelling and solidifying of narratives displayed on Femality TV creates a cyclical system of profit through engagement.

Femality TV profits from the concept of celebrity by inviting those who loosely relate to the label to partake. Thus, existing in a system where celebrity is celebrated and rewarded with further celebrity resulting in a cyclical renewal of relevancy. This has resulted in disdain from a general audience who refer to the stars of Femality TV as “famous for being famous” with a disregard to the cultural and entertainment value of the Femality TV style

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<sup>269</sup> Arcy, p.492.

and Femality media that work in conjunction to create a sub-culture dedicated to the female audience. The term can be traced back to 1961 where Daniel J Boorstin described it as being “a person who is known for his well-known-ness”<sup>270</sup> yet it is most used to belittle the attention given to women who gain success from RTV. The RTV star is not seen as a viable talent despite the proven performativity required.<sup>271</sup> A Femality TV star must be comedic (either intentionally or accidentally), attractive and aspirational, with a distinct sense of personal style. Ultimately, they must be interesting and can weather extreme criticism. These qualities are under-appreciated and the women who pioneered Femality TV are subject to unfounded criticism; they provide not only entertainment but warnings and wisdom to other women and are culturally significant in the representation of women and the roles women occupy in American society.

The future of Femality TV is uncertain. The recent Screen Actors Guild strike over the usage of AI in Hollywood suggests that Femality TV could see a further resurgence in popularity. In 2008, reality television saw its first boom as production companies were restricted by the strike and thus turned to RTV products that were cheap to produce and didn't require script writers who were bound by strike conditions. This could be countered, however, by a developing campaign by *RHONY* alumni Bethenny Frankel against Bravo for its production methods and the nature of the contracts given to Bravolebrities, which includes Bravo receiving a share of the profits made from businesses advertised on their platform. As presented in this research, the relationship between the RTV star and RTV as a platform for advertisement of personal product is foundational for the format.<sup>272</sup> The attempt to unionise Bravo talent could result in future slews of Femality TV and ultimately reach a point where the parent network NBC must evaluate Bravo's commercial worth if the stars become too expensive to maintain and profit is lost from current endorsements and promotions. As established in chapter two, commercialism is an essential aspect of Femality TV. The removal of such would make the endeavour less appealing to the stars who share their private lives and subject themselves to the public's scrutinising gaze in turn for an

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<sup>270</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, (New York and Boston: Harper Colophon, 1964).

<sup>271</sup> Kavka, p.63.

<sup>272</sup> Deery, p.5.

opportunity to economically profit from product endorsement and the establishment of a personal brand. The sole attraction would be the incentive for fame which can be created externally outside of the platform and aspiring housewives would benefit from alternative platforms that are more economically enticing. To quote Karen Huger “you have to make millions to owe millions”<sup>273</sup> and for Bravo you must pay to profit.

The relationship between Femality TV and commercialism can be argued to undermine the female agency celebrated within Femality TV. However, it has been established that the focus on consumerist habits within the business model of Femality TV shows is mutually beneficial for both the stars and the network. Whilst Bethenny Frankel argues the business model of Bravo is exploitative in nature,<sup>274</sup> many of the products advertised on Femality TV shows would not have reached the same level of success organically. Karen Huger’s three-wick candle is a novelty product that only Bravo fans would enthusiastically consume, as is the same with Luanne DeLesseps’s CD or Sonja Morgan’s *Tipsy Girl*. These women have no professional expertise in said industries; they benefitted from the exposure and dedication of Bravo’s curated audience, who are eager to engage with new methods of consuming Bravo media. In turn, “women who tune in to Bravo are also highly engaged, suggesting they are more likely to stick around for any ad messaging” thus benefitting both Bravo, the Bravolebrity and the audience who are convinced by the Femality TV style that they can “buy happiness.”<sup>275</sup>

Cox and Proffit argued Bravo created and cultivated their audience,<sup>276</sup> however, this research would suggest the audience already existed but the focus on the female audience and the female gaze within Bravo’s model served as an evolution of media directed toward this audience (gossip media) and thus gave prominence to it. The success of Femality TV has proven there is an audience, a unique audience, for this type of programming but, moreover, other forms of visual representations of the female condition. This is further

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<sup>273</sup> ‘You Gotta Make Millions to Owe Millions,’ *The Real Housewives of Potomac*, S3, E2, (Bravo, 2018)

<sup>274</sup> Ree Hines, ‘Is Bethenny Frankel’s Fight for A Union A Hit with Other Reality Stars?’ *Forbes*, (2023), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/reehines/2023/08/02/is-bethenny-frankels-fight-for-a-union-a-hit-with-other-reality-stars/?sh=4f669d217e25>

<sup>275</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.295.

<sup>276</sup> Cox and Proffit, p.300.

consolidated by the success of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*. *Barbie* found success from a female audience who have been underserved on the silver screen. A campy extravaganza of hyper-femininity and an exploration of the cultural implications of embracing or enforcing such, *Barbie* proved that women (and men) are eager to engage in conversations around femininity within the visual products they consume. Gerwig's success is indicative of future trends in cinema. Femality TV cultivated this audience and through cinema it will only be further defined in the future as Hollywood attempts to capitalise on the triumph of *Barbie*. The release of Bravo's 2023 series "Luanne and Sonja: Welcome to Crappie Lake" (2023) encourages this idea of interconnectivity between *KUWTK* and *TRH*. In 2022 Bravo placed the *RHONY* series "on hold,"<sup>277</sup> they later confirmed a completely new cast that would replace the former *Housewives*, whose popularity lasted over a decade. This legacy afforded to the *RHONY* alumni is a blatant homage to *The Simple Life*; the show that inspired the success of *KUWTK* and Kim Kardashian's trajectory. The rich and delusional New York housewives who have close connections to legacy wealth are placed in an impoverished town where hilarity and humbling ensues. This reference to *The Simple Life*, the show that within this research it is argued was a precursor to the Femality TV style, is indicative of the lifecycle of trends within RTV.

Femality TV could prove to be a trend of the 2010s or it could capitalise on the rejuvenation of the female audience in 2023 and become a leading sub-genre in RTV. The recent success of *VPR* and *RHOBH* could be the beginning of a new wave of Femality TV viewing. *VPR*'s season 10 reunion has become "the most-watched Bravo episode of any series in more than nine years, and the most watched "Vanderpump Rules" episode of all time."<sup>278</sup> Alternatively, the recent resurgence of interest in "Scandoval"<sup>279</sup> and *RHOBH* could serve as the curtain call for the style. Other notable entries to *TRH* franchise seemingly have reached a plateau such as *RHOA* which saw ratings of 0.2 and 900k viewers for season 15 (compared against a previous peak of 0.68 and 1.9m viewers in season 13) and an ambiguous reboot of *RHONY* which saw ratings drop to a low of 0.12 and 500k viewers

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<sup>277</sup> Chelsea Hirsch, "'RHONY' Season 13 reunion on hold amid low ratings and backlash,' *Page Six*, (2021), <https://pagesix.com/2021/07/14/rhony-reunion-on-hold-amid-low-ratings-and-fan-backlash/>

<sup>278</sup> Selome Hailu, 'Thanks to Scandoval, "Vanderpump Rules" Season 10 Hits 11.4 Million Viewers,' *Variety*, (2023), <https://variety.com/2023/tv/news/vanderpump-ratings-scandoval-season-10-viewers-1235646782/>

<sup>279</sup> Hailu, *Variety*.

during its run but received promising feedback from fans. With a change in the ways people view entertainment, ratings have naturally dropped as more of the audience resort to streaming services over live television. Additionally, these trends could be an indicator of the individual programme as opposed to the style, however. *Selling Sunset*, a show that features high achieving women working as realtors in Los Angeles, saw recent success. First airing in 2019, the show is now in its seventh series and has coined two spin-offs: *Selling Tampa* and *Selling the OC*. *Selling Sunset* shares a target audience with the selected case studies and its success compared against *The Kardashians* (2022) and *The Real Housewives'* demise could suggest a shift in viewing patterns of the audience. The audience still exists but no longer feel satisfied with the product released by Bravo and the Kardashian-Jenners.

Femality TV is preoccupied with satisfying a female gaze that is rooted in visual demonstrations of style and aesthetics. The nature of relying upon fashion and aesthetic trends places Femality TV in the realm of fashion in the sense that the style itself is subject to becoming outdated and no longer “in vogue.” Whilst the demographic for Femality TV appears to transcend age according to Hannah Ewen,<sup>280</sup> the stars of Femality TV are ageing and despite the style being an advocate for women ageing,<sup>281</sup> the women who currently represent Femality TV such as Kim Kardashian, Lisa Vanderpump and Scheana Shay have represented the style for over a decade and consequently run the risk of becoming stale or out-dated in their visuality. New tastemakers are required to continue the visual relevancy of Femality TV. Due to this risk of visual stagnation, Femality TV requires the ability to evolve and rejuvenate its programming concurrently to maintain the style’s relevancy. Cohen’s experimentation with the recasting of beloved entries to the Housewives franchise have been met with cynicism from fans who appreciate the women who pioneered the style. However, for the style to be an ever-present staple of American culture and not an oddity resigned to the 2010s, they must find a way to keep portraying issues around womanhood in alignment with shifting societal beliefs and that requires rotating casts. The creation of *Ultimate Girls Trip* supports the claim that Bravo values older women as valuable performers and thus not undermining the argument at the core of the Housewives franchise

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<sup>280</sup> Hannah Ewens, *RollingStone*.

<sup>281</sup> Fairclough

that age is not a restriction to feminine aspiration. *Crappie Lake* is an enjoyable and light-hearted programme that revels in the joviality of long-standing female friendships. It is aspirational viewing for an audience that still needs reminding that female ageing is not to be feared.

In contrast, it could be suggested that we are at a peak of feminine focused culture as a trend and with changing attitudes towards gender as binary perhaps culture is moving beyond the binary and thus predicting a collapse of Femality TV. By focusing on the female condition Femality TV is restricted to its audience. It appears that Femality TV's longevity will rest upon its ability to adapt and become more inclusive around the question of what it means to be a woman. Audiences want representation<sup>282</sup> and that is something Femality TV appears to be lacking in. The tokenisation of franchises has only recently been responded to and changes have been minimal. *RHOBH* saw the addition of the first black Housewife in season ten (2020) with Garcelle Beauvais. *RHONY* was similarly criticised for its restricted representation of ethnicity,<sup>283</sup> with their first black Housewife Eboni K Williams joining the cast in season 13 (2021). In contrast to this criticism of exclusion, we have seen a disabled housewife with Aviva Drescher as well as queer Housewives such as Julia Lemigova, Brauwyn Windham, Kim Zolciak and Brandi Glandville. We have seen educated Housewives such as Wendy Osefo, Carol Radziwell and Phaedra Parks working as a political commentator, news correspondent and lawyer respectively. *KUWTK*'s treatment of Caitlyn's personal transition was a cultural moment that gave validation to the inclusivity of trans-gender experiences. The topic of gender dysphoria is heavily contested in American culture, with the topic often being weaponised and used as a political tool. The family's response to Caitlyn's transition was significant in the history of RTV and the centralisation of her personal experience validated Caitlyn's (and trans-women's) place within Femality TV. Thus, proving there is still a space for Femality TV, as a contemporary source of social commentary. The style serves a purpose of not only creating and appealing to fantasy but also educating the audience in the process through the presentation of multiple perspectives and experiences that the audience could be otherwise unaware of. Cynthia

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<sup>282</sup>Goldman.

<sup>283</sup> Goldman.

Davis's observation of *TRH* as "women occupying public spaces"<sup>284</sup> is pertinent to the style of Femality TV. Femality TV is the chance for women to view other women occupying public space. They may identify with the women or sympathise with them, they may even make judgement upon them, but one of the most significant contributions of the style is the dedication to representations of women and womanhood.

To conclude, through the declaration of this gap within RTV as "Femality TV," has arisen the opportunity to streamline academic research around reality television's influence on and representations of womanhood and the female condition. Previous discussions on the case studies selected often overlap and have been referred to as "female orientated docu-soaps," "projective dramas" as well as "unscripted reality." Femality TV acts as a clear definitive of female orientated reality television that has clear, identifiable boundaries and thus presents the opportunity to be judged in isolation and in-comparison to other styles or media. To discuss the *Real Housewives* without acknowledging *KUWTK* or the period and culture the show was born out of is disregarding of the wider effect the show has had upon popular culture and how it enforced a cultural moment for the representation of women. It was a cumulation of reality television shows simultaneously targeting the same audience through similar strategies (the usage of confessional sequences, transmedia storytelling, advertising the self as a brand) that resulted in a distinct audience and gaze. The future is uncertain for Femality TV, it could prove to be a trend or become a transcendent sub-genre of RTV with lasting impact. However, at the time of writing, the cultural impact of curating and catering to a female gaze is becoming evident.

Word count: 32891

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<sup>284</sup> Davis, p.77

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