The London School of Economics and Political Science

On the Genealogy of the American Millennial Ideal:
A celebrity case study of neoliberal feminism in the 21st century

Miriam A. Rahali

A thesis submitted to the Department of Media and Communications of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

London, 8 June 2021

Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

I declare that my thesis consists of 73,825 words.

Abstract

This dissertation is motivated by the question that asks how the ideal Millennial constituent is produced, and reproduced, in American society as a response to crisis. The interrelated social, economic and political crises of the 21st century have had profound implications for the Millennial generation, and this study aims to show that traditional markers of adulthood have not become delayed for the Millennials who conform to the ideals espoused by the neoliberal social contract. I posit that the contemporary social contract is gendered, and as such, neoliberal feminism is the central framework through which I theorize the feminine ideal. I draw on the key tenets of neoliberal feminism (independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention) to guide the coding frame of my textual analysis. Using multimodal analysis, I examine the ideal Millennial's discursive construction across three intensely mediated and highly popular feminine subjects – Taylor Swift, Beyoncé Knowles Carter and Kim Kardashian – because I seek to examine the values and expectations that have been most widely conveyed by the celebrities whose public platform offers a model of how to prosper in a society where success is predicated on the logic of neoliberalism. My three empirical cases shed light on American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed, and offer a way to interrogate how popular discourses participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to. Despite political and economic upheaval, my findings indicate that neoliberal feminism is being reproduced through the responses that incorporate the very same logics that reactivate and extend the ideology; as such, the results of my empirical analysis further validate scholarship delineating neoliberalism's symbiotic relationship with feminism. My findings also suggest that in a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, patterns of entrepreneurship, adaptability and resilience are foregrounded. Discourses of the American Millennial ideal type, as constituted by my celebrity cases, suggest making a name for oneself in spite of difficulty, becoming not only the product of, but also a targeted response to the gendered crises of education, work and reproduction. For a generation that is not only struggling to find its identity, but is also facing a profound lack of security in linear progress and mobility, the narrative of success constructed by my three cases offers the blueprint of a solution.

Keywords: Crisis, Millennial, Feminism, Neoliberalism, Celebrity, Political Economy

Dedication

To all of the role models who have inspired me to become a better person.

Thank you.

Acknowledgements

As someone who suffers from long-term mental illness, I enrolled in the PhD program not knowing if I would see it through to completion. My daughter and I moved to London in 2015, and in the years since, there have been wonderful highs (like the birth of my son; becoming a published author), and depressing lows (spousal separation; death in the family; Covid-19 lockdown). As a single mom trying to raise two small children – while working, and completing the PhD – it often felt like I was running to the finish line against the odds. Making it this far is a testament to the care and support from my family, friends, colleagues and community.

The work on this dissertation has truly been a collaborative effort. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my Supervisor, Professor Shani Orgad. This dissertation would not have cohered in any meaningful way without her guidance and insightful comments. I am honored that she has worked with me to develop my research. Thanks for the time and energy put into this project, as well as my personal and academic development.

Many thanks to Professor Ellen Helsper, who as my Advisor, has helped me to develop my professional skills beyond the scope of this dissertation. Special thanks go to Dr. Fahed Al Sumait and Professor Patrick Sturgis for additional methods coaching.

I would like to thank the department of Media and Communications. I joined in 2013 as an MSc student, and have been spurred to see my postgraduate journey through to completion by Professor Robin Mansell and Professor Charlie Beckett. I am fortunate to have worked on several research projects in parallel to the manuscript. I would like to thank Professor Nick Couldry for including me in his intellectual pursuits. I am grateful for the wider support of the department: Professor Sonia Livingstone, Professor Bart Cammaerts and Professor Sarah Banet-Weiser in their capacity as directors of the PhD Program; and to Professor Lilie Chouliaraki for delivering unparalleled seminars and discourse labs – thank you for inspiring and mentoring me.

Thank you to the members of the PhD program, both in the department and the School. Specific shoutout to my cohort: Tijana, Svetlana, Winnie, Jun, Kate, Franco, George and Richard. The experience (especially the conferences, symposiums and writing retreats) wouldn't have been the same without you.

Thanks to the Eden Teaching and Learning Centre for enriching my pedagogical expertise, and to the students – across disciplines and levels – for whom I have had the privilege of delivering lectures, seminars and supervision.

Administratively, thanks to the LSE Library team for lighting the way, and to the PhD Academy for their funding and support.

I owe a debt to Francisco for giving me the two most wonderful gifts of my life, Alaia and Osian. And finally, I am eternally grateful to my parents.

Thank you all for fostering a lifelong love of learning.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Preface

My initial interest in generation and crisis stems from my experience of 9/11 as a first-year undergraduate at Columbia University. It had only been two weeks since I had moved to New York City when the attacks on the World Trade Center occurred. I was 15 years old at the time, and vividly recall the sense of anxiety in the aftermath of a terrorist attack: the streets had emptied; relatives were desperately trying to connect with their families; and there was constant attention to the headlines for breaking news and developments. Students on campus were in shock, debating whether to stay or return home, and lacked clear direction for a way forward.

In the aftermath of September 11th, I witnessed the response to this crisis – how the World Trade Center catastrophe brought Columbia students together, New Yorkers together, and Americans together – forming a bond in both grief and survival, elevating a sense of community throughout the United States (U.S.).

I also learned how to perform the ideal neoliberal response to this crisis: refusal to stand down by continuing to move on and, crucially, forward. On September 12th, 2001, classes had resumed. I was overwhelmed by not only the combination of my course-load, Varsity tennis and paid work schedules, but also by my adapted lifestyle in a dynamic and global city that was struggling to cope with the devastation of the terrorist attack. It was a difficult year, and I started to wonder if I had made the right choice by enrolling at Columbia University.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was a move that I would not regret. In these formative years, I fundamentally learned to make something of myself, not just in spite of difficulty but *through* it, a skill that recently propelled me forward in the aftermath of Covid-19. Never would I have imagined that my own (student) experience in higher education – from undergraduate to PhD – would be bookended by catastrophic world events.

I was raised on the American promise that working hard is the key to self-actualization, and I am thankful for the hard work ethic that was instilled by my parents and our culture. It has allowed me to see my PhD research through to completion, despite the barriers and obstacles that I have

encountered along the way. Furthermore, I would have never been able to raise two young children – on my own, as a single mother – if I had not previously cultivated the habits of resilience and adaptation. As a result, I am eternally grateful for the discourses espoused by the neoliberal ideal, because the development of such key characteristics served as a buoy during difficult times.

In many ways, I have been drawn to the topic of societal ideal types because I was culturally conditioned by neoliberal norms that prioritize competitive individualism. I can relate to many of the qualities rendered visible in national narratives (hard-work, responsibility and achievement) because as Millennials, we all came of age together and were conditioned by hegemonic cultural narratives, such as the American Dream. However, because I know how physically exhausting and emotionally draining it is to adhere to the standards set by the construction of the neoliberal ideal, I engage with this project in hopes that conditions will change (for the better) for future generations.

Chapter One: Introduction

Each generation typically has a self-defining moment (Debevec et al., 2013), but for American Millennials, the last two decades have contained several world-changing, paradigm shifting developments. This generational cohort has grown into adulthood amidst the backdrop of 9/11, the Global Financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, rising costs of living, unparalleled student loan debt and stagnant wages. As a result, traditional markers of adulthood[1] have become increasingly delayed, disorderly and reversible (Silva, 2013). In the 21st century, Millennials often shift between postsecondary education and precarious employment, a phenomenon known as 'waithood' (Milkman, 2017). In addition to academic research, popular media outlets have reported that many life milestones such as marriage, a secure job and home ownership are now out of Millennials' reach on account of the 'arrested development' experienced in the face of high student-loan debt and low employment rates (Rampell, 2014). With basic necessities such as housing, healthcare and education absorbing a disproportionately large part of income (Madgavkar et al., 2020), the transition to adulthood has been prolonged for Millennials to an unprecedented degree.

[1] The five formal markers of contemporary adulthood include completing schooling, beginning full-time work, becoming financially independent, getting married and becoming a parent (Aronson, 2008).

The social landscape that has been sketched has significant implications for the Millennial generation. More acutely, I argue that these conditions have particularly *gendered* implications. In this chapter, I seek to better understand the implications of the contemporary social climate for the construction of ideal Millennial femininity. As such, I will first delineate the tenets of a reconfigured social contract, arguing that changes to the social contract have possibly prolonged the transition to adulthood for American Millennial women. I then offer an explanation of three interrelated crises (financial, educational and reproductive) that have afflicted the Millennial generation. Inspired by Berlant (2011), I view crisis as a genre that distorts something structural and ongoing within ordinariness into something that seems shocking and exceptional, with the present moment increasingly imposing itself on Millennial consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with "one happening piling on another" (2011, p. 7). But from the outset, it is worth noting that in this dissertation I operationalize 'crisis' as a definition, with an intended meaning of a time of intense difficulty; as such, I do not theorize crisis more deeply. This allows me to briefly locate the conditions in which a reconfigured neoliberal ideal type has emerged, in order to conduct an in-depth exploration of the role of popular culture in shaping the discourse that is both a product of, and response to, the social situation in the U.S. I ultimately advance the argument that traditional markers of adulthood have not become delayed for the Millennials who conform to the ideals espoused by the modern social contract.

1.1 The Modern Social Contract

Unlike the European social contract that was developed by theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the modern social contract in the U.S. has evolved to a point where women are not de facto excluded in its remit. In order to delineate the tenets of the modern social contract, and its gendered implications, I will draw on key work by Angela McRobbie (2020), Jo Littler (2018) and Catherine Rottenberg (2018). I build on their scholarship to outline an updated social contract that combines commitment to meritocratic ideals with the gender-, race- and class-blind optics of neoliberal feminism to engender a troubling crisis that implicates the Millennial woman in its address.

To provide some historical context, the narrative of social mobility has been woven into the national fabric since the founding of the United States of America. An indispensable element of the American Dream is the expectation that children should do better than their parents (Rank et al., 2014). Coined by James Adams in 1931, 'The American Dream' posits that "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability of achievement" (Adams, 1931, p. 214). The ethos implies an opportunity for upward mobility and prosperity (or, rather, for children to attain a better condition of living than their parents) through hard work, irrespective of circumstances of birth or social class.

Closer scrutiny of the way the concept of meritocracy has been embedded in the U.S. context reveals that founding ideals have been betrayed (for example, the Founding Fathers did not admit women or Black people to the meritocratic republic, in the same way that European women were initially excluded from the bourgeois public sphere). While contemporary American society has reduced prejudicial inequalities in some respects (for example, through affirmative action policies), the quintessential factor for determining where people end up economically is based upon the social position from which they started (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Narratives of meritocracy have nevertheless been continuously drawn upon to popularize and promote individualistic, competitive ways of organizing the nation in the interests of the elite. However, in order to achieve critical purchase, meritocracy must be yoked to the idea of career advancement from egalitarian beginnings, in which it is positioned as part-and-parcel of a social system premised on boundless opportunity for anyone with the talent or ambition. In this way, the idea of meritocracy rests on the assumption of a level playing field, and obscures the uncomfortable truth that those who are successful pass on more privileges to their children, thereby contributing to unequal social starting blocks (Littler, 2018).

The construction of a fair and equitable education institution underpins a democratic social system predicated on individual achievement. To provide an illustrative example from the U.S. (where education is posited as a solution to levelling the playing field, and is seen as a vehicle of social mobility), considerable attention has been devoted to programs like *Head Start* and *Teach for America* to bridge educational inequalities, and ensure equal access for citizens in disenfranchised

communities. The logic behind educational equity holds that the majority of the population will attain a social position for which they are suitable and appropriately remunerated.

In her 2018 book, *Against Meritocracy*, Jo Littler offers key theoretical resources to understand the shifting of cultural formations of meritocracy. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will draw on her conceptualization of meritocracy in order to understand why it is so valuable in the context of neoliberalism (namely, that it needs to be understood as a belief system that not only constitutes a general worldview, but also upholds particular power dynamics). Meritocracy is a powerful discourse through which hegemonic, neoliberal ideology can be sustained in society; in the U.S., the meritocratic underpinning of the neoliberal ethos places the burden of success on the individual, whereby primacy of the self, pursuit of self-interest and market-based determinations of worth are embraced (Giroux, 2011). It is important to articulate that as the contemporary iteration of meritocracy proclaims greater equality of opportunity for more people than ever before[2], American citizens have been encouraged to believe that success is predicated on hard work, and that gender, for example, is no longer perceived as a significant barrier to success (Minkin, 2020).

Recent data indicate that women are now achieving even higher levels of educational attainment than men (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). This is significant because academic progression is associated with qualification. The success of the Millennial woman in school is a fundamental aspect of coming into visibility, because she is not only read as a bearer of qualification, but also as an aspirational subject (McRobbie, 2007). In this way, Millennial women embody the success of the meritocratic values implemented by the U.S. education system.

Prior to Covid-19, women were on track to comprise a majority of the college-educated labor force, thereby marking a historic turning point in gender parity (Rosalsky, 2020). The coming forward of women into the workforce in greater numbers than ever before is beneficial to the government and economy through its promise of wealth and prosperity (McRobbie, 2007, p. 730). In *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Catherine Rottenberg (2018) argues that the movement for gender equality has mobilized feminism to advance political goals of enhancing market value. The

[2] Evidenced by the data that indicate the labor force is becoming more diverse (Burns et al., 2012).

contemporary push for 'equal participation' in the global economy signifies the ambitious reach of neoliberalism, whose wide-ranging and pervasive influence means that its principles have become not only 'common-sense', but also an active forcefield of political values. In many ways, neoliberalism has entered a symbiotic relationship with feminism, with each extending its remit to endorse the hard-working, self-actualizing American Millennial. As per the modern social contract, there is a cultural expectation that women of working age in the U.S. fully define as laborers, and operate in service of the neoliberal agenda (or in other words, women are regarded as a subset of the population that is not dependent on the state). This expectation is solidified by claims that feminism has made such great strides that it has been cast aside as irrelevant or no longer needed, with some arguing that feminism has become universal, and that society has widely accepted the principle of women's equality and empowerment (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Redfern & Aune, 2010).

As a movement, feminism has profoundly impacted women's lives with regard to education, career, partnership and parenthood. In her work on *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*, Angela McRobbie (2020, p. 81) argues that one key element of the societal transition to a fully neoliberal regime is that disadvantaged, low-paid women are compelled to prioritize paid labor and 'contraceptive employment' over and above maternal obligations or the desire to become a mother. I would add that this applies to privileged women as well, and manifests under the guise of procedures such as egg freezing and elective abortion, which provide an option for the professionally-minded Millennial to take control of not only her fertility, but more importantly, her *career*.

Having a well-planned life has emerged as a norm of contemporary femininity (Amsler & Motta, 2019). Subsequently, fertility in the U.S. has come to be defined within the normative frame of planned parenthood, where social policy, public health and media discourses work to reshape configurations of the family so that it complements the requirements of the new economy (McRobbie, 2020, p. 78). The modern construction of the ideal function of the neoliberal Millennial woman has significant implications for other facets of life, specifically as they relate to her reproductive capabilities. As such, I posit that the contemporary social contract is *gendered*.

Contemporary changes to the social contract have necessitated changes to the sexual contract, specifically as it relates to reproduction and motherhood. In my articulation, I will not differentiate

between the sexual contract and the social contract, as I argue that the former has been subsumed by the latter. Planning reproduction now follows a similar cost-benefit analysis as does investment in a Millennial woman's education and career – with the formal markers crucially being ordered in such a way that reproduction is preceded by education and career, but nevertheless essential to the construction of successful femininity (as I will further explain in the literature review). McRobbie (2020) argues that planning motherhood is a complex domain, and it is hard to find government policy documents explicitly downgrading family in favor of work. This applies not only to the U.K. (the location from which McRobbie interrogates the phenomenon), but also to the U.S., where nonprofit organizations with liberal leanings, such as the well-known organization 'Planned Parenthood', encourage Millennial women to apply neoliberal logic to fertility. Additionally, within the realm of U.S. centered popular culture and celebrity, Millennial women are encouraged to downgrade family in favor of work, and to postpone having children until the time is right (McRobbie, 2020, p. 78). Contemporary indicators of the 'right time' are derived from a woman's ability to complete schooling, begin full-time work, become financially independent and get married. Such indicators provide the logic for 'planned' parenthood, and are indicative of the way contemporary conceptions of reproduction have been remade in the image of neoliberal capitalism. The economic focus, whereby paid employment is constructed as a social good, means that family obligations are pushed into a secondary position.

For Millennials who choose to be mothers, the logic of the aforementioned social contract requires them to play a dual role, one in which they are active in the workforce and primarily responsible for raising children and tending to matters in the domestic sphere. On the one hand, Millennial women are expected to compete and achieve on similar levels to men in order to attain educational and professional parity. On the other hand, workplaces oftentimes do not adequately alter the responsibilities associated with being a working mother. To illustrate, this stark inequality was recently brought to light in the disruption wrought by Covid-19, as women continued to shoulder the majority of family caregiving responsibilities while also continuing their professional responsibilities. Peer-reviewed academic studies have shown that for men, the difference in work hours before and after the disruption on account of the pandemic was not significant (Kashen et al., 2020). Interruptions to work schedules caused by childcare affect women more than men, with

the impact on short-term work productivity borne entirely on the backs of mothers with children (Heggeness, 2020).

Despite advances in feminism, work policies often fail to accommodate family responsibilities (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2019). As a result, women and men do not experience conflict and disjuncture between work and family in the same way. Although career uncertainty has become a norm for both Millennial men and women in the current economy, men view their careers in a more linear fashion, whereas career-oriented women tend to base their career paths as contingent on family plans (Parker, 2015). Even as men and women buy into the ideals espoused by the modern social contract, they prepare for different outcomes based on sexual differences.

The modern social contract, as it relates to the Millennial generation, sees women self-actualizing through professionalism, while continuing to shoulder the responsibility of bearing a child, along with the majority of the care. Tensions between the incompatibility of the new opportunities for women in the workplace and the continued expectation that women will take on the bulk of the unpaid labor at home is one of the main reasons for the "stalled gender revolution" which Crossley crucially applies to the contemporary moment (Hochschild, 1989, as cited in Crossley, 2017, pp. 14-15). The social contract, though updated, remains deeply inegalitarian in its normative assumption that Millennial women are active in the workforce, in addition to their responsibilities for providing care in the home. The logic of neoliberal capitalism asserts that each person who can work must do so. As a result, Millennial women find themselves coping with the long period of **education** that is the price of the ticket for upward social mobility, which then requires gainful **employment** and, consequentially, **delayed-child bearing**. For Millennial women, this is a process that inevitably prolongs the delay of reaching successful markers of adulthood, and it engenders three interrelated crises in its propositional formula.

1.2 Contemporary Crises

In this section, I argue that there have been three interrelated, contemporary crises (financial, educational, and reproductive) that have had profound implications for the construction of the ideal

neoliberal Millennial woman. Firstly, in a span of 12 years, American Millennials have suffered two economic cataclysms. The Global Financial crisis of 2008 struck seven years after the attack on the World Trade Center – the impact of which still reverberates more than a decade later. The biggest financial recession since the Great Depression was particularly harmful to the Millennial generation. Many older Millennials were initially entering the workforce when the crisis hit. As a result, their careers suffered early setbacks that have impeded Millennials' ability to afford aspects of the lifestyle that their parents may have enjoyed at similar ages. Older Millennials may have not yet recovered from the 2008 crisis, and younger Millennials are now graduating into a recession, where those who are fortunate enough to have a job are more likely to be on short-term, temporary or zero-hours contracts. Furthermore, in the aftermath of Covid-19, the labor market was set back to the turn of the millennium. The economic regression to Y2K (when Millennials began to come of age), is a fitting symbol for a generation that has been plagued by recession, and the average Millennial has experienced slower economic growth than any previous generation in American history (Van Dam, 2020).

Secondly, the financial crisis is compounded by an educational crisis. In the contemporary climate, soaring student debt and high unemployment rates should give rise to questions pertaining to the value of a college education (Sandel, 2020). Millennial patterns, however, provide compelling answers. The disparity in economics outcomes between those with less formal schooling, or only a GED, has never been greater than in the contemporary era. In further validation of the 'meritocratic' underpinning of the education system in the U.S., the young people who do not attend college also face a crisis in today's service and information-based economy, and are often relegated to the secondary job market in positions that are not only menial, but also low paying (Hill & Yeung, 1999); more recent studies show that unemployment is higher among those without a college degree (Torpey, 2018). The post-2008 economy has divided the country along a fault line demarcated by college education (Carnevale et al., 2017), and there is a widening gulf in both opportunities and wages between more highly educated and skilled Millennials, and those with less, especially minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged young adults.

Thirdly, there are many factors that converge around the current reproduction crisis, with perhaps one of the most potent reasons driving the falling birth rate being that Millennial women in their

prime child-bearing years do not have the financial security and stability needed to start a family. Financial concerns have weighed heavily on the Millennial generation, who have been hit the hardest by the 2008 recession. Not only have Millennials faced high unemployment and increased debt, but the cost of raising a child in the U.S. has increased by over 40% since 2000 (Dickler, 2011). In 2015, the average estimate of annual expenditure per child was $12,680, an expense that is projected to rise to $16,430 by 2025, culminating in over $230,000 from birth to age 17 (Lino et al., 2017). Polling results indicate that many American women are having fewer children than what they would consider ideal; more than 75% of Americans feel that the main reason people do not have more children is finances or the economy (Newport & Wilke, 2013). The key point behind a more recent Gallup poll indicates that while data show that significantly more Millennials are single or never married (in comparison to older generations), there does not appear to be evidence that Millennials are putting off having children, with 87% indicating that they want children someday (Fleming, 2016). This data indicates that it is perhaps not a change in attitudes behind the recent drop in the U.S. fertility rate, but a structural change – a structural change that I have argued has emerged in response to societal crises.

The aforementioned evidence suggests that when the education crisis and financial crisis map onto gender, there are significant implications for modern constructions of successful, neoliberal femininity. My study aims to show that traditional markers of adulthood have not become delayed for the Millennial women who conform to the ideals espoused by the neoliberal social contract. Going forward, I draw on Max Weber's (1949) notion of the ideal type as a way to examine similarities, as well as deviations, in empirical cases. Ideal types enable the construction of a social reality that links the figurative ideal with the conditions through which she has been constructed, or with the consequences that follow from her emergence. This has led to the motivating question behind my research project:

How is the ideal Millennial constituent produced, and reproduced, in contemporary American society as a gendered response to crisis in a neoliberal age?

1.3 Conceptual Framework

To date, the Millennial woman has been looked at from various angles as a real, ontological entity (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2013; Twenge, 2006), with little reflection on how she has been discursively constructed. Because I have chosen to examine the Millennial woman's discursive construction, the starting point for my analysis will be the Foucauldian idea that power works through the production of subjects – which in the case of this dissertation, is the ideal feminine figure. I will argue that the Millennial woman is a part of a larger power nexus in which certain neoliberal practices, ideas and ways of living are normalized. The social construction of contemporary femininity has material effects; thus, the creation of ideal figures and hegemonic femininities prompt an exploration of the ways in which gender is currently represented. I ask under what historical conditions the Millennial has come to achieve epistemological coherence, and seek to understand the forces (such as the crises) and beliefs (anchored in contemporary neoliberal feminism) that have generated such coherence, along with the consequences.

Drawing on work from key scholars in the field of feminist communications – *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Rottenberg, 2018); *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* (McRobbie, 2020); and *Empowered* (Banet -Weiser, 2018) – I will argue that contemporary feminism has come to be authorized by a specific political economic context. As previously explained by the updated social contract, this is a context in which the inclusion of women in the public sphere signals feminism, regardless of whether this inclusion is committed to interrogating sexist, classist and racist structural inequalities. Contemporary feminism – as it circulates in its more popular form – is not often critical of neoliberalism and its meritocratic values. Rather values such as economic success, new market growth and self-entrepreneurship are essential to the conceptualization of the current iteration of feminism. As such, the construction of the ideal Millennial female cannot be analyzed in isolation; rather, it needs to be understood as co-constitutive of capitalistic values and divisions of labor (Rottenberg, 2018).

On this point, I circle back to the Foucauldian idea that power works through the production of subjects, and the Millennial woman is a part of a larger power nexus in which certain practices, ideas and ways of living are normalized. The world-changing, paradigm shifting developments

that occurred over the last two decades have profound implications for modern constructions of ideal types of neoliberal femininity. This dissertation argues that highly visible Millennial ideal figures are not only a product of, but also a response to these crises.

As such, the second chapter proceeds in three steps and is dedicated to summarizing literature on generations, neoliberal feminism and celebrity feminism in order to better situate the female Millennial ideal figure within the current crises. The first part focuses on how the concept of generations has been historically conceived, with specific attention paid to the discursive construction of the Millennial cohort. The second focuses on summarizing and critiquing arguments produced by the popular and academic community about the landscape of contemporary feminism, especially as it is embedded in popular culture. The discourses that come to circulate as 'feminism' require more nuanced and critical thought, so the third section of the literature review focuses on key scholarship that examines the way 'celebrity' has become a predominant domain in which the contestation and unsettling of ideas of contemporary femininity take place.

1.4 Methodological Design

The methodology chapter describes the rationale for selecting, designing and employing multimodal analysis to the discursive formation of contemporary feminism's ideal constituents. This has been done in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities that arise when neoliberal values appear to be inscribed within a more determined attempt – undertaken by both political and cultural forces – to re-shape notions of American femininity so that it complements the requirements of the economic agenda. The methodological design of the study was shaped by the conceptual need to forgo unrestrained truth claims and judgments about an individual, instead opting to focus on the ways by which the Millennial subject emerges to achieve epistemological coherence. The following section introduces my empirical cases, whose position as public figures offers a way to interrogate how popular discourses are constructed, and how they participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to.

1.4.1 Case Studies

The independent, empowered and successful woman has become a familiar trope in a neoliberal era (Rottenberg, 2018). Exemplified by women such as Kamala Harris, Ivanka Trump, Sheryl Sandberg and Megyn Kelly, this figurative ideal is hailed as an individual not only worthy of admiration, but also as one who serves as a role model for a younger generation of women. In this dissertation, I examine the ideal Millennial's discursive construction across three intensely mediated and highly popular feminine subjects – Taylor Swift, Beyoncé Knowles Carter and Kim Kardashian – because I seek to examine the characteristics and expectations that have been most widely conveyed by the celebrities whose public platform offers a model of how to prosper in a society where success is predicated on the logic of neoliberalism. My three empirical cases shed light on American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed. Because of their unique position and platform, celebrities serve as reference points for gauging the basic beliefs about the state of American culture (Driessens, 2013). It is by taking these discursive formations as an object of study that I can better understand how popular narratives cohere in response to the social and political climate of the time.

1.4.1.1 Taylor Swift

In Chapter Four, I advance the argument that Taylor Swift has emerged and has sustained her celebrity presence because she concurrently indicates and speaks to a contemporary crisis. On account of the financial crisis, the Millennial generation is facing a profound lack of security and upward mobility. Taylor's discursive construction offers a solution; despite turbulent economic conditions, she represents being self-reliant and resilient by adapting and adjusting to new circumstances. In doing so, her career trajectory denies that meritocracy is a myth, and confirms that hard work pays off for talented and ambitious Millennials.

Since her emergence on the public stage, Taylor has been discursively constructed as the 'girl next door'. At the beginning of her career, she cultivated young, devoted female fans; in doing so, she 'grew-up' alongside them, which is imperative for constructing what Mannheim (1952) calls a generation actuality. Her status as an American Sweetheart was cemented through her lyrics, which 'spoke' to her audience by foregrounding relatable themes. The core elements of her constructed

persona were instrumental in the initial success of her cross-over from country music to pop music. Despite her efforts to break from her initial image and reconfigure her public persona (evidenced by both her professional and personal 're-invention' in recent years), Taylor could only attempt to change who she is within certain confines of what the market dictates as 'acceptable'. In this way, her adaptability to market changes can be read as a response to the havoc wrought by the financial crisis, by way of incorporating neoliberal logics that empower the Millennial woman: resilience and self-reliance.

Because neoliberal feminism is the central framework through which I theorize the feminine ideal, the development of my coding frame was guided by its core tenets. I analyzed Taylor's Instagram account with a specific focus on images that represent hegemonic ideals of contemporary neoliberal femininity. Content and multimodal analysis were applied to 836 photos and 130 videos to allow for a better understanding of Taylor's discursive construction – which, in the specific context of Millennial activity on Instagram, is not an insular activity performed in isolation, but rather it is situated in a cultural, mediated context that involves a dynamic between image and video content and the audience. Key themes in Taylor's mediated appearance are independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. The chapter suggests that Taylor crafts a specific gendered identity as both a product of and response to new and emerging neoliberal economic arrangements inherent in the updated social contract. Having been in the spotlight since 2004, Taylor's career trajectory works as proof that the formula for success in the U.S. still works, despite the turbulent economic upheavals. For a generation that is not only struggling to find its identity, but is also facing a profound lack of security in linear progress and mobility, her narrative of success provides a solution; however, this is a solution for a very particular ideal type of Millennial woman, one who is White, heterosexual, and middle-class.

1.4.1.2 Beyoncé Knowles Carter

In Chapter Five, I turn to examining how Beyoncé offers a model response to both the financial and reproductive crises, in that her discursive construction demonstrates the normalized way to 'have it all' – which is *after* establishing a career and getting married. Beyoncé is one of the most visible performers in hip hop music, and her discursive construction shapes in significant ways what it means to be a successful Black Millennial, and what it means to be an independent and

empowered modern woman and mother more broadly. In this empirical chapter, I apply multimodal analysis to Beyoncé's lyrics, music videos, live performances and social media to explore how they challenge normative conceptions of Black femininity and reconfigure societal stereotypes.

The pattern in Beyoncé's discourse indicates that her construction serves to defy dominant images of Black femininity as emblematic of a profound contemporary crisis in social reproduction, such as the Welfare Queen or Strong Black Woman. Her discourse contests the ideological formation of the Black American family as dysfunctional, and instead reconfigures marriage and maternity as essential. In doing so, Beyoncé's discourse challenges the normative conceptions surrounding the disempowerment of Black women in the U.S. through sexual exploitation and exclusion from the public sphere. Beyoncé discursively repositions Black motherhood as empowering, and in the process, becomes a discursive site through which Black maternity can be reframed from a negative state of crisis to a more positive, legitimate social influence. As a result, her mediated construction of Black maternity is offered as a solution to the current crisis in reproduction, thereby concealing what Briggs (2017, p. 105) has referred to as the "new normal" of reproduction (which sees fundamental disruptions to racialized reproduction after the withdrawal of government support and declining wages that mark the neoliberal era). The consequences of the unavailability of social benefits like healthcare, childcare and housing seemingly originate in individual bad decisions. Disciplined by an aversion to a "mismanaged life" (Brown, 2005, p. 42), the Black woman is thereby interpellated as an entrepreneurial actor.

Beyoncé's discourse offers a solution to the current reproduction crisis more broadly, and the racialized reproduction crisis specifically. Not only does it align with neoliberal discourses that insist each individual household has a privatized responsibility for reproduction and care, but also her construction further solidifies career, family and lifestyle options as interrelated markers of neoliberal success. In this way, she cements the logic behind traditional markers of adulthood, and ensures that they have not become delayed or reversible despite hardship. More specifically, in investing the modern Black woman and mother with new meanings related to economic independence and self-sufficiency, Beyoncé has placed the Black feminine subject squarely at the heart, and arguably in the service of, the neoliberal imagination.

1.4.1.3 Kim Kardashian

In Chapter Six, I explore how Kim's discursive formation speaks to the crisis of class. My analysis focuses on Kim's emergence as a national figure specifically in response to the crisis encountered by the segment of the Millennial population without a college degree. To better define the parameters of the crises, and illustrate the *interrelated* nature of the three, I will use educational attainment as a proxy for socio-economic status, or class.[3]

Because her rise to fame is not predicated on a perceived talent or aptitude in a given field, Kim's discursive construction appears to fundamentally disrupt the secure meritocratic and neoliberal logic that dictates the boundaries of what it means to be an independent and empowered modern woman worthy of emulation. Drawing on the concept of respectability to analyze Kim's construction, I locate her emergence within the historical trajectory of gender, race and class within the U.S. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how her behavior is judged in comparison to norms that idealize performances of upper-middle class womanhood and femininity. I thus treat Kim's initial discursive formation as a site that defines and delineates the type of femininity that has been rendered *deviant* in American culture.

I argue that Kim has sustained her presence as a public figure because she offers a strategy for Millennial women to respond to the lack of market opportunities by finding alternative paths for achievement. While Kim lacks a formal education, her discursive construction is the formulation of the ideal American worker who pulls herself up from her bootstraps after hardship by exhibiting a clear, relentless commitment to paid work. I apply discourse analysis to critical points in the trajectory of Kim's career in order to identify the unique ability of her discursive construction to push the boundaries that had previously constrained her hyper-sexualized public image, and enable her to perform the identity work necessary to move toward a higher social standing as a successful entrepreneur and businesswoman. Through strict adherence to business codes, Kim managed to negotiate and reconfigure her discursive label as a social 'deviant'. Her discursive formation

[3] While education *alone* may not be the best proxy for class (as it relates to socioeconomic status), the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) has recognized its effect on differential access to resources. In this dissertation, I will argue that education must be mapped onto class in order to better understand the compounded nature of the contemporary crises and the growing inequality gaps.

speaks to a neoliberal climate that encourages Millennials to become successful and empowered by means of self-promotion and opportunism; or in other words, through selling themselves.

Through the performance and commodification of her 'self', Kim has become an agent of change in the way the classed Millennial subject is rendered legible through discourse in the Digital Age. This entrepreneurial narrative appears as a beacon of hope and a response to a generational cohort in crisis as they struggle to find work. Her construction fundamentally disrupts the secure neoliberal logic that dictates the boundaries of what it means to be a Millennial ideal, while simultaneously confirming and cementing the very same logic. As a result, neoliberalism is being reproduced through the 'responses' that incorporate the very same logics that reactivate and extend the ideology.

1.5 Structure of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I explore how the ideal Millennial constituent is produced, and reproduced, in contemporary American society as a gendered response to crises in a neoliberal age. In Chapter Two, I take a deeper look at the literature on generations, as well as neoliberal feminism, as it is situated in popular culture. Despite existing research that theorizes difficulties with the variety of discourses that pertain to generations, critical research on Millennials is less common. This is a notable lacuna that my research study aims to address. Furthermore, my perspective is unique in that the generational literature has not fully examined the cross-over between generations and feminism, and even less work has been done on the gendered Millennial subject as she is situated within media and celebrity popular culture. This dissertation represents a valuable and original contribution to discussions on neoliberal feminism in relation to the Millennial in celebrity culture – as she is gendered, raced and classed. The significant feature of this research is pairing the literature of media studies, generation studies and feminist studies with intersectional analysis.

Chapter Three delineates the methodological design by presenting the study's rationale along with a summary of the tools employed for data analysis. The analytical strategy and the justification of the case selection is also provided. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the success and limitations of the research design. Subsequently, I turn to sketching patterns of the Millennial's presence across three intensely mediated and highly popular feminine celebrity subjects to explore

neoliberal feminism's ideal constituents. Chapters Four, Five and Six are empirical case studies that illustrate the ideal attributes of the Millennial woman. Multimodal analysis is applied to each case's discursive construction to better understand how each speaks to a contemporary crisis.

In my accounting for a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, I also discovered patterns of entrepreneurship, adaptability and resilience that have possibly been activated to provide a response in a time of crisis. In Chapter Seven, I expand upon these three themes – across cases – in order to better understand how discourses of Millennial ideal types suggest an attempt to make something of themselves in spite of difficulty. This raises important questions about the shifting nature of neoliberal feminism and feminist identities in the U.S., thus warranting further critical scholarly attention to the future of neoliberal feminism and the future of the feminine ideal. As such, the latter part of this chapter looks at how she can be imagined in her next permutation.

Chapter Eight serves as the conclusion. I summarize the main points of the dissertation, discuss the major theoretical and methodological contributions of my dissertation, consider what my work adds to core debates, as well as to the development of an intersectional understanding of neoliberal feminism. Following a reflection of the study's limitations, I discuss possible avenues for future research.

Chapter Two: Situating the Ideal Millennial in Academic Literature

As a means of locating individuals within a specific historical time period, the concept of 'generation' in the U.S. is widely mobilized as a way to understand differences between age groups. To date, the Millennial cohort is likely the most researched generation. In less than one second, a popular search engine returned over 138 million results for articles related to this generation. A crude Google Scholar search for the term 'Millennial' reveals that more than 127,000 academic articles (with an additional 1,290,000 for the term 'Generation Y') have been published since 2000 (December, 2020). These numbers are simple anecdotal evidence used to illustrate that the volume of scholarly interest in the cohort is not only impressive, but also wide-ranging, as many distinct fields are engaged in the study of this generation.

Competing discourses on the 'Millennial' have been produced ever since the term was coined by sociologists Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000) to label individuals born during the time frame of 1980 to 2000. Since the turn of the century, classifying, measuring and monitoring the Millennial generation has become a key focus of interest and interrogation, with an increasing number of analysts exploring and documenting shifts in Millennial values and behavior. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will refer to the cohort as Millennials, but they are also known as Generation Y, and colloquially by an additional 30 labels, such as Generation Me, Generation We, Generation Rx, and the Boomerang Generation. The abundance of appellations hints at a fundamental tension and difficulty of ascertaining just who it is that they 'are'.

This process is not simply a descriptive one, but one that involves very careful selections and exclusions in order to advance persuasive accounts about new and evolving truth claims about the Millennial. In *Millennials Rising*, Howe and Strauss (2000) investigate the ways that Millennials have re-casted the image of youth from alienated and downbeat to optimistic and engaged, and ultimately conclude that Millennials will emerge as the next great generation. Over the course of 20 years, the socio-cultural landscape has changed, and it has become increasingly difficult to paint a coherent picture of the most ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history.

Karl Mannheim (1952) proposed the concept of generations as cohort members who have developed similar attitudes, worldviews and beliefs on account of shared experiences and contexts. However, according to statistics compiled in 2015, there are more than 80 million Millennials in the U.S. (United States Census Bureau, 2015), thereby representing the most diverse generation when compared to older generations. The large waves of immigration from Latin America and Asia to the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s have given rise to the racially and ethnically diverse Millennial generation, making them even harder to 'define' or 'conceptualize' based on shared experience over time. As such, it becomes worth asking whether the application of a 'generational' lens still remains useful for examining complex sociological phenomena.

As mentioned in the introduction, Millennials have been looked at from various angles as an ontological entity (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2013; Twenge, 2006), with little reflection on how they have been discursively constructed. Thus, understanding the Millennial

through a Foucauldian lens will make a unique and original theoretical contribution. The starting point for my analysis will be the Foucauldian idea that power works through the production of subjects. I will argue that the Millennial is a part of a larger power nexus in which certain practices, ideas and ways of living are normalized. As such, one of the questions that I have asked is under what historical conditions has the Millennial come to achieve epistemological coherence? I seek to understand the forces (such as the crises, and the rise of social media) and beliefs (anchored in neoliberal feminism) that have generated such coherence, along with the consequences. As a result, the construction of the ideal neoliberal Millennial female cannot be analyzed in isolation; rather, it needs to be understood as embedded in wider capitalist economic practices which are premised on incentives through free markets, financial responsibility, and a more liberal socio-cultural arrangement that favors pluralism.

The following chapter proceeds in three steps and is dedicated to summarizing literature on generations, feminism and celebrity in order to better situate the female Millennial subject within the current social landscape. The body of literature on each topic is vast; the purpose of this review is to not only identify germinal work in each field, but also locate omissions. My perspective is unique in that the generational literature has not fully examined the cross-over between generations and neoliberal feminism, and even less work has been done on the gendered Millennial subject as she is situated within media and celebrity popular culture. For example, prominent work in the field by Tasker and Negra (2007), Dosekun (2015) and Biressi and Nunn (2013) has interrogated the boundaries around race, nationality and class to open new ways of thinking about contemporary feminism from an intersectional angle. Butler (2013) has considered celebrity figurations of feminism, and McRobbie (2009) has challenged the exclusive focus on youthful luminosities, but no one has yet specifically mapped the current iteration of feminism onto the Millennial generation. As I will show, while the Millennial subject is imagined as the implicit figure in postfeminist critiques, research has not explicitly focused on the Millennial as she is constituted through celebrity postfeminist discourses. This draws attention to the lacuna in the literature that my study aims to fill.

2.1 Generations as a Discursive Formation

In his seminal text, *Problem of Generations*, Karl Mannheim (1952) argues that generations are mediated by structures of meaning, and that the effect of biological factors cannot be observed directly, but must be reflected through the medium of social and cultural forces. As such, he places a particular emphasis on early adulthood experiences on account of the fact that "early impressions tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world" and "later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set" (1952, p. 298). Mannheim posits that those experiencing similar historical problems are differentiated into 'generation units' through the way they *"*work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways*"* (1952, p. 304). Drawing on Mannheim's notion of formative principles emerging in youth as discursive practices of cultural circles, Corsten (1999) suggests that "we need to study how, out of the experience of 'having been young together', the attributes 'my generation' and 'our time' gain a solid social validity and become general aspects of identification in discursive practice" (1999, p. 268).

As discursive formations, generations arise from narratives that attempt to make sense of persons born in different time periods. Interestingly, despite extensive consideration and attention to generations as ontological entities – or entities whose membership is ascribed through birthdate – there has not been much empirical engagement with the concept of generation from a discursive perspective. More recent studies have examined the discursive construction of generations in the U.K., exploring age as it intersects with work. For instance, Pritchard and Whiting (2014) turned their attention to the discursive construction of baby boomers and the lost generation. Their study has inspired me to think more deeply about the ways in which generational discourse is deployed through difference. When tensions are set up within the generation, it becomes harder to look across divisions to determine similarities. This led me to understand that 'social generations' are better conceived of as discursive formations, because in this way, they can "account for more than diffuse cultural similarities between cohorts, as generational labels are produced by the overall struggles for naming in the symbolic field" (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2014, p. 167).

The struggle for naming the Millennial generation is evidenced by the sheer abundance of appellations for this generational cohort. Further empirical work done by sociologists of youth has

examined the complex and contradictory discursive construction of Millennials, who have dominated the news headlines as a 'lost' generation, a 'burnt out' generation and at other times as a fragile, avocado-toast loving 'snowflake' whose 'woke-ness' is a threat to free speech (Allen et al., 2020). In this way, the concept of generation can be seen as constructed by interpretive processes aimed at uncovering similarities and differences within the cohort (Timonen & Conlon, 2015).

Other empirical research has investigated how young adults are positioned in the media through opposing discourses that construct them as a 'threat' or as a symbol of 'hope' (Wyn, 2005). Further research by Morris (2021) examines discursive strategies of positioning through an examination of the Millennial 'Other' in the news media. Morris' work helped me think about the role and influence of exclusion, and how dominant media discourses have fundamentally worked to obstruct a plurality of perspectives by reducing the complex nature of generation to a simple binary. To me, this is most clearly illustrated by the juxtaposition the individualistic Millennial cohort – Generation Me – with the more collective Millennial cohort – Generation We. This tension speaks to the way generations become constructs that are both maintained and reconfigured by people over time.

However, in order to clearly delineate the concepts of cohort and generation, I will follow Scherger, who advocates a much stricter definition of generations as people sharing the same identity and culture, "originating in similar and similarly interpreted biographical-historical experience" (2012, p. 9). She also argues that generations as social formations and as discursive constructs are not far removed:

> "if generational discourses are anchored in shared biographical-historical experiences ... and if they contribute to the formation of a generational group with a shared identity and tendency to become collective actors, the communicative construction of a shared experience turns into a social fact having structural consequences" (2012, p. 178, as cited in Timonen & Conlon, 2015, p. 3).

Discursive formations, in the Foucauldian sense, not only structure and classify, but also normalize the social world. Foucault's interest with discourse developed out of his concern for identifying and tracing the conditions of possibility for particular systems of thought or disciplines. Discourse

is defined by Foucault as being constituted by "a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence" (Foucault, 1972, p. 107). One of his central arguments is that discourses are able to function in such a way due to self-effacement; in other words, the processes of discourse have been rendered invisible. It is thus necessary to make such discourse visible by identifying the ways in which it operates. Discourses make claims to be authoritative over a sphere of knowledge and social interaction, thereby producing truth claims rather than truth itself.

As an organization of knowledge, discursive formations are embedded in social institutions and, from a Foucauldian perspective, are always linked to power. In this way, they produce new forms of understanding. Through forms of selection, exclusion and domination, discourse both constitutes and reproduces the social system (Young, 1981). In *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault asserts "in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role it is to avert its powers and dangers, to cope with its change events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (1981, p. 52). This attempt to master and domesticate materiality constitutes the order of discourse. In his 1976 *Collège de France* lectures, Foucault conceptualizes discourse as a battle and struggle:

> "The mere fact of speaking, or employing words, or using the words of others…this fact is in itself a force. Discourse is, with respect to the relation of forces, not merely a surface inscription, but something that brings about effects" (Foucault, 2003, p. xx, as cited in Hook, 2007, p. 120).

Foucault's method informs my research in its consideration of representations and cultural manifestations. His approach insists on the constitutive role of such cultural manifestations in effecting a discourse that both forms and transforms knowledge, and creates a space that establishes certain statements as truthful and legitimate, while rendering others illegitimate and deviant (Orgad, 2009). Generations can be viewed as a discursive formation; that is, a system of meaning designed to illustrate particular historical locations through the interpretation of the voices of the persons living in a particular time and place. Specifically, in this project, I explore the discursive construction of the ideal neoliberal Millennial figure, and situate her in relation to the immediate context of the current historical period.

2.2 Competing Millennial Discourses

Having reviewed the sociological conceptualization of 'generation', the aim of this section is to provide the historical context for the discursive construction of the Millennial generation. As previously mentioned, the concept of generation can be viewed as constructed by interpretive processes aimed at uncovering both similarities and differences within the cohort, and I now want to expand upon the key competing discourses surrounding the Millennial. The mediated representation and discourses that describe a generation can have significant effects on how the group views itself and its potential within society; therefore, an examination of the culture that helped to shape and produce the mediated Millennial discourses is crucial. As a discursive formation, Millennials are formed at the juncture of academic publications (e.g., Howe & Strauss, 2000), popular media corporations (e.g., the MTV network) and commercial discourse (e.g., U.S. Chamber of Commerce). It is this variation in discourses that presents a complicated view of the Millennial generation. However, there are several patterns in both the data and the literature worth identifying. Beyond the descriptive, statistical accounts rendered by government agencies such as the census bureau, there has been widespread debate amongst academics about how to characterize Millennials as a generation. In this section of the literature review, I will focus on popular debates that discursively position Millennials as either entitled narcissists (Generation Me) or as a civically engaged generation (Generation We). The texts under examination circulate across academic disciplines, as well as popular media, and as such I consider them as critical sites in which truth claims are both produced and contested.

2.2.1 Generation 'Me'

One of the most polarizing questions posed by both academics and the popular press asks whether Millennials are a self-focused 'me' generation, or the next best hope to save the world. To better understand how these discourses advance certain generational 'truth claims', I will first draw on a body of literature that shines a spotlight on Millennials' narcissistic nature. In *Generation Me*, Jean Twenge (2014) argues that Millennials are more confident, entitled and miserable than previous generations. She claims that parents and teachers raised Millennials on the promise that they could be anything they wanted to be, yet they grew up to face widespread unemployment and limited

opportunities. Following a childhood of optimism and high hopes, "reality hit them like a smack in the face" (Twenge, 2014, p. xi). She draws her findings from a decade of research, including more than 30 studies based on nationally representative surveys from 11 million young Americans, finding a cultural shift toward individualism that has shaped the Millennials as a generation. She admits that this has some positive outcomes (such as Millennial support for equality and tolerance); disadvantages include narcissism and mental health problems.

2.2.1.1 The Digital Narcissist

Twenge (2014) substantiates claims about Millennial narcissism by citing their fondness of selfies and sexting, which has logically emerged from the 'it's all about me' mentality upon which they were raised. In addition to the term 'Millennial', the 'Net Generation' (Tapscott, 1998) and 'Digital Natives' (Prensky, 2001) have been used to describe individuals born between 1980 and 2000. Using the term 'Digital Natives', Prensky (2001) has argued that there has been a significant generational change in attitudes and styles as a result of technological advancements. Tapscott (2009, p. 16) has argued that each generation "is exposed to a unique set of events that defines their place in history and shapes their outlook", and he posits that what makes the Millennial generation distinct from previous generations is that they are the first to grow up with digital technologies. In order to signify a break and departure from older generations, Prensky (2001) developed the idea of the 'digital native' to identify a similar generational change.

Millennials are unique in that they are the first generation to grow up immersed in social media and online technology. As such, they have learned to represent themselves as individual entities online, which provided a critical platform to contest and reconfigure both personal and grand, hegemonic narratives. The rise of social media and digital platforms has broadened access to information and has transformed the production of public knowledge to account for a plurality of viewpoints. Constructing an online identity has become a normative practice in the current neoliberal economic environment, and has been deployed by Millennials to communicate personal ideas using strategies derived from the logic of commercial capitalism.

Twenge (2014) argues there is an increasing obsession with physical appearance and an unashamed willingness to use invasive medical procedures to improve one's image. One of the

grand ‘moral panic’ narratives relates to the Internet as a wild, unrestricted space where young people need to be policed because they can be stalked and cyberbullied. Research has found that girls have a much higher rate of depression than boys, and this is closely linked to the amount of time they spend on social media (Kelly et al., 2018). Because Millennials have experienced several crises at an early, impressionable age (such as 9/11 and the Great Recession), they perceive a world where external happenings determine the course of their lives, rather than their own efforts. This kind of externality can be adaptive, serving to protect their self-esteem; but it can also lead to cynicism and alienation, and as the synonymous Millennial label ‘Generation Rx’ suggests, possibly depression.

In addition to empirical studies, popular discourses echo academic work and have depicted the Millennial generation as self-centered, lazy, disrespectful and unfaithful (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Entertainment-focused articles in newspapers, magazines and blogs have portrayed the ‘Look at Me’ generation as overly confident and self-absorbed (Pew Research Center, 2007). These attributes have significant implications for the construction of the Millennial worker, who has been depicted as self-important, and lacking in both work ethic and loyalty (Hill, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2007; Marston, 2007).

On account of the aforementioned financial crisis (explained in greater detail in Chapter One), recent economic conditions may have given rise to discourses that place the blame on Millennials for failing to find gainful employment. The Global Financial crisis struck seven years after the attack on the World Trade Center – the impact of which still reverberates more than a decade later. The biggest financial recession since the Great Depression was particularly harmful to the Millennial generation. As previously indicated, many older Millennials were initially entering the workforce when the crisis occurred. As a result, their careers saw early setbacks that have precluded them from affording aspects of the lifestyle that their parents had at the same age. In a fragmenting social and political environment, many Millennials are pessimistic about the prospects for political and social progress. Because they are the slowest cohort to recover from the Great Recession, Millennials are at the greatest risk of becoming a ‘lost generation’ (Federal Reserve Bank, 2018) – an epithet that further serves to construct the Millennials in a negative light.

2.2.2 Generation 'We'

Contrary to the negative conclusions published about the Millennials as a self-centered, individualistic generation (Twenge, 2014), political scientists Winograd and Hais (2011) argue that Millennials are "focused on revitalizing the nation's institutions and dealing with the long-standing issues deferred during the idealist era that is now passing from the scene" (Winograd & Hais, 2011, p. 25). They advance the argument developed by Howe and Strauss in *The Fourth Turning* (1997) by applying the sociologists' theory of generational archetypes to Millennials.[4] To summarize, if Baby Boomers were an idealist generation, then it would follow that the older end of the cohort birthed Generation X, who are 'reactive', and whose response to being raised by *laissez faire* parents was to become individualistic and pragmatic. The children of the younger Baby Boomers, and the children of Generation X, are the Millennials; according to Howe and Strauss' theory, they will be civic-minded. Because of Millennials' place in this generational schema, they believe in the (left-leaning) government's ability to help design a better world. To evidence this claim, Millennials have offered overwhelming support and enthusiasm for political candidates such as Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders.

In *Media, Millennials and Politics*, Alison Novak (2016) explores the relationship between Millennials, media and politics, and proposes that there is not the presence of a singular discourse surrounding the political and civic engagement of the Millennial generation, but rather several discourses that shape the relationship of the group to media. However, sociologist Ruth Milkman (2017) argues that Millennials are a uniquely differentiated political generation, in comparison to other generations, because their shared experiences set them apart from previous ones. These 'experiences' which shape political activity involve being the most educated generation to date, and coming of age in a Digital Era. Milkman argues that these experiences have led to a generation whose members weave intersectionality into their activism. Researchers have attributed this multicultural awareness to the fact that Millennials now represent the largest generation of

[4] Howe and Strauss suggest that there are four generational archetypes that rotate over time (hero, artist, prophet and nomad), each with distinctive attitudinal and behavioral traits (idealist, reactive, civic-minded, and adaptive). According to Strauss and Howe, these generations cycle every 80 years, four archetypes with 20 years per generation.

Americans, who are, as previously indicated, the most racially and ethnically diverse American generation (United States Census Bureau, 2015).

In the years since 2008, Millennials have led social movements involving economic inequality (Occupy Wall Street), racism (Black Lives Matter), immigration (the Dreamers), and sexual harassment (#MeToo). Although the concept of 'wokeness' varies in meaning, the crux refers to acts of resistance to capitalism and solidarity in response to structural oppression and systemic racism (Sobande, 2020). These overlapping understandings of oppression are better understood within the framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017), which will be further discussed in the next section of this thesis.

As discussed in the previous section (Generation 'Me'), the early careers of the Millennial generation faced a setback on account of the financial crisis. However, in contrast to popular depictions of Millennials as late-bloomers who are still living in their parents' basements (Ferro, 2013), research has found that Millennials comprise a majority of the workforce, with more than half in management roles. In addition, there are also positive depictions of attitudes toward the cohort (Howe & Strauss, 2000), with employers mentioning that they are more accepting of diversity than previous generations, they have a more unique perspective on challenges and opportunities, and in support of the claim to 'Generation We', they are more comfortable working in teams than previous generations (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

This survey of literature on the Millennial cohort provides a brief overview of texts that assert truth claims about the Millennial. When I conducted the literature review for this segment of the dissertation, what was particularly striking was the way the majority of prominent writers assumed that generations are stable, ontological entities that are easily identifiable by factors such as age, location and attitudes. Such work appeals to *a priori* criteria that minimize the constitutive role of discourse in producing social realities. Thus, the reality of the generational cohort is not of fundamental importance to this dissertation. In the section that follows, I unpack how constructions of the Millennial are enrolled in feminist debates, with a specific focus on the way the ideal Millennial woman is constituted through neoliberal discourses.

2.3 The Millennial Feminist in the Age of Neoliberalism

In the previous section, I focused on the tensions created by the multiple and competing discourses that circulate to produce knowledge about the Millennial generation. Namely, I argued that these discourses involve very careful selections and exclusions in order to create persuasive accounts about new and evolving forms of the Millennial, and illustrated this point through popular debates that position Millennials as either entitled narcissists (Generation Me) or as a civically engaged generation (Generation We). This binary has been generative for my thinking as it relates to contemporary feminism in the U.S. Specifically in this thesis, I locate similar points of tension in the contemporary articulation of feminism which makes claims to being a collectivist ideology, while concurrently foregrounding and celebrating the primacy of the individual woman. In this section, I will begin by outlining a more collectivist notion of feminism before going into greater detail on neoliberal feminism.

2.3.1 Intersectional Feminism

Considering that Millennials are the most diverse generation in history, it follows that an ideology such as feminism, when taken up by the cohort, has evolved to a point where it is no longer a static notion. Feminist scholarship in the 21st century has been attentive to difference, thereby challenging the idea that the female subject centered by feminism is "white and middle class by default" (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 3). Whereas the public face of feminism in the latter part of the 20th century in the U.S. had been White and middle-class (represented by figures such as Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Hillary Clinton), the varying strands of contemporary feminism speak to the multifaceted identity of an evolving women's movement that foregrounds personal narratives in order to encapsulate an intersectional feminism.

Because feminist politics encompasses a variety of perspectives and experiences, many different definitions exist (hooks, 1981). In the academy, there is theoretical recognition of the intersecting inequalities, but yet there are notable differences as to how feminist analysis should proceed (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 1988; Walby, 2009). Central to the debates about intersectionality and gender are three crucial texts by Crenshaw (1991), McCall (2005) and

Hancock (2007). They are similar in their move to reconceptualize the 'some' women (meaning, 'White' women) to 'all' women, but diverge in their conceptualization of the relationship between compounded inequality. I will now address the theoretical approach to analysis of intersectionality – as originally advanced by Crenshaw – because it underpins my own analysis. I will once again return to the scholarship on intersectionality in Chapter Three – the methodology chapter – to address substantive issues pertaining to my empirical cases.

In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) pioneered the term 'intersectionality' to capture the marginalization of Black women in feminist and antiracist theory and politics. As the concept evolved, it highlighted the ways in which social activism around violence against women excluded the vulnerabilities of women of color, most notably from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities (Crenshaw, 1991). Using the metaphor of crossroads and traffic, she illustrates:

> "Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group . . . tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. . . . The main highway is 'racism road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. . . . She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, many layered blanket of oppression" (Crenshaw in Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 196).

The aim of adopting an intersectional approach to the analysis of disempowered, marginalized women is to understand the interaction between two or more forms of subordination, along with the consequences. It addresses the ways by which discriminatory systems create and sustain inequalities that structure the positions of gender, race and class. However, there is a notable tension between scholars as to whether priority should be given to stable identity groupings, or fluid and changing ones. Hancock (2007) is critical of approaches that stabilize identity categories, and argues instead that only analyses that treat categories as fluid truly merit the term 'intersectional'. Her arguments influenced my thinking in such a way that led me to believe that intersectional feminism has worked to open the door to an 'anything goes' ideology. This is evidenced by the resulting difficulty in specifying what features constitute contemporary feminism in the U.S. In *Finding Feminism: Millennials and the Unfinished Gender Revolution*, author Alison Crossley (2017) posits that delineating the line between who is a feminist, and who is not, is more difficult because of limited consensus about what feminism is. It has become increasingly difficult

to understand where the boundaries and borders are; what defines feminism's politics and its visibility?

This difficulty is indicative of the nuance and complexity of the current time. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will focus specifically on neoliberal feminism, which is more explicit in its articulation, and provides the necessary framework from which I can theorize the ideal Millennial woman. I follow Rottenberg (2018) in defining neoliberal feminism as an ideology with a view to converting women into human capital producing agents. I further draw on Brown to articulate human capital as being an investment in the self in such a way so as to enhance its figurative credit rating and attract investors (Brown, 2015, p. 33). This encouragement of upward mobility and emphasis on meritocratic worth is crucial because it underpins the logic behind the social contract that I delineated in Chapter One. As a result, Millennial women find themselves in a unique position in American history; changes to the social contract now see them having to cope with the long period of education (which is required for a 'meritocratic' understanding of upward social mobility), which then requires gainful employment, and consequentially, delayed-child bearing. As I have previously argued, this is a process that inevitably prolongs the delay of reaching successful markers of adulthood, and engenders three interrelated crises in its propositional formula. Because this dissertation aims to show that traditional markers of adulthood have not become disorderly for the Millennials who conform to the ideals espoused by the social contract, neoliberal feminism is the most appropriate frame for my study.

2.3.2 Neoliberal Feminism

In the U.S., neoliberalism does not only refer to economic policies, but to "a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner-workings of the subject, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents" (Banet Weiser et al., 2020, p.8). Unlike the first three waves of feminism, which aimed to critique liberalism and reveal gendered exclusions within democratic aims of equality, this iteration of feminism maps directly onto the evolving neoliberal order and has sustained a symbiotic relationship to capitalism since the new millennium. As opposed to the more classical permutation of liberalism, neoliberalism does not presume that conduct takes an entrepreneurial form automatically, but rather develops

institutional practices for enacting this agenda (Gilbert, 2013); crucially the enterprise form extends to "all forms of conduct" (Burchell, 1993, p. 275). Neoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing rational, entrepreneurial actors; DuGay (1996) and Rose (1992) have argued that the neoliberal self is bound by specific rules that emphasize traits such as ambition, calculation, accountability and personal responsibility, with Gill and Kanai (2018) adding an affective dimension.

One of the defining characteristics of neoliberal feminism is the intense focus on rugged individualism, a precise alignment with the American ethos and way of life that perhaps hints at the reason why it has been taken up and popularized with minimal scrutiny. Under neoliberalism, structural inequalities are re-routed from a collective responsibility to an individual responsibility. The female becomes the ideal subject in that she is expected to assume a dual role without locating the injury of the injustice (Orgad, 2019): namely, the Millennial woman is imagined as an assemblage of productivity, and as a result, under the new social contract, she is required to be active in the workplace and primarily responsible for child rearing and domestic concerns. According to Rottenberg (2018, p. 55), the neoliberal feminist subject "disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, and accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus".

Female Millennial participation in the workforce has become an important feature of the success of the new social contract. As members of the most educated generation, they have been socially conditioned to display enthusiasm and willingness to pursue higher education and careers as a mark of 'modern' identities (McRobbie, 2007). Pervasive structural inequalities have been excused by meritocratic discourses that prize participation in the workforce as the apotheosis of empowerment. This combination provides not only the impetus, but also the justification for a neoliberal feminism that sees representation in the marketplace as the solution to structural inequality (Rottenberg, 2018). Gender inequality in the marketplace is rendered publicly visible through discourse pertaining to unequal wages and sexual harassment, but the 'solutions' it posits obscure the structural and economic undergirding of these phenomena (ibid).

As a political rationality, neoliberalism neither recognizes nor values reproduction and care work because everything is reduced to market metrics. To illustrate the way in which neoliberal ideas have pervaded the most intimate spheres, Rickie Solinger (2002, p. 6) asks what happens when "the special guarantee for all women – the promise that all women can decide for themselves whether and when to be mothers – is expressed by the individualistic, market-place term 'choice'?" Solinger's correlation of 'choice' with 'marketplace' ties directly to the economic and political restructuring of neoliberalism. As previously mentioned, under the new social contract, individual Millennial women are required to self-regulate. Having a well-planned life has emerged as a norm of neoliberal femininity. Subsequently, fertility in the U.S. has come to be defined within the normative frame of planned parenthood, where social policy, public health and media discourses work to reshape configurations of the family so that it complements the requirements of the new economy.

Planning reproduction now follows a similar cost-benefit analysis as does investment in a Millennial woman's education and career – with the formal markers crucially being ordered in such a way that reproduction is preceded by education and career, but nevertheless essential to the construction of successful femininity. Because I theorize the ideal Millennial constituent through a neoliberal framework, I will maintain that motherhood is a marker of successful femininity. Motherhood is crucial to the viability of neoliberalism because a decline in birth rates and a failure for society to reproduce itself poses a serious risk – and has significant implications – for the economy and the security of the nation.

Read in this way, a problematic tension arises with regard to the conceptualization of the ideal neoliberal woman. As per the modern social contract, women are expected to be active in the workplace, while being primarily responsible for children and the domestic sphere. In breaking with Rottenberg's 'happy' work-life balance as the ideal, I argue that in a neoliberal regime, 'balance' can only be achieved when the same value extracted by a woman's paid work is also extracted by the woman's offspring. In her capacity as mother, the neoliberal ideal must also consider the long-term return on investment in the development of the child. As such, I am critical of the claim that professional women can strive toward a value-balance if they depend on the care of "women of colour, poor, and immigrant women" (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 1079). More liberal feminists are working to minimize the exploitation of the 'Other' female subjects (ibid), but I arrive

to a similar outcome differently: neoliberal alarm bells should ring when the care of the next generation is being outsourced to non-aspirational women, or the "unworthy, disposable female 'Other'" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 20). Serious re-consideration of the role of the ideal neoliberal mother is warranted, because she may offer more 'value' to society by not only prioritizing her children as favored subjects of attention, but also by allowing the other parent to excel in the workforce and advance in his or her career, without also having to take care of "the home front" (Glucksberg, 2018, p. 21).

Foucauldian scholars have explored how subjectivities are reconstituted under neoliberalism as entrepreneurial subjects (Brown, 2003; Rose, 1992). The stake in neoliberal analysis is "the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself" (Foucault, 2008, p. 226 as cited in Elias et al., 2017). Central to the construction of women as ideal neoliberal subjects are the alliances and collusions between contemporary feminism and neoliberalism. Work by Rosalind Gill (2007, pp. 163-164) positions the resonance or 'synergy' between the contemporary iteration of feminism (or postfeminism) and neoliberalism at the following three levels: first, she claims that both are structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves; secondly, the autonomous, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism; thirdly, the connection implies that the synergy is even more significant, insofar as women are – to a much greater extent than men – called on to self-manage and self-discipline. Women are not only required to work on and transform the self, but also regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. These parallels suggest, then, that postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism but is also at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas (Gill, 2007). I extend Gill's elements of a postfeminist sensibility by using three characteristics (independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention) as key tenets of neoliberal feminism, precisely because they are constituted by core neoliberal ideas. However, I do not use postfeminism as the framework for theorizing the Millennial ideal. Although postfeminism stresses the importance of empowerment and choice, it is understood to present something that has already "accomplished its goals, and is therefore passé or no longer necessary" (Rottenberg, 2017, p. 329). This was particularly useful

for my thinking, because the work of progress – as it is gendered – is never done, it merely changes. Because feminism has resurfaced as a widely circulated and influential discourse over the last ten years, it suggests that the movement is not only necessary, but also warrants critical attention in the way it registers and produces cultural sensibilities.

The body of literature in the area of neoliberal feminism is vast and makes a range of important contributions. Similar to this dissertation, much scholarship is informed by Foucauldian approaches that extend neoliberalism beyond free market principles to producing, and reproducing, new forms of subjectivity. Foucauldian theorists have highlighted similar neoliberal themes around the emphasis on personal responsibility (McNay, 2009), the illusion of autonomy (Davies, 2005) and the repudiation of dependencies (Binkley, 2011). Scholarship by Baker (2008), McRobbie (2004) and Walkerdine (2003) has demonstrated how young women in a capitalist environment, such as the U.K. and the U.S., are positioned to be consumers, makeover devotees, self-helpers and 'empowered' agents par excellence.

Drawing on the proliferation of scholarship on this topic, my research will make a unique and original theoretical contribution in its consideration of the ideal Millennial through a Foucauldian lens, as she is gendered, raced and classed. This figurative ideal has been an implicit, not explicit, figure in neoliberal feminist critiques, with numerous feminist scholars, such as Budgeon (2011), Rich (2005), Ringrose (2007) and Scharff (2016) having specified that it is "young" women who have been constructed as ideal neoliberal subjects (Rutherford, 2018, p. 619). In *Repudiating Feminism,* Christina Scharff (2012) adopts a discursive approach to contemporary feminist identification through the examination of popular phrases as performances of feminist identity in which race and class are implicated. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) have argued that the ideal neoliberal subject is predominantly middle class (see also Dabrowski, 2021). Furthermore, in her critique of contemporary feminism, Gill (2008) notes that women, particularly White, middle- to upper-class women are uniquely positioned to undertake the 'work-on- the-self' required by the neoliberal regime in order to become the ideal subject. While Gilroy (2013) has demonstrated how entrepreneurial discourses have appealed to members of marginalized communities, Williams (2011) argues that the constitution of neoliberal subjectivities also produces 'Others', and in this way cuts across gendered, raced and classed power dynamics, and raises questions that partially

motivate this research. This is a critical point because neoliberal feminism interpellates a very specific woman in its address. As a political rationality, neoliberal feminism does not produce 'Others' in the same way different variants of feminism do. As my empirical chapters will illustrate, post- and popular feminism[5] occasionally align with neoliberal feminism in that some identities are jointly celebrated for conforming to the ideal, while others are abjected. This has led me to question whether the subject interpellated by postfeminist discourse can be presumed 'liberal'.

Because I am interested in the American societal ideal, my interest is unapologetically directed at women who are aspirational strivers. This is a fundamental trait of the neoliberal woman – one which authorizes high-powered individuals (from Hillary Clinton to Ivanka Trump) to be discursively upheld as ideal types through their desire to create the life they envision through continuous labor and perseverance. Like Rottenberg (2018), I reinforce the claim that a new articulation of feminism is rising, and its formulation is the prerequisite for understanding the 'ideal' American subject. To elaborate, neoliberal feminism engenders a specific subject (the American societal ideal) who – through her constitution by market metrics – is able to further entrench U.S. imperialist logic. I expand Rottenberg's account (that primarily focuses on politicians, journalists and corporate professionals) to include additional contemporary ideal figures, such as entertainment celebrities.

However, I depart from Rottenberg's permutation of the neoliberal ideal in that I do not envision the ideal as increasingly predicated on being able to craft a felicitous work-family balance. In my formulation, I follow the self-as-entrepreneur model (Rose, 1992), because this conceptualization of the figurative ideal aligns with the version of the 'self' that is always looking to alter and diversify assets or modify behaviors – and in the very act of doing so, the ideal is therefore never able to achieve 'balance'. Instead, I further integrate ideas advanced by Michael Feher (2009) and Wendy Brown (2009; 2016) (whose work also serves to underpin Rottenberg's theorization of neoliberal feminism). Specifically, Feher's articulation of neoliberalism's subjective apparatus illustrates how female subjects can be converted into self- investing capital, for instance through

[5] For a more nuanced understanding of the difference between popular, post and neoliberal feminism, see Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020).

the gaining of qualifications (e.g. education, career) that subsequently enable the American Millennial woman to obtain intelligibility, and step forward into visibility. I couple his work with Brown's (2015, p. 177) declaration that neoliberalism has produced a subject through which not only education and career are configured as practices of self-investment, but so too is mate-selection, thereby indicating how neoliberalism is encroaching upon even the most intimate of spheres. In this way, I was better positioned to articulate the inextricable link between the modern social contract and the neoliberal feminist ideal.

In addition to adopting intersectional and Foucauldian lenses, this study is unique in its understanding of the complex ways in which an ideal Millennial feminist subject is being cultivated, especially as she is embedded in the context of popular culture. Popular culture stands out as a primary institution through which the project of neoliberal feminism can proceed with its intervention and makeover of subjectivity. I will now turn my attention to celebrity ideal types.

2.3.3 The Neoliberal Feminist in Popular Culture

Since the turn of the century, feminism has become an increasingly important element of popular culture (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015), with popular media providing a compelling 'index' for the status of neoliberalism (Blouin, 2018). The mass media serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of ideology, educating constituents in "making the 'right' choices" (Negra & Tasker, 2013, p. 348). To illustrate, popular culture and its attractive discourses are spread by the media (through cinema, television, social networks, advertising and celebrities) to coax women toward self-discipline, self-management and constant self-surveillance (Prügl, 2014). The overlap between cultural and economic logics depends on the circular relationship between identity formation and the economy, and generates connectivity between subjectivity and culture (Genz, 2015). This relationship is not only deeply gendered, but also it essentializes and normalizes the differentiation of good choices in relation to the idea of ideal femininity. As previously mentioned, the ideal neoliberal subject has been constructed as a White, privileged woman who works on the self by becoming more educated, qualified and professional. This is exemplified in my own empirical work through the case of Taylor Swift. The notable exceptions to this model, represented by my case selection of Beyoncé Knowles Carter and Kim Kardashian, are spectacularized in the media

to legitimize the effectiveness of the neoliberal ideal as it converges with "the new meritocracy" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 258), which is increasingly traversed by social differentiators such as race and class. The concept of neoliberal feminism facilitates this dissertation's analysis of the role played by celebrities in popular culture, to which I will now turn.

2.3.3.1 Celebrity Feminism

> *"I wish when I was 12 years old and I'd been able to watch a video of my favorite actress explaining in such an intellectual, beautiful, poignant way the definition of feminism because I would have understood it and then earlier on in my life I would have proudly claimed that I was a feminist because I would've understood what the word means"*
> (Swift, 2014 as cited in Robinson, 2014).

In his essay, 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular', Stuart Hall (2020 [1981], p. 348) argued that the study of popular culture should begin with a double stake: the double movement of containment and resistance, which is inevitably inside of it. Building on his work, I view celebrity culture as a terrain for the performance of and struggle over the meanings of ideal Millennial femininity in a moment of neoliberal feminism. By drawing upon theoretical positions that recognize the centrality of celebrity to meaning-making and idea formation in the modern world, I will examine their discursive constructions as a generative center that explains the world's social functioning and its values (Couldry, 2009, p. 441). Celebrity is therefore helpful to understand the way the social world organizes and commodifies its representations, consumption patterns and ideologies. As a means of expression for mass mentality, celebrities can be read as tools of Western liberal democracy (Wesołowski, 2020), particularly as they are constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas.

Congruent with my overall approach is an understanding of celebrity feminism not as an identity, but as a discursive construction that makes available particular kinds of subjectivity (Allen & Mendick, 2013). Celebrity, as it intersects with feminism, functions as a discursive tool for the negotiation of the parameters that define 'feminist' subjects. Celebrity feminism has been richly theorized and critiqued, with key debates organized around questions that ask whether or not celebrity discourses constitute 'legitimate' feminist identities (Cobb, 2015). Within the digital mediascape, questions of authenticity circulate amongst academic, celebrity and popular audiences

(Brady, 2016a; Taylor, 2016), with the blogosphere commanding a distinct space for intense scrutiny of feminist subjectivity (Tennent & Jackson, 2017). Empirical work has been conducted on this nuanced and complex terrain with regard to young women's engagement with celebrity, and how women take up, ignore or reject celebrity feminism (Duits & van Romondt Vis, 2009; Jackson & Vares, 2015). Fewer empirical studies have examined the contributions of celebrity feminism to participation in feminism (Jackson, 2019). There is a glaring absence of audience studies with young women, which Keller and Ringrose (2015) argue is alarming given that they are the targeted demographic of celebrity feminists.

Furthermore, it has been argued that because celebrity is a performative practice, it thereby renders impossible an authentic feminist identity (Brady, 2016a). Because of its circulation across varied media spaces such as television, broadcast media, social media and pop music, contemporary feminism has become popular and cool (Gill, 2016). Some academics and popular commentators understand this as a global resurgence in feminism, while others critique it as 'basic', trendy and apolitical (Jackson, 2019). In *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay (2014) revealed a worry (among feminists) who anticipated that celebrity-branded feminism would undermine feminism by serving as a distraction or by advancing a false narrative. This sentiment was confirmed by empirical research that deemed celebrity feminism less credible and wishy-washy (Kim & Ringrose, 2018). Zeisler (2016) argues that celebrities excel at placing an appealing face on social issues, but the Hollywood machine is one that "runs on neither complexity nor nuance, but cold, hard cash. How much can celebrity feminists do if their prominent voices emanate from within systems – the film, TV, and music industries, for starters – in which gender inequality is a generally unquestioned m.o.?" (2016, p. 133). While celebrities may participate in and perpetuate systems of oppression, Janell Hobson (2016a) responds that Zeisler takes for granted the feminists from other walks of life who are less implicated in exacerbating inequalities, whether they operate in academia, politics or community organizing:

> "Celebrities may be perched at the zenith of raced, gendered, and economic hierarchies, but they are not unique in perpetuating systemic inequalities even if they are powerfully positioned to speak to, for, and with those who have fewer outlets for public discourse" (Hobson, 2016a).

The debates that position an authentic, substantive feminism against a reductive 'celebrity' feminism will be further unpacked in my empirical chapters. More generally, popular feminism refers to widely accessible practices like organizing marches to hashtag activism to consumption habits. Contemporary feminist messages are 'popular' in part to their circulation – they are rendered visible on several media platforms and industries. "It appears on broadcast media, in television and advertising. It appears in popular music. In the contemporary context, it appears perhaps most urgently in social media, with digital sites such as Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter providing platforms for its circulation" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 9).

Not only is celebrity a genre of representation that provides a semiotically rich body of texts and discourses, it is also a discursive effect. For example, Chris Rojek argues that "celebrity = impact on public consciousness" (2001, p. 10). The process of 'celebritization' is widely viewed as transformative, but with varying political significance (Turner, 2010). On the one hand, when situated in post-feminist culture, celebritization can be described as a form of empowerment (which is explicitly discursively illustrated by my empirical cases); on the other hand, celebritization can be seen as a mode of exploitation or objectification (which is implicitly exemplified in my cases). In the extreme, celebritization can produce something close to abjection (which is how I position the case of Kim Kardashian). While politics of the operationalization of celebrity will be conjunctural and contingent, it has the capacity to generate "real-life" consequences (Turner, 2010, p. 14). The more idealistic interpretation of this potential generates demand for *micro*-celebrity, a uniquely Millennial phenomenon. Web 2.0 is a neoliberal technology of subjectivity that gives Millennial women a blueprint of success where social status is predicated on the logic of celebrity (Marwick, 2013). Furthermore, the potential is demonstrated by reality television, which offers the Millennial woman a unique opportunity to subject herself to such a process of transformation. As texts, both reality television and social media accounts will be analyzed in this dissertation in order to understand the construction of ideal femininity in contemporary society. Thus, a Foucauldian approach is warranted, as I hope to move beyond thinking about celebrity as a discrete formation to conceptualizing celebrity as a mediatized repertoire of constructed discourses.

The discursive work of celebrity feminist messages is to mediate perceptions of possibilities for future selfhood (Mendick et al., 2018). As previously mentioned, many scholars have noted that it has become increasingly difficult to understand whether the mediated construction of a celebrity's image can be authentic, but I argue that because their discourse is widely circulated, it warrants critical attention in the way it registers and produces cultural sensibilities. Crucially, when speaking from the position of celebrity, the 'individual' person is not constituted through the discourses of privilege and equality, but meritocracy. I extend Rottenberg's (2018) work to argue that it is through celebrity that we are seeing the reproduction of a specific iteration of feminist ideology that is uniquely neoliberal in its articulation. In my empirical chapters, I will investigate the discourses of three highly visible celebrities to determine how their power and privileged speaking position is underpinned by neoliberal ideals of individualism, and as some may add, consumerism (Dejamnee, 2018).

The individualist feminism of neoliberal consumer culture currently occupies significant terrain in the landscape of celebrity feminism. The contemporary cultural climate in the U.S. is such that women simultaneously re-establish and reinforce their gendered identities as they are able, through acts of self-surveillance and consumption, to express and articulate individuality and 'independence' while maintaining their prevailing identity as feminists. In my Master's dissertation (Rahali, 2014), I took up the concept of 'celebrity' to better understand both how women engage and use consumer culture to self-style, and how neoliberalism can concurrently proceed with its intervention and makeover of subjectivity. Cultural critics identified how individuals had to be taught how to consume (Leiss et al., 2005; Toland & Mueller, 2003). Retail and consumption provided the pathway to a material world which represented possibility and potential, in addition to participation in a wider and more connected culture (Schudson, 1984) – a culture that was intricately intertwined with Hollywood and its stars.

Further to the neoliberal agenda, Graeme Turner (2016) argues that what is most significant about the re-invented media is that it is rooted in the commercial interests of media organizations. Celebrity culture is not an "autochthonous development organically emerging from the people" (Turner, 2016, p. 123), but one that is a product of increasing commercialization. My previous research has examined the ideal 'consumer' that celebrities both construct and embody. In the

aggregate, consumer behavior has significant economic implications because the U.S. economy is driven by consumer spending – it comprises **70%** of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Ryssdal & Hollenhorst, 2020). However, my research was limited in its study of celebrity pedagogy, as its core focus was consumption. Less developed in my own work, and in the critique of consumer culture more broadly, is the pedagogic work performed by celebrities in order to transform a more conservative American culture to a consumer-based culture. The capacity of 'celebrity' to train populations in consumer culture only partially captures their didactic influence and educative power; celebrity culture travels across presentational (social) and representational (mainstream) media, and is co-opted into the capitalist imperatives of the neoliberal culture industries (Marshall, 1997).

In this dissertation, I attempt to build on my previous findings (namely, the capacity of celebrities to embody the transformative power of consumer culture) to better understand the contemporary shift to a wider (and, in the Digital Age, more *pervasive*) production of the self. The constitution of the self implies the mutability of the process, as it is derived from the various permutations of possible discourses that celebrity representations provide for the Millennial woman. Whereas previously I looked at discourses of consumption in the construction of self, I will now turn to understanding the capacity of celebrities to embody the transformative power of neoliberal culture by examining the pattern of key characteristics that can be interpellated by the ideal Millennial constituent as a response to societal crises.

The aforementioned synergies between post-feminism and neoliberalism have been made ever more apparent in the Digital Age through social media platforms. Unlike previous generations, American Millennials are heavily involved in the process of constructing themselves online, most notably by curating their image and identity on social media platforms. I argue that it is through the role of celebrity in this process that research can better illuminate the convergence of neoliberal and feminist ideologies. The performance and the production of 'the self' is at the core of celebrity activity, serving as a "rubric and template for the organization and production of the on-line self which has become at the very least an important component of our presentation of ourselves to the world" (Marshall, 2010, p. 39). There are parallels between the construction of contemporary feminism and contemporary celebrity, in that each owes a debt to digital media for increasing their

visibility, with new opportunities taking place at a greater speed and on a larger scale. However, there is an explicit tension in that both depend on and validate media platforms and organizations, as well neoliberal capitalism; these iterations of digital feminism and celebrity do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constitutive with capitalism), but rather contribute to its normalization and conceit of inevitability. Banet Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020) argue that contemporary 'popular' feminism required a neoliberal capitalist context in order to emerge so forcefully, and crucially so visibly, citing digital media and its affordances for expanded markets and circulation capabilities. The same, I would add, applies to the emergence of modern celebrity.

My three empirical chapters reflect on new visibilities of feminism during the early 21st century through the lens of celebrity. Celebrity culture is a potent site at which the very category of the feminine Millennial is being negotiated and formed in digital spaces. In the U.S., Americans live in a media society that often equates social power with visibility, but it is a visibility that is limited, as it works to "commodify identities within boundaries established by the communications industries" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 35). As an instance of the functioning of those boundaries, within not only the blogosphere but also social networking sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, 'celebrity' has become a widely adopted frame, as well as motivation, for the public and private performance of the self. Following Marwick's (2013) investigation of the cultural production of social status via social media, my research employs a similar celebrity lens to look at discourses of neoliberal feminism in relation to the Millennial. A high status 'feminist' persona online is the product of successful, neoliberal self-branding strategies. Marwick argues that this is directly related to the affordances of the Internet:

> "Web 2.0 is a neoliberal technology of subjectivity that teaches users how to succeed in postmodern American consumer capitalism. Social media not only demonstrates the lessons of white-collar business success by rewarding flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and risk-taking; it also provides a blueprint of how to prosper in a society where social status is predicated on the cultural logic of celebrity" (Marwick, 2013, p. 14).

Banet-Weiser also connects the neoliberal focus on individualism and self-reinvention to the technologies in use, noting that social media centers the representation of the self to others, and thereby contributes to a culture of "celebrity, materialism and entitlement" (Banet-Weiser, 2012,

p. 87). Identity is performed according to a set of social conditions, and the practice of performativity has become less of a choice in the Digital Age, and more of an expectation among the Millennial cohort, as 88% use social media daily (Cox, 2019). To Marwick (2013), what emerges from celebrity is how they have internalized the culture's proscription of the desired self; in my analysis, this translates as a discursive construction of the ideal neoliberal subject. This ideal subject is most apparent in the Digital Age, in which a particular persona – one that is highly visible, entrepreneurial and self-configured for consumption – is not only idealized, but also rewarded.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I summarized the literature on generations, feminism and celebrity in order to better situate the ideal neoliberal Millennial woman within the current social landscape. The body of literature in each area is vast; the purpose of this review was not only to identify germinal work by employing an expansive and contextual approach to current articulations and tensions in the field, but also locate omissions.

To date, Millennials have been looked at from various angles as an ontological entity with little reflection on how they have been discursively constructed. Thus, understanding the Millennial through a Foucauldian lens will make a unique and original theoretical contribution. The starting point for my analysis is the Foucauldian idea that power works through the production of subjects. Because I am specifically interested in the way the ideal Millennial subject is gendered, my research focuses on the ways by which contemporary femininity is produced and reproduced in culture. I have argued that the Millennial is a part of a larger power nexus in which certain practices and ideas of modern womanhood are normalized. My perspective is unique in that the generational literature has not fully examined the cross-over between generations and feminism, and even less work has been done on the gendered Millennial subject as she is situated within media and celebrity popular culture. While she is imagined as the implicit figure in feminist critiques over the past two decades, research has not explicitly focused on the Millennial woman, as she is constituted through celebrity discourses. This draws attention to the lacuna in the literature that my study aims to fill. This dissertation represents a valuable and original contribution to discussions on neoliberal feminism in relation to the Millennial in celebrity culture – as she is gendered, raced and classed.

The significant feature of this research is pairing the literature of media studies, generation studies and feminist studies with intersectional analysis.

The following chapter describes the methods employed to answer the question that asks how the ideal Millennial constituent is produced, and reproduced, in contemporary American society as a gendered response to crisis in a neoliberal age. Multimodal analysis will be applied to the discursive formation of contemporary feminism's ideal types to better understand the challenges and opportunities that arise when a selection of feminist values appears to be inscribed within a more determined attempt – undertaken by both political and cultural forces – to re-shape notions of femininity so that it complements the requirements of the neoliberal agenda. The methodological design of the study was derived from the conceptual need to forgo unrestrained truth claims and judgments about an individual, instead opting to focus on the ways by which the ideal Millennial subject discursively emerges to achieve epistemological coherence. The following section also justifies the selection of my empirical cases, whose spectacularly visibility offers a way to interrogate how popular discourses are constructed, and how they participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to.

Chapter Three: Methodological Approach to Analysis

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explicate the study's methodological features, assess the quality of the data collected and evaluate the appropriateness of the analytical strategy for answering the research question. As such, the methodological rationale is explained, the study's procedures and sites are described and the analytical strategy is discussed. In each empirical chapter, the interpretation of the analysis is presented in narrative form. The research design not only draws on methodological literature from generations, media and communications and gender studies, but has also been developed in light of previous empirical work and pilot studies.

The motivating question behind this research study is to understand how the ideal Millennial constituent is produced, and reproduced, in contemporary American popular culture as a gendered

response to crisis in a neoliberal age. As previously discussed, the starting point for my analysis is the Foucauldian idea that power works through the production of subjects. I argue that the Millennial is a part of a larger power nexus in which certain practices, ideas and ways of living are normalized. The social construction of contemporary femininity has material effects, thereby warranting an exploration of the ways in which gender is currently represented by ideal figures and hegemonic femininities. I ask under what historical conditions the Millennial has come to achieve epistemological coherence, and seek to understand the forces (such as the crises, and the rise of digital technology) and beliefs (anchored in contemporary neoliberal feminism) that have generated such coherence, along with the consequences.

As indicated in the literature review, the Millennial has been looked at from various angles as an ontological entity, with little reflection on how she has been discursively constructed. Neoliberal feminism is the central framework through which I theorize the ideal Millennial constituent, and is used to not only contextualize the emergence of this figure, but also uncover how power is produced and reproduced through truth claims about her. In this dissertation, a genealogy is employed to understand the emergence of discourses and how they come to achieve epistemological coherence. Foucauldian discourse analysis is used to better understand truth claims about the Millennial and uncover how power is produced and reproduced through the construction of this figure. Foucault offers not a structured 'methodology' of genealogy, but rather a set of profound methodological suspicions to knowledge (Hook, 2005). In other words, the genealogical method is one of suspicion and critique. The strength of applying a Foucauldian frame lies in its ability to disrupt the narrative and offer alternative ways of viewing new futures (Koopman, 2013, p. 21); following the completion of data analysis, I am thus set up to conduct a thought experiment whereby I reconstruct the present in an effort to yield better futures.

As such, this chapter proceeds as follows: I first situate the relevance of my research question in relation to extant literature. I provide an account of the methodological design, its strengths and weaknesses, and its appropriateness for answering my research question. I then move to clarify the main features of the research design and justify the choice of sampling and data collection materials, and consider its limitations. Following this, I give an account of how I will analyze the

data, before concluding with an assessment of the ethical procedures of the research and a reflexive statement about my role in the research process.

3.2 Foucauldian Genealogy

In *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault (1981) fashions that in every society, the production of discourse is selected, organized, redistributed and controlled in accordance with a number of procedures. Foucault's genealogical method informs my research in its consideration of the representations and cultural manifestations of the Millennial in contemporary culture as constituting a discursive site for the production of knowledge.

From Foucault's (1984) point of view, discourse is a representation of terminologies, codes or conventions that create cultural meanings that are historically located, which then translate into discursive practices. A discursive formation is then the result of discursive practices that define what has been legitimized in a particular society and endows meaning to a particular historical moment. However, in order to avoid certain shortcomings of discourse analysis, I will also combine discourse analysis with genealogy. For the purposes of this research, I fundamentally employ genealogy to foreground the historical entry of forces (Hook, 2007), and as such it is used strategically; genealogy is tactical, rather than unconditional, with regard to the truth. History becomes 'effective' insofar as it deprives stability. To quote Foucault (1984, p.88): "Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting". Genealogy disturbs formerly secure foundations of knowledge and understanding; however, this is not done in order to substitute an alternate, and more stable foundation, but rather to produce an awareness of the fragility, contingency and complexity of historical forms (Smart, 1983). Ros Gill's (2003) work, "Power and the Production of Subjects" has been particularly helpful in furthering my understanding of this method. With regard to my project, the procedures of genealogy should lead me to produce alternative ways of viewing the Millennial, while enforcing an awareness that things have not always been as they are.

The strategic utility of employing a Foucauldian genealogy lies in its ability to provide historical analyses that problematize the mechanisms of power, forms of rationality, discourse and

subjectivity that dominate the field of media and communications studies, research, policy and practice (Hook, 2005). History is therefore used by genealogists not to explain how things 'have always been' but to offer alternative ways of viewing to chart new futures; if the present is reconstructed to yield better futures, a grip on the materials out of which the present has been constructed from the past is essential (Koopman, 2013). Perhaps it is this diagnostic grip that is the greatest advantage of genealogy. Genealogy is employed neither to reassure the necessity and virtue of current thinking, policy and practice, nor to eschew current reforms and projects and their benefits, but as a tool of critique that not only disrupts, but also undermines it. A particular strength of applying a Foucauldian genealogy – which will be further explored in the seventh chapter – is that as a method, new possibilities of thinking, perceiving and acting are exposed (Hook, 2005). Genealogy opens a space to enable both thought experiments and concrete changes that can transform power relations and forms of existence. In this sense, one of the limitations is that genealogy works not in the service of a universal emancipatory project, but as a much more localized form of resistance. The method does not purport to offer prescriptions for resistance or programs of reform; but rather is, in itself, a practice of resistance, as strategic knowledge is produced which has the potential to open up available avenues for the practice of freedom (McNay, 1994). In other words, it is the practice of navigating power relations in ways that keep them open and dynamic, thus allowing for the development of alternative modes of thought and existence. In this regard, the work of Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism* (2013) has proved inspirational for my thinking.

A genealogical approach will allow me to move beyond the level of the individual text in order to tie discourse to the motive and operations of varied power-interests. If I were to approach my research question using only discourse analysis, and without reference to the underwriting conditions of what constitutes 'knowledge' of the Millennial, I would only be able to make isolated comments with reference to the text under analysis. In turn, this limits the generalizability and political relevance of my analysis. By remaining within a particular text, I could run the risk of lacking reference to a broader perspective where material and institutional instances of power come to be intimately connected to textual elements. I explore the constitutive role of such cultural manifestations in effecting a discourse that both forms and transforms knowledge, and creates a space that establishes certain statements as truthful and legitimate, while rendering others

illegitimate and deviant (Orgad, 2009). Crucially, my analysis of discourse, then, will be driven through the extra-discursive. My study of discourse will entail a focus on discourse as historical, discourse as knowledge, and discourse as a matter of the socio-political conditions under which statements about the Millennial achieve coherence. This is necessary to flag now, or else the predominance of the historical discussion in the empirical chapters may appear distanced from issues of the applied methodology.

As I noted in Chapter One and Chapter Two, Millennials are permeated by statements that are contradictory (e.g., Generation Me and Generation We), thereby exhibiting a hierarchical composition and operating to reinforce certain types of subjectivities (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2014). Characterizations and representations are created; thus, I will explore how the Millennial has been, and continues to be, constructed by academics, political entities, corporate interests, media industries and even by the Millennial herself—in varying ways, and with varying degrees of influence.

Using multimodal analysis, I examine the ideal Millennial's discursive construction across three intensely mediated and highly popular feminine subjects – Taylor Swift, Beyoncé Knowles Carter and Kim Kardashian – because I seek to examine the characteristics and expectations that have been most widely conveyed by the celebrities whose public platform offers a model of how to prosper in a society where success is predicated on the logic of neoliberalism. My three empirical cases shed light on American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed, and offer a way to interrogate how popular discourses participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to. I will now turn to providing the rationale behind the use of a celebrity lens for examining my topic.

3.3 Case Studies

As a method, case studies can make a valuable contribution to research if composed within a common framework (in this case, neoliberal feminism), and follow a structured analysis (George & Bennet, 2005). For case studies to contribute to advancing knowledge and theory, it is crucial

that the cases "explore the same phenomenon", "pursue the same research goal", "adopt equivalent research strategies", and "ask the same set of standardized questions" (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012, p.13). As such my empirical research stands to make a contribution through its exploration of the same phenomenon (e.g., how the ideal subject is produced and reproduced in American society); its pursuit of the same research goal (e.g., to show that traditional markers of adulthood have not become delayed for the Millennials who conform to the ideals espoused by the neoliberal social contract); its adoption of equivalent research strategies (e.g., the application of multimodal analysis to each case's discursive construction); and its application of similar questions (e.g., how do popular discourses participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to).

For the methodological purposes of this dissertation, a case study is defined as an in-depth study of a single unit with an aim to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena (Gerring, 2004). In this research project, I examine three celebrity cases: Taylor Swift, Beyoncé Knowles Carter and Kim Kardashian. Following Hague and Harrop (2010, p.45), I justify my selections as "representative" (e.g., Taylor Swift), "prototypical" (e.g., Beyoncé), and Kim is a unique case that transitions from "deviant" to "exemplary".

The coding framework has allowed for rigorous, systematic comparison, and will help accomplish the critical step of moving from 'description' to 'explanation'. At times the cases read as descriptive texts, but this 'process tracing' (George & Bennet, 2005) allows for the examination of multiple sources in order to make claims about the relationship between variables (e.g., socio-demographic characteristics) in a case. What distinguishes the case study method from others is its reliance on trying to illuminate features of a broader set of units (as captured by my broad global themes that relate to independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention), while at the same time demonstrating covariation by a single unit (illustrated by my intersectional study that examines American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed).

Cases have been selected based on age (e.g., because they are Millennials) and gender, as well as differentiating factors such as race and class. As mentioned in the literature review, there are many approaches to intersectionality. For the purposes of my analysis, I will draw on McCall (2005, pp.

1773-1774), who identifies three distinct approaches. The first, the 'intra-categorial' approach, draws from Crenshaw to examine smaller groups that had not previously been analyzed. Because it displaces the focus from larger social processes and structures that underpin inequality, it is not congruent with my overall approach in this particular study. The second approach is 'anti-categorical' and considers stable categories to be problematic in reifying social relations. As a result, it prioritizes fluidity over stability. The disadvantage to this approach for my study is that it makes practical analysis more difficult, as my interest is very much rooted in stable categories that help understand how the ideal Millennial woman – as she is gendered, raced and classed – is constructed. The third, and more appropriate approach for my critical analysis, is 'inter-categorical' which adopts existing analytical categories in order to not only document relationships of inequality among social groups, but also document changing configurations of inequality among multiple and conflicting dimensions. In other words, my interest is in giving attention to inequalities within the category, not only between them. I will now further explain the rationale behind each case selection.

3.3.1 Case One: Taylor Swift

As outlined in the literature review, contemporary feminism has become trendy. To elaborate further, 'trendy' feminism in the U.S. has oftentimes been equated with 'White' feminism, a point of view that fails to acknowledge what feminism means for a diverse range of women experiencing inequality in various forms, as previously discussed in the section on intersectionality. The celebrity embodiment of this trendy, popular feminism can be rendered visible by the discursive construction of pop star Taylor Swift. Having been in the spotlight since 2004, Taylor's career trajectory serves as proof that the formula for success in the U.S. still works, despite the turbulent economic upheavals. For a generation that is not only struggling to find its identity, but is also facing a profound lack of security in linear progress and mobility, her narrative of success provides a solution. However, this is a solution for a very particular ideal type of Millennial woman – one who is White, heterosexual, and middle-class.

3.3.2 Case Two: Beyoncé Knowles Carter

Through her work, Beyoncé illuminates how women are intricately connected intergenerationally and intragenerationally through historical chains of overlapping understandings of femininity. She is one of the most visible performers in hip hop music, and her discursive construction shapes in significant ways what it means to be a successful Black Millennial, and what it means to be an independent and empowered modern woman and mother more broadly. Beyoncé offers a model response to both the financial and reproductive crises, in that her discursive construction demonstrates the normalized way to 'have it all' – which is a*fter* establishing a career and getting married. Her discursive construction is analyzed as a site of both cultural and political agency that asserts certain principles of femininity – as it is gendered and raced – and in doing so, she reframes the Black maternal from a negative state of crisis to a more positive, legitimate social influence. Not only does Beyoncé offer a solution to the current reproduction crisis, but also her discursive construction still speaks to a neoliberal ethos that further advances the rhetoric of meritocracy and self-governing.

3.3.3 Case Three: Kim Kardashian

Because her rise to fame is not predicated on a perceived talent or aptitude in a given field, Kim's discursive construction can be read as 'deviant' when compared to the 'representative' and 'protypical' cases of Taylor and Beyoncé. Drawing on the concept of respectability to analyze Kim's construction, I locate her emergence within the historical trajectory of gender, race and class within the U.S. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how her behavior is judged in comparison to norms that idealize performances of upper-middle class womanhood and femininity. I thus treat Kim's discursive formation as a site that defines and delineates the type of femininity that has been rendered deviant in American culture.

Dismissed in popular culture as trashy, vulgar and narcissistic (or the anti-feminist), the media savvy (former) porn star and her family have come to represent a microcosm of uniquely 21st century, shallow, self-obsessed Millennial Internet-based pop culture. In that respect, Kim is not only a powerful, but formidable figure to analyze. I posit that of my three cases, Kim is the celebrity whose success would not have been possible prior to the Digital Age. As previously

mentioned, Web 2.0 is a neoliberal technology of subjectivity that gives Millennial women a blueprint of how to prosper in a society where social status is predicated on the cultural logic of celebrity (Marwick, 2013). Kim's ability to sell 'herself' is made possible in part because she emerged in a late-capitalist, neoliberal society that emphasizes individualism. I argue that she has sustained her presence as a public figure because she provides a strategy for Millennial women to respond to the lack of market opportunities by finding alternative paths for achievement. While Kim lacks a formal education, her discursive construction is the formulation of the ideal American worker who pulls herself up from her bootstraps after hardship by exhibiting a clear, relentless commitment to paid work. Her discursive formation speaks to a contemporary cultural climate that encourages Millennials to become successful and empowered by means of opportunism and self-promotion. In doing so, Kim offers a solution to the crisis of education and class, and transitions from being a 'deviant' to 'exemplary' case.

3.4 Methodological Design

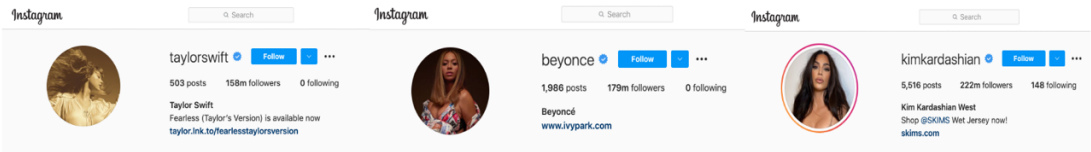
3.4.1 Data Collection

Because this research seeks to understand how neoliberalism's ideal constituents are constituted through discourse, the use of text-based data sources is congruent with my overarching methodological approach. Multiple interpretations of a text can be recognized, understood and valued, and analysis can illuminate cultural phenomena occurring within the historical and sociopolitical time in which the texts were created. When making the initial selection of texts, I asked how they connect with the contemporary moment – specifically, how do they reflect or reject the views of society, and how does a text connect with similar texts. For the purposes of this research project, texts consist of songs, albums, performances, films, documentaries, television shows, social media, interviews and advertisements. Because of my approach, I examined messages in the text to better understand how discourses around generational values, beliefs and norms are either reified or contested.

3.4.2 Selection of Media Texts

As a discourse, the pervasiveness of neoliberal feminism entails analysis across a range of sites, and my selection of texts therefore includes multiple genres of media. Crucially, I consider the texts to be both universal and specific in that each particular text is a unique enactment of a discourse that cannot exist outside the enactment of texts (Chouliaraki, 2006). In other words, even though the discourse is articulated within the confines of a specific genre, it transcends boundaries by speaking to a broader repertoire. To illustrate, the social media site of Instagram is but one space that works to form part of a wider discursive regime circulating across popular culture. When taken together with news media (such as interviews) and other traditional media (such as film and television), these texts help make sense of the complex configurations of contemporary representations of ideal neoliberal femininity in American popular culture. However, this study is limited in that it would be nearly impossible to encompass the socio-cultural landscape of discourses on neoliberal femininity.

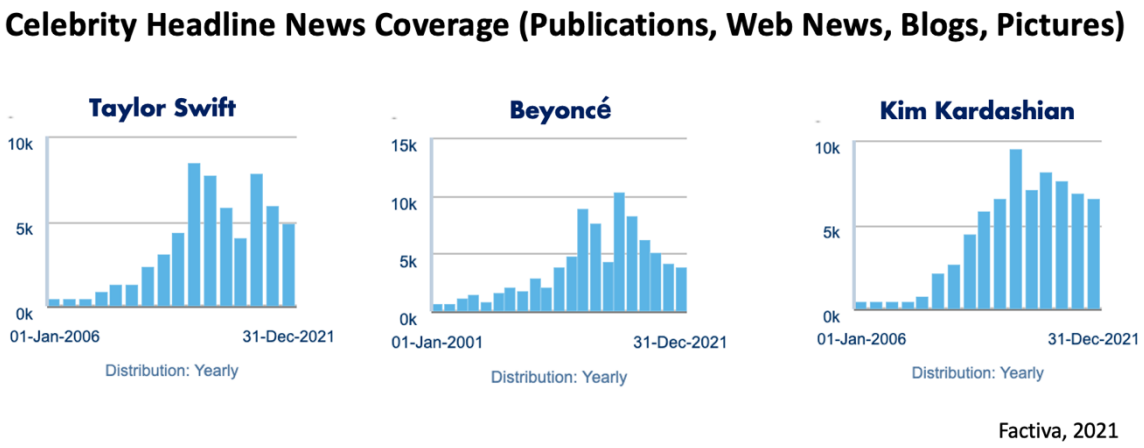
Following Orgad (2020), I argue that connecting cultural and media discourses with personal (or in this case, public figure) discourses is critical for scholarship in the field of media and communications, and serves to cement neoliberal rationality through representational coherence. The texts and the celebrities that have been chosen for analysis have been selected primarily due to their popularity and ability to reach a large audience. For example, when I began this project, each of my celebrity cases had amassed over 100 million followers, and as of June 2021, each has a following of at least 150 million (see Figure 1.1).



(Figure 1.1)

To find the relevant texts for analysis, I examined top search engine results, news databases (such as Factiva), and social media sites to uncover the most liked (or most circulated) posts, and read

the reviews and popular discourse surrounding the release of the celebrities' promoted products or artwork. I began conducting fieldwork in 2016 and continued through 2018. As indicated by the following graph generated by Factiva (Figure 1.2), this time period also coincided with the peak moments in each celebrity's media coverage (as measured by headline mention).



(Figure 1.2)

Because these numbers do not capture autobiographical blogs or social media results, I paid particular attention to the artist's self-produced sites, books and documentaries, viewing these texts as alternative forms of knowledge that have the potential to challenge the more dominant, hegemonic mass media constructions. As such, the bulk of my coded dataset reflects the material that was produced by the celebrity. In the case of Taylor, I coded her Instagram account (Figure 1.3); for Beyoncé, I coded her lyrics, with a particular emphasis on the hit singles that were released each album (Figure 1.4); and in the case of Kim Kardashian, I coded her foremost reality television series, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (KUWTK) (Figure 1.5).

Instagram (www.instagram.com/taylorswift) *All previous posts deleted on August 18th, 2017.

Date	Text	Tag	Comment	Code
8/21/17	Video	Snake	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
8/22/17	Video	Snake	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
8/23/17	Video	Snake	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
8/23/17	Photo	Single Release	Promotional Teaser	Actualization
8/23/17	Photo	Album Cover	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
8/23/17	Photo	Album Intro	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
8/24/17	Video	New Single	Promotional Teaser	Actualization
8/24/17	Video	New Single	Promotional Teaser	Actualization
8/24/17	Photo	Release	Promotional Teaser	Actualization
8/25/17	Photo	Album Magazine	Promotional Material	Actualization
8/25/17	Video	#LWYMMD	VMA Teaser	Reinvention
8/25/17	Photo	Album Magazine	Promotional Material	Actualization
9/3/17	Video	Reputation Album	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
9/3/17	Video	Reputation Album	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
9/3/17	Video	Reputation Album	Promotional Teaser	Reinvention
9/7/17	Video	Behind the Scenes	Cookie Dough Ad	Actualization
9/7/17	Video	Behind the Scenes	Plays with Cat	Individualization
10/19/17	Photo	Available now	Promotional Material	Actualization
10/19/17	Video	Plug for Gorgeous	Promotional Material	Actualization
10/19/17	Photo	Release	Promotional Material	Actualization
10/23/17	Video	Ready for It video	Promotional Teaser	Actualization
10/23/17	Video	Ready for It video	Promotional Teaser	Actualization
10/23/17	Video	Ready for It video	Promotional Teaser	Actualization
10/26/17	Photo	Ready for It still	Promotional Material	Reinvention
10/26/17	Photo	Ready for It still	Promotional Material	Reinvention
10/26/17	Photo	Ready for It still	Promotional Material	Reinvention
11/1/17	Photo	Behind the Scenes	Promotional Material	Actualization
11/1/17	Photo	Behind the Scenes	Promotional Material	Actualization

(Figure 1.3)

Recording Albums (www.beyonce.com/album) *Singles color coded

Year	Album	Track	Code
2003	Dangerously in Love	Crazy in Love	Love/Playfulness
2003	Dangerously in Love	Naughty Girl	Love/Playfulness
2003	Dangerously in Love	Baby Boy	Love/Playfulness
2003	Dangerously in Love	Hip Hop Star	Love/Playfulness
2003	Dangerously in Love	Be With You	Love/Intimacy
2003	Dangerously in Love	My, Myself and I	Relationships/Sadness
2003	Dangerously in Love	Yes	Relationships/ Communication
2003	Dangerously in Love	Signs	Love/ Attributes
2003	Dangerously in Love	Speechless	Love/Playfulness
2003	Dangerously in Love	That's How You Like It	Love/Playfulness
2003	Dangerously in Love	The Closer I Get to You	Love/Playfulness
2003	Dangerously in Love	Dangerously in Love 2	Love/Relationships/Growth
2003	Dangerously in Love	Beyonce Interlude	Love
2003	Dangerously in Love	Gift from Virgo	Love
2003	Dangerously in Love	Daddy	Father-Daughter Relationships
2006	B'Day	Beautiful Liar	Relationships/Dishonesty
2006	B'Day	Irrepleceable	Resilience
2006	B'Day	Green Light	Relationships/Moving On
2006	B'Day	Kitty Kat	Relationships/ Letting Go
2006	B'Day	Welcome to Hollywood	Sexual Playfulness
2006	B'Day	Upgrade U	Relationships/Confidence
2006	B'Day	Flaws and All	Relationships/ Communication
2006	B'Day	Get me Bodied (Extended)	Playfulness
2006	B'Day	Freakum Dress	Playfulness
2006	B'Day	Suga Mama	Playfulness
2006	B'Day	Déjà Vu	Playfulness
2006	B'Day	Ring the Alarm	Jealousy/Competition
2006	B'Day	Resentment	Relationships/ Resentment
2008	I am... Sasha Fierce	If I were a Boy	Gender
2008	I am... Sasha Fierce	Halo	Love/Strength

(Figure 1.4)

Keeping Up With the Kardashians *Available from iTunes

Season	Episode	Key Moments	Code
1	1	Appearance Tyra Banks show/ Confessional	Remake of self
1	2	The introduction to the work of a 'Momager'	Business
1	3	Self branding through work on the body; GGW shoot in Mexico	Business
1	4	Discussion and deliberation on whether to maintain brand coherence through business offers	Business
1	5	Tribute to late father, Robert Kardashian	Family
1	6	Pregnancy Test	Family
1	7	Dating adventures, Charitable acts	Family
1	8	Lost purse, nude photos, FBI	Family
2	1	The price of fame; reconfigured antics, family vacation	Family
2	2	New love; healthy eating	Family
2	3	Khloe's new career; Work ethic; Bruce make-over	Business
2	4	Work invitation; injury; the coming into adulthood	Family
2	5	Money making and work ethic; playing match-maker	Family
2	6	Incident at DASH; Self defense class	Family
2	7	Family clashes; Bruce on verge of mid-life crisis	Family
2	8	Family clashes; Bruce struggles with aging	Family
2	9	Bruce's motivational speech; Kim's photoshoot	Business
2	10	New Orleans visit; Kardashians help Single Mom in charitable giving	Family

(Figure 1.5)

Figures 1.3-1.5 are illustrative extracts of my Excel dataset. Full coding comprised of 836 photos and 130 videos on Instagram; 86 songs; and 248 episodes of reality television. These texts were assessed to determine whether the discourse corresponded to the core tenets of neoliberal feminism: independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention, along with additional codes that specifically arose with each celebrity case, as she is gendered, raced and classed. Because I am also trying to better understand how this ideal figure is a response to crisis, I was attentive to new themes that emerged, such as entrepreneurship, adaptability and resilience. Taylor's Instagram account has been coded through December 31st, 2018. The last Beyoncé album to be coded was

Lemonade (2016), and as a result, *Everything is Love* (2018) is not included. This year marks the series finale of KUWTK (Season 20), but all of my coding was completed before the start of Season 18. I acknowledge that the selection is limited in that it is neither exhaustive nor representative. However, the coding enabled me to take a more targeted approach to the selection of examples for more detailed discourse and visual analysis. These illustrative examples are fewer in number, but indicate significance as they are situated in a wider discursive repertoire.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

On the social theory level, the empirical analytics of this dissertation address the role of popular culture in shaping contemporary communications discourse. On the methodological level, multimodal analysis will be applied to the aforementioned media texts in order to determine how each celebrity figure embodies neoliberal feminist sensibilities, and what elements she articulates and concurrently disavows. Multimodality is the "use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20), thereby allowing for the complexities of the text to be more fully addressed. All signs, in all modes, are considered meaningful in a social-semiotic multimodal account of meaning. Social semiotics allows something to be said about the function of each of the modes in a multimodal text; about the relation of those modes to each other; and about the main entities of the text (Kress, 2010).

Having discussed the celebrity cases and selection of media texts, I will now outline the methods that were applied to analyze the collected multimodal data. This chapter will conclude with an elaboration on the development of the coding frame, along with ethical reflections.

3.4.3.1 Thematic Analysis

It should be noted that prior to conducting content, discourse and visual analysis, I carried out thematic analysis to identify and categorize prominent themes in the data. As previously mentioned, the media texts that were selected were chosen on account of their popularity, wide circulation, or for being a noteworthy text that functions to make sense of the complex configurations of contemporary representations of ideal neoliberal femininity in American popular culture. A thematic analysis allowed for a very large corpus of data to be refined according to

prominent themes. In addition, I was better able to search for patterns in the text. As indicated by Figures 1.3-1.5, data was manually input into an Excel spreadsheet and thematically analyzed. I took both an inductive and deductive approach to systematically code the selected media texts. These codes served to inform which texts were then selected for deeper discourse or visual analysis.

Following Hansen (1998, p. 119), the naming of the codes resulted from both the theoretical framework and preliminary immersion in the textual material, and as such, the coding frame reflects the three global themes that correspond to the core traits of the neoliberal ideal that I had initially identified – independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention – and will be further discussed at the end of this chapter. Additional codes were generated from a close reading of the data. Unnecessary codes were removed and the codes were refined to ensure that they were comprehensive. As such, more basic and organizing codes were subsumed by global themes. Following a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I was able to see crucial additional codes emerge from the text that had not previously been drawn from the original theoretical framework and literature. I was attentive to moments of disruption, and closely considered their potential implications with regard to my analysis. In my accounting for a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, I also discovered patterns of entrepreneurship (specifically as it relates to feminist 'solidarity'), adaptability and resilience – discourses that could have possibly been activated to provide a response to a time of crisis. The codes emerged from a mapping of media texts (such as social media accounts, news interviews, documentaries, performances and product promotion) and linking themes through their connections and patterns. This was a particularly fruitful exercise in that it allowed for a clearer understanding of the way mediated images come to achieve epistemological coherence.

3.4.3.2 Content Analysis

As a widely used method in the study of media and popular culture, content analysis is a systematic, quantitative approach to analyzing text. Content analysis is used in this study as a *descriptive* approach; I take up theories advanced by Gill (2007) and Rottenberg (2018) and apply them to empirical work by using content analysis to examine Taylor Swift's Instagram account,

Beyoncé's lyrics, and Kim's reality television series. This allowed for a broader sketch of the number of texts that operate in the service of neoliberalism and represent hegemonic ideals of contemporary femininity. This section provides a brief overview of content analysis as it intersects with social media research.

The emergence of social media technologies has been embraced by an increasing number of users who post texts, pictures and videos online (Duggan et al., 2015). Furthermore, the combination of the production and consumption of user-generated content has garnered the attention of researchers interested in understanding social media and its role in society. Social media offers researchers a novel opportunity to harvest not only a large, but also a diverse range of content. Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to this area, evidenced by the volume of articles produced that examine social media.

Digital architecture varies by social media platform. In other words, one site, such as Twitter, does not contain the same possibilities for the presentation and expression of the self as another, such as Facebook. Instagram, with its added emphasis on the visual, has become an ideal space for American Millennial women to construct the 'self'. For this dissertation, I examined Taylor's Instagram account with a focus on images that are consistent with contemporary hegemonic ideals of femininity. This fieldwork was completed in December 2016. Coding was done prior to August 18th, 2017, when Taylor deleted all social posts and profile images across her Instagram account. The account was coded and analyzed for its content. Content analysis was applied to 836 photos and 130 videos to allow for a better understanding of Taylor's 'project of the self' – which, in the specific context of Millennial and digital activity, is one in which young women perform a narrative of themselves to an audience in order to maintain control and achieve coherence in the construction of their identity. The construction of the self is not done in isolation, but is rather situated in a media and cultural ecology that involves a dynamic between the self and an audience (real or imagined), or in the specific case of Instagram, between image and video content and the audience. This dynamic is fruitful for this dissertation on account of its gendered nature. That is, if Millennials are now in the process of constructing an online self, this means negotiating power relations and crafting a feminine identity in such a way that it can be consumed and understood by the viewers. In doing so, empowerment comes to be understood in a context that not only validates

its specific logic, but also makes specific definitions of power (and its limitations) legible in the first place. Instagram users draw on the utility of the platform as a mainstream commercial website and promotional vehicle to distribute images and videos that rely on societally ingrained narratives about gender identity and the feminine. As such, the three tenets of neoliberal feminism (independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention) have guided the creation of the coding frame for analysis.

Content analysis was also done on 86 Beyoncé songs (across six albums), as well as Kim's 17 seasons of KUWTK, which comprised of 248 episodes. However, additional noteworthy codes and patterns emerged in relation to the celebrity figures, as they are raced and classed. Beyoncé's discourse was coded to better understand how her construction has placed the Black feminine subject squarely at the heart, and arguably in the service of, the neoliberal imagination. I argue that her discourses offer a model response to both the financial and reproductive crises through an emphasis on building a foundation for stability – both economic and marital. As such, codes that emerged – such as career, relationships and lifestyle options – solidify such interrelated markers of neoliberal success, thereby cementing the logic behind traditional markers of adulthood.

I have identified two additional codes that I will go on to argue are crucial to the successful reconfiguration of Kim's discursive construction: an emphasis on 'family values' and 'business acumen'. I then moved to apply discourse analysis and visual analysis to critical points in the trajectory of Kim's career in order to identify the unique ability of her discursive construction to push the boundaries that had previously constrained her hyper-sexualized public image, and to enable her to perform the identity work necessary to move towards a higher social standing as a successful entrepreneur and businesswoman.

From the outset, I will admit that I did not seek to claim significance from the coding project, nor did I endeavor to seek a second coder to secure inter-coder reliability. One limitation of this coding process is that I went into data collection and analysis with a specific research agenda, and utilized a particular framework and approach. As such, it is possible for someone who is not applying an intersectional lens to neoliberal feminism to interpret the texts in a remarkably different way. The

purpose of this broader, and more quantitative sketch, was to aid in selection of texts for more in-depth analysis.

3.4.3.3 (Critical) Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is understood in a range of different ways across the social sciences, and can be viewed as a contested disciplinary terrain where various theoretical notions and analytical practices compete. In this dissertation, there are times when discourse analysis is a convenient label for the practice of analyzing text which can include a variety of approaches – from narrative analysis to visual analysis. At other times, I will apply discourse analysis as a more fully-fledged, critical analytic position. From the outset, I acknowledge that segments of my empirical chapters may appear more descriptive. However, considering the vast amount of data, these selections are not merely descriptive, but involve more careful selections and exclusions in order to advance a persuasive argument. Furthermore, I justify this decision by following Gee (2010, p. 8) who argues that there are two forms of discourse analysis: descriptive and critical. When I apply descriptive discourse analysis, I am seeking to understand how discourse functions to make meaning in specific contexts, and how meaning is made in certain ways and not others.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) goes further than meaning making, and seeks to understand the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power relations within social structures. Within media studies, CDA has arguably become the standard framework for studying texts (Bell & Garrett, 1998, p. 6). Discourse analysis is used to explore relationships between discursive practices and wider socio-cultural structures and processes (Fairclough, 1995). It is a text-based method that seeks to "investigate how texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132).

I follow Wodak and Meyer (2001) who emphasize the importance of taking into account four contextual levels: the immediate use; the relationship between texts; the institutional context of discourse; and the sociopolitical and historical contexts. CDA is applied to each of my three cases, and I have chosen it as the primary method to investigate my research problem because I intend to examine how neoliberal feminism has given rise to the conditions through which the ideal

Millennial feminine is produced. Focusing primarily on social problems and political issues, CDA allows for an analysis of the way discourses legitimize, reproduce or contest power (Fairclough, 1995).

As previously mentioned, the initial coding that was applied to the data served to inform which texts were then selected for an in-depth discourse analysis. Texts were also selected because they helped make sense of the complex configurations of contemporary representations of ideal neoliberal femininity in American popular culture. For example, as a popular text that has been regularly deployed in broader discursive struggles over feminism and femininity, the movie *Charlie's Angels* – along with the theme song by Beyoncé and *Destiny's Child* (Independent Women, 2000), offer a particularly appropriate venue for my analysis.

CDA is not a specific direction of research with a unitary theoretical or methodological framework. Rather, critical discourse analysts aim to offer a different type of perspective (whether theoretical, analytical or applied), through the exploration of the role of discourse in the production – and reproduction – of power relations within social structures (Wooffitt, 2005). As a perspective on social life, CDA involves thinking about discourse (the theoretical elements), and ways of treating discourse as data (methodological elements), and involves a number of assumptions that are important in their own right as a foundation for doing discourse analytic research. To reiterate, it is not easy to precisely delineate the unique aims, principles, practices and theories or methods of CDA. However, in order to realize its aims, any CDA research work should satisfy a number of requirements.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) outline basic principles or tenets of CDA that are useful for my empirical analysis. Firstly, my topic is problem- or issue-oriented in that it seeks to understand discursive responses to societal crises. In order to adequately study contemporary social problems, my project is multidisciplinary, and lies at the intersection of media, gender and generation studies. Through its celebrity lens, my dissertation focuses especially on relations of ideal power and dominance, and the ways these are reproduced through the ideal figure, as she is gendered, raced and classed. Much work in CDA is about the underlying ideologies, such as feminism, neoliberalism and capitalism, that play a role in the reproduction of (or resistance to) dominance

and inequality. Studies in CDA try to formulate an image of solidarity with marginalized groups, for example, by formulating strategic proposals for the enactment and development of counter-power and counter-ideologies in practices of challenge; as this applies to my study, a forward-looking strategy that imagines a more equitable future will be further developed in Chapter Seven.

3.4.3.4 Visual Discourse Analysis

In my empirical work, I use visual discourse analysis in a similar way to discourse analysis in that I explore how images make meaning, and I examine the connections between representation and social power, culture, politics and ideology. Scholars (Jenks, 1995; Rose, 2012; Stafford, 1991) have argued that in contemporary Western societies, the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life. Rose (2012) posits that it has been assumed in pre-modern societies that visual imagery was of less importance due to the lack of images in circulation. With the onset of modernity, Jenks (1995) argues that the contemporary world has become much more of a 'seen' phenomenon, an argument that resonates with research being conducted online. In the Digital Age, one of the most noteworthy developments across the social sciences is the growth of research methods using visual materials.

This body of visual analysis work has been developed from several different theoretical positions (Barnard, 2001; Evans & Hall, 1999), and while most of the work concerns the interpretation of visual images, others focus more on the practices of visuality or on the agency of visual objects. I will draw on Rose (2012), who suggests five frames to engage with visual culture that I believe are valuable for thinking about my research and the social representation of images. The first is the way in which images can both visualize and render invisible social difference. Secondly, scholars of visual culture are concerned by how images look, and how they are looked at. Thirdly, there is an emphasis on the embeddedness of visual images in a wider culture. Fourthly, there is an insistence that images themselves have their own agency, with the important question being what images *do* and not how they look. Finally, Rose argues that the viewer of an image will bring his or her own interpretation to bear on its meaning and effect. This final point leads me to one of the main limitations of this method for my research project, in that the individual who encounters the visual image is one who has been socialized into possessing a number of codes acquired and

developed in the social and cultural contexts experienced over the course of a lifetime; meaning is tempered by situational and social constraints (Nightingale & Ross, 2003). However, a key advantage is that these frames both offer a way to interrogate images and their construction, and a way to link their participation in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial is inheriting.

In this dissertation, visual analysis is a necessary method to deploy considering the media texts that I have chosen to analyze. In my empirical chapters, one significant site of analysis is Instagram – a photo and video-sharing social networking service – where particular attention is paid to the visual construction of the 'selfie', for instance. Empirical examples of visual analysis range from Beyoncé's 2017 recording-breaking Instagram photo (which was the most liked picture on the photo-sharing platform at the time) to Kim's selfies. Viewed individually, the self-portraits can appear banal; however en masse, Kim's selfies are a vehicle through which she can reclaim and reconfigure her subjectivity. In addition to social media texts, I also examine prominent magazine and tabloid cover images, as well as advertisements. Furthermore, I have selected three celebrity cases who – on account of their news coverage, fan following and years in the spotlight – can be considered as 'icons' of popular culture. As such, the production and presentation of their image is a crucial site to examine. Celebrity is the domain in which the contestation and unsettling of ideas of contemporary femininity take place, and my cases provide the spectacular visibility for understanding how feminine Millennial ideals are being negotiated and formed in both offline and online spaces.

3.4.4 Coding Frame

Following Mannheim (1952), Gumpert and Cathcart (1985) propose that the worldviews and relationships of every generation are influenced by the media ecology of their youth years. The female Millennial is conditioned by specific media grammars and literacies in her youth, which are not only derived from that era's media ecology, but also reflected in the values, habits and thought patterns of the cohort. The media teaches about society by repeatedly representing specific types of people in certain roles. Hall (1997) argues that these representations are frames for understanding how and why the world works in particular ways. The media do not simply imagine

these representations. Rather, they are part of a cultural discourse that reinforces a hierarchy found in society. There are many reasons, both organizational and ideological, as to why the media portray women in particular ways, and their depiction in mass media has been the focus of much feminist media scholarship.

As noted in the literature review, Gill (2007) positions the powerful resonance or 'synergy' between postfeminism and neoliberalism at three levels, claiming that both are structured by a current of individualism, self-regulation and autonomy. This leads her to question whether neoliberalism itself is already gendered, and in my research, I would like to expand upon this line of thinking, and determine how the Millennial has actually come to be constructed as its ideal subject. Other feminist scholars (Genz, 2009; McRobbie, 2007; Winch, 2013) have coded the postfeminist ideal figure as independent, successful and materialistic. The application of these *a priori* codes to the texts will shed light on the way the ideal type of Millennial figure has come to achieve epistemological coherence – not only in the academy, but in popular culture. In many ways, the ideal Millennial has been conditioned to represent herself online, since exclusion from Internet-mediated economic, social, political and cultural networks can be one of the most damaging forms of exclusion in society (Castells, 2002). Thus, it becomes necessary to understand, in this current cultural climate, why and with what consequences, the ideal Millennial figure is using social media platforms. For example, what does the ubiquitous Millennial practice of taking selfies reveal? This act takes on great significance when confronted with the sheer volume of self-representation, and I am interested in how discourses of the figurative ideal are being both produced and reproduced online. As previously mentioned, the self-portraits can appear banal when viewed individually; however en masse, the 'Selfie' can seem like a revolutionary political movement. In the Digital Age, it appears that the body has become a site where agency, resistance and subversion occur. This is characteristic of neoliberal discourses, where active, self-reinventing and autonomous women are required to work on and transform the self, and regulate their conduct (Gill, 2007). Linked to this change in representation is the shift from objectification to subjectification. The focus is rerouted from a male gaze to a self-governing, internal gaze. In postfeminist discourse, an emphasis is placed on subjectification, and I will examine how Taylor, Beyoncé and Kim exemplify the active, desiring, ideal neoliberal subject.

My work will attend to notions of celebrity and popular culture. Questions of self-actualization, empowerment and responsibility become articulated when the Millennial operates the technologies that functionally govern her, and there are particular implications of surveillance for gendered, raced and classed bodies when thought about in the context of neoliberalism. I will further explore how notions of choice, self-improvement and authenticity may coincide with surveillance, discipline and the exclusion of those who fail to embody the figurative ideal.

The issues I raise are important and timely, as the focus on ideal figures can help to either render invisible, or legitimate and strengthen a social system. As opposed to looking inward to focus on the self, it may be more helpful, in terms of promoting gender equality, to look outward and work on society as a whole. The feminist celebrities that I have described owe their wealth, power and privileged speaking position to the backing of cultural industries and ideals which, while helpful to the individual, may actually be harmful to women as a collective. In her construction, does the neoliberal ideal figure undermine the collective action and solidarity that produce long-term social change and equality?

3.4.5 Ethical Reflections

In this section, I would like to reflect on the way my position and experience has had an impact on all aspects of the qualitative research design – from conceptualization of my theoretical framework through to the choice of methods, selection of texts and subsequent analysis. As I conducted qualitative analysis, I have tried to remain reflexive by acknowledging the fact that my own language is as constructive as the one being studied, thereby constituting yet another instance of an influenced construction of reality (Gill, 2000).

Firstly, the issue of objectivity must be addressed: “in intertextual analysis, the analyst is more dependent upon social and cultural understanding” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 61). As a result, the selection of theoretical framework for this dissertation has been greatly influenced by my worldview. As a Millennial woman who is a U.S. citizen, I realize that the neoliberal ideal is a subject position for someone like me to interpellate. I have been immersed in American culture since childhood, and therefore I bring my own social conditioning and experience to bear on the

historical, political and social understanding of the environment within which the text was made. Crucial to qualitative analysis is the explicit awareness and rejection of a 'value-free' science; social science, and scholarly discourse in particular, are concurrently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced through social interaction. How I have analyzed and decoded the text has ultimately been determined by my identity. I have a multicultural background, but due to my upbringing in the U.S., I have been conditioned by a neoliberal, meritocratic discourse that places primacy on the individual. Catherine Rottenberg's work on neoliberal feminism has greatly inspired my thinking – specifically the view that the affective and physical intensive labor that women perform as the neoliberal ideal is, actually, "feminist" in its articulation (2020, p. 1074).

Secondly, the timeframe in which this research took place is noteworthy. Considering my research relates to issues of gender, race and class, questions can be raised as to why I did not engage on a deeper level with movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter or MAGA, which arguably were the three most relevant political movements (on the three aforementioned intersectional axes) during the period in which this research was conducted. These movements managed to galvanize and mobilize millions of people around the world, and they are not omitted from my empirical work – I will integrate a discussion of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter as they pertain to the relevant celebrity case study. However, because I position myself specifically in the neoliberal feminist tradition, I have sharpened my focus to three interrelated crises that center the individual, and her obligations under the new social contract. Delineating the core components of this contract (higher education, professionalism, motherhood) has led me to explicate crises in education, finance and reproduction.

As someone who subscribed to the neoliberal social contract, I note that my trajectory to 'adulthood' (as previously defined) was not disorderly or delayed. I take the position that it is on account of my hard work ethic and neoliberal conditioning that enabled me to do the following: enroll in an Ivy League institution at the age of 15, start full-time professional paid employment at the age of 19, get married at the age of 22, and advance my career in education and business until I became pregnant with my first child at the age of 28. Following the birth of my daughter, I enrolled in a full-time PhD Program, at the age of 29.

Clearly, the selection of theoretical framework for this dissertation has been greatly influenced by my lived experience. As such, I do not presume to be objective in my orientation, or even celebratory of the neoliberal ideal Millennial representations because my own lived experiences are constituted by a similar discourse. Rather, I hope to explore the hegemonic underpinnings of these cases and texts, ultimately taking a position with respect to the practices involved in the creation of representations of the neoliberal ideal. That having been said, my chosen sites do not try to force meanings onto some predetermined ideological 21st century generation, but rather draw on these important theoretical traditions to help make sense of the contemporary depictions of the Millennial. To safeguard against celebrity bias, it is important to note that I do not look at my three cases as ontological entities, but rather as sites that are constituted *through* discourse, and the way these discourses transcend boundaries by speaking to a broader discursive repertoire. For example, when I discuss Kim's discursive construction as an adult film star, I explain how this forms part of a wider discursive regime circulating about the uneducated underclass. In this way, I never offer any personal judgement or critique of the individual person. Rather, I investigate the truth claims that are being made, and how they are situated as both universal and specific in that each particular text is a unique enactment of a discourse that cannot exist outside the enactment of texts. In this way, I hope to better understand how knowledge is being produced, and how that understanding comes to achieve epistemological coherence.

3.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the study's methodological rationale, its procedures and sites, as well as the analytical strategy of the research design. I began by situating the relevance of my research question in relation to extant literature. I then provided an account of the methodological design and its appropriateness for answering my research question. Having clarified the main features of the research design and having justified the choice of sites and data collection materials, I gave an account of how I will analyze the data. I concluded with an assessment of the ethical procedures of the research, and a reflexive statement about my role in the research process.

Within a central framework marked out in various ways as neoliberal, I will now examine patterns of the ideal Millennial's discursive construction across three intensely mediated and highly popular

feminine subjects – Taylor Swift, Beyoncé Knowles Carter and Kim Kardashian. Multimodal analysis is applied to each case to better understand the challenges and opportunities that arise when neoliberal values appear to be inscribed within a more determined attempt to re-shape notions of American femininity so that it complements the requirements of the economic agenda. The attribution of characteristics and expectations such as independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention to the Millennial woman, as a series of interpellative processes, takes different forms. However, it is the frequency of such neoliberal discourse, across various sites, that comes to function as a key mechanism of social transformation. As previously mentioned, I argue that the social construction of neoliberal femininity has material effects. Thus, the creation of contemporary ideal figure types and hegemonic femininities prompt an exploration of the ways in which the gendered, raced and classed Millennial woman is currently constructed. This will be the focus of the following three empirical chapters.

Chapter Four: Taylor Swift – America's Sweetheart

You know, my entire moral code,
as a kid and now,
is a need to be thought of as good.

It was all I wrote about.
It was all I wanted.
It was the complete and total...
belief system
that I subscribed to as a kid.
Do the right thing.
Do the good thing.

(Swift, 2020)

In this Chapter, I advance the argument that Taylor Swift has emerged and has sustained her celebrity presence because she concurrently indicates and speaks to a contemporary crisis. On account of the financial crisis, the Millennial generation is facing a profound lack of security and upward mobility. Taylor's discursive construction offers a solution: she represents being self-reliant and resilient – always adapting and adjusting to new circumstances – but forever remaining true to her representational core. In this way, her resilience can be read as an ideal response to the crisis of neoliberalism by adopting neoliberal logics.

The most visible neoliberal strategies focus on economic and political policies, however the "long-term success of those policies rests on integrating neoliberal ideas into the cultural and social spheres of life" (Coakley, 2011, p.67). The media industry is but one arm that proponents of neoliberalism can use to influence forms of socialization. As a cultural perspective, neoliberalism emphasizes the following ideals that will be further discussed in this chapter, in relation to Taylor: independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. The probability that neoliberal principles will be sustained or revived in a society varies depends on the extent to which citizens accept the ideology, and the resilience of neoliberalism crucially depends on embedding its ideas and beliefs in popular culture (Coakley, 2011). Therefore, in order to establish viable alternatives to neoliberalism, a deeper understanding of cultural and social ideals is required in addition to economic and political manifestations.

In order to better understand how Taylor's discursive construction both produces and reproduces the female Millennial ideal, I will draw on an array of methodological tools to investigate how celebrity discourses offer a model of how to prosper in a society where success is predicated on the logic of neoliberalism. A genealogy is first employed to foreground Taylor's emergence onto the public stage and locate her position as a White, middle-class female. While this historical account may appear descriptive, and significantly less analytical, it performs the crucial work of raising awareness of the complexity of meritocracy in the U.S., while also tying Taylor's individual discourses to the motive and operations of varied power-interests.

As previously mentioned, a thematic analysis was the initial starting block for this empirical research because it allowed for a very large corpus of data (on each celebrity) to be refined according to prominent themes. The naming of the codes resulted from both the theoretical framework and preliminary immersion in the textual material, and as such, the coding frame that guided my analysis of Taylor reflects the three themes that correspond to the core traits of the neoliberal ideal that I have previously identified – independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. These codes served to inform which texts were then selected for deeper discourse or visual analysis. The media texts that were selected were chosen on account of their popularity, wide circulation, or for being a noteworthy text that functions to make sense of the complex configurations of contemporary representations of ideal neoliberal femininity in American popular

culture. With regard to the case of Taylor, this led me to analyze her Instagram account, her albums, noteworthy interviews, as well as public appearances. This analysis has also been informed by previous empirical work conducted by scholars researching at the intersection of media and feminism, and I will engage with their accounts more substantially throughout the chapter.

4.1 Laying the Foundation for Meritocracy

> *"My parents raised me to never feel like I was entitled to success. That you have to work for it. You have to work so hard for it."* – Taylor Swift

The American Dream is an ideology that holds the U.S. as a land of opportunity wherein the circumstances of one's birth do not determine his or her status in life. As mentioned in Chapter One, the ideal of meritocracy remains a powerful discourse in sustaining hegemonic, neoliberal ideology in American society. The meritocratic underpinning of the neoliberal ethos in the U.S. places the burden of success on the individual; failure to succeed is interpreted as the result of one's own inadequacies.

While this narrative serves to influence how Americans conceptualize 'success', it underscores the instrumental role played by the family structure in providing the foundations (such as lifestyle and access) that are oftentimes fundamental to an individual's initial success. The idea of meritocracy rests on the assumption of a level playing field, and obscures the uncomfortable truth that those who are successful pass on more privileges to their children, thereby contributing to unequal social starting blocks (Littler, 2018).

It is in this context that it is necessary to understand the emergence of Taylor Alison Swift, who provides the clearest case for being both a product of, and response to, American society's ever-present threat of financial crisis. Born to financial executives, Taylor partially evidences her upper-middle class upbringing by telling the story of how her name was chosen. The first is that she was named after famed musician James Taylor, whom her financial advisor father, Scott Swift, and mutual-fund marketing executive mother, Andrea Swift, adored. This appellation was somewhat prophetic for a young girl who would later go on to be a best-selling recording artist and 11-time

Grammy-winner. But it is perhaps the second reason behind her name that speaks to the evolution of her more carefully cultivated image: "My mom named me Taylor because she thought that I would probably end up in corporate business – my parents are both finance people – and she didn't want any kind of executive, boss, manager to see if I was a girl or a boy if they got my résumé" (Swift, 2015).

Assuming the latter is true, her parents have been responsible for crafting her image and brand since conception, opting for a name that would both enable her to compete in the corporate marketplace and climb the ladder without facing gendered barriers to entry. In U.S. neoliberal society, culture is viewed as an economic resource, and branding determines what can be sold on the market (Banet-Weiser, 2012). From an early age, Taylor was constructed as an ideal neoliberal constituent, and produced as a brand, which involved creating a detachable, saleable image and narrative that could then be distributed within the cultural marketplace.

Taylor's initial success was due largely in part to the strong financial and emotional support from her parents. In order to pursue a music career, Taylor and her family moved from Pennsylvania to Hendersonville, Tennessee, (near to Nashville, the country music capital). Her parents cite Taylor's hard work and dedication as the motivating factor behind the move, a discourse that is consistent with the neoliberal ethos in the U.S., whereby individual responsibility and market-based determinations of both moral worth and merit are celebrated (Giroux, 2011). This narrative of hard work invites comparison of other Millennial women to Taylor by symbolically illustrating the capacity of other women to not only take control of their future, but also to become agents of change in society through ambitious career aspirations.

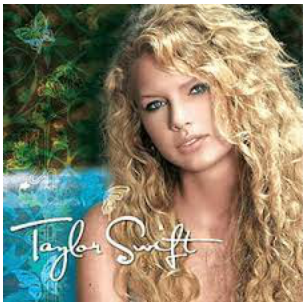
While performing at a café in Nashville, Taylor struck the attention of the record producer Scott Borchetta, of Big Machine Records. Taylor's father was a minor investor in his label, which provoked scrutiny of Taylor's talents:

> "Scott Swift owns three percent of Big Machine. But I hear people go, 'Oh, well, he funded the whole deal, and that's why Taylor's Number One.' It's like, 'Please, people.' Everybody wants to say, 'Well, there's a reason.' Yeah, there is a reason. 'Cause she's great. That's the reason" (Hiatt, 2012).

However, by discursively constructing Taylor as 'great', her record producer renders invisible the ways in which the people who lack resources in society forgo opportunities because they have fewer connections, knowledge and insider information than their wealthier counterparts. Taylor's constructed narrative of individual exception perpetuates the notion that poverty and financial vulnerability are self-made problems that can be overcome through hard work, and obscures the way children from more privileged backgrounds are given a 'leg-up' in life. Poverty is often rooted in structural inequality, and created and reinforced by institutions, corporations and ideologies that are designed to benefit the most powerful. In the U.S., two Millennials from contrastingly different socio-economic backgrounds can pursue the same path and still end up in very different career placements; one reason for this could be that the wealthier individual had the financial capability to start a business, the connections to land an internship that led to a covetable job, or, in Taylor's case, a family that was able to guide her in the right direction.

The instrumental role of family in Taylor's breakthrough as an artist has been overshadowed by meritocratic discourse that illuminates her talent, ambition and hard-work. This rhetoric reinforces the status quo by denying inequality through focusing on the individual and ignoring social and familial structures. The narrative of the American Dream reassures Americans, particularly young adults, such as Millennials, that the social system is not flawed, as it continues to reward hard-working citizens. Rather than being threatened by the existence of inequalities, the overarching narrative of achievement is used to understand inequality by focusing attention on the faults of the individuals as opposed to focusing attention on the problems which have been predetermined by social, political and economic structures.

4.2 The Emergence of Taylor Swift as the Girl-Next-Door



(Figure 2.1)

In this section, I will more vividly illustrate Taylor's emergence onto the public stage as a recording artist. Taylor was a mere 16 years-old when she debuted her self-titled album. *Taylor Swift* was released on October 24th 2006, and the album peaked at the number five spot on *Billboard,* and remained on the chart for 157 weeks, thereby marking the longest reign by any release in the 2000s (Trust, 2009). Following 'Tim McGraw', four more singles were released throughout 2007 and 2008, all of which were highly successful on the *Billboard Hot Country Songs* chart, as evidenced by 'Our Song' and 'Should've Said No' reaching the top spot. For the former, Taylor became the youngest person to both write and perform a song that topped the chart. She won several accolades for *Taylor Swift,* receiving the Nashville Songwriters Association's Songwriter/Artist of the Year in 2007, and in doing so became the youngest person to be selected for the title. Furthermore she won the Country Music Association's Horizon Award for Best New Artist, the Academy of Country Music Awards' Top New Female Vocalist, and the American Music Awards' Favorite Country Female Artist honor. I have referenced her early awards because their significance is derived from having been authorized by the gatekeepers of the music industry. As a result, these achievements have served to further legitimize her status as a talented breakthrough star.

Taylor's (former) record producer, Borchetta, has said that record industry peers disliked his signing of a 16-year-old singer-songwriter, but he was confident in his business choice; Taylor tapped into a previously unknown country market – teenage girls (Greenberg, 2013). This demonstrates how her very emergence aligned with a core neoliberal principle that centers new market growth. Previous scholarship has read Taylor's early discursive construction as linked to

Victorian notions of an authentically pure, good 'girl', and (Prins, 2020) specifically correlates innocence to 'Whiteness'. This assessment can be validated by music videos such as 'Love Story' (2008) and 'Mine' (2010). Her first album cover, *Taylor Swift* (Figure 2.1), conforms to ideals of innocence, as signified by her (untouched) curly blonde hair. Furthermore, a butterfly motif is scattered across a blue and green backdrop that seems to reflect the unspoiled beauty of nature, further framing an image of a down-to-earth individual. However, a noteworthy tension rests in the way she holds her chin up and looks directly into the camera. This positioning can be interpreted as confident, whereas popular lyrics from her album, such as the hit single 'Teardrops on my guitar' suggest insecurity:

> I bet she's beautiful, that girl he talks about
> And she's got everything that I have to live without.

Taylor insisted on writing her own songs based on her personal life. This tension created through moments of confidence and insecurity speaks more broadly to the challenges encountered by American 'girls' as they navigate the complex terrain that accompanies adolescence. By constructing a public discourse around 'relatable' experiences, Taylor became a bonding element for teenage girls and their mothers. She further strengthened this bond by establishing a MySpace page on August 31st, 2005, where she subsequently amassed more than 45 million streams through the site. Social media became a primary channel for Taylor to engage her audience and take discursive control of her image. As opposed to simply promoting her music, personal messages could demonstrate to her audience that she was 'one of them'– advancing the down-to-earth, girl-next-door narrative of a country music superstar. Instead of giving a story to the media and hoping that reporters would not only care, but also convey her intended meaning, she reached out to her fans directly, altering the 'journalistic' process along the way.

Additionally, social media provided Taylor with an opportunity to further brand herself online, a practice that is increasingly normative in the contemporary neoliberal economic environment, and has been deployed by the Millennial woman to communicate personal ideas by using strategies premised on market logic (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Entangled discourses of neoliberal brand culture and Internet interactivity rely ideologically (and materially) on individuals becoming what Nikolas Rose (1992) refers to as 'the entrepreneur of the self'. Taylor's accomplishments – independence,

capability, empowerment – are also those that constitute the ideal neoliberal subject (Gill, 2007). This was a primary reason for conducting a systematic analysis of a social media site, and I will now turn to analyzing Taylor's discursive construction across Instagram to examine the values and expectations that are conveyed by someone whose platform and visibility allows her to speak publicly for the Millennial's place in modern society.

For the purposes of this study, Taylor's Instagram account was coded and analyzed for its content.[6] Content and multimodal analysis were applied to 836 photos and 130 videos to allow for a better understanding of Taylor's 'project of the self'. As previously indicated, in the specific context of Millennial and digital activity, the project of the self is one in which young women perform a narrative of themselves to an audience in order to maintain control and achieve coherence in the construction of their identity. The construction of the self is not done in isolation, but is rather situated in a media and cultural ecology that involves a dynamic between the self and an audience (real or imagined), or in the specific case of Instagram, between image and video content and the audience. This dynamic is fruitful for analysis on account of its gendered nature. That is, how Taylor constructs an online self suggests a negotiation of power relations and a crafting of feminine identity in such a way that can be consumed and understood by the viewers. My coding of her account will be put into conversation with her broader relationship to neoliberal feminism, in which her articulation of womanhood has evolved and more fully developed. As such, I complement the examination of her Instagram account with further textual analysis (derived from album lyrics, music videos and interviews, for example). These analyses are not discussed separately, but rather are interwoven to advance a coherent narrative.

4.3 A Content Analysis of Taylor Swift's Instagram Account (@taylorswift)

The ideals shaping the ideological space of Instagram – independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention – are the same discourses that provide the logic for neoliberal femininity, a practice

[6] This fieldwork was completed in December 2016. Initial coding (836 photos/130 videos) was done prior to August 18th, 2017, when Taylor Swift deleted all social posts and profile images across her Instagram account. Her re-branded account will be discussed at a later point in the chapter. An additional 195 photos and 59 videos were also coded to discern similarities and breaks from her previously constructed persona. A large selection of photos that were deleted from the artist's official Instagram page can be found on a page dedicated to archiving her account (Taylor Swift Insta Archive).

that discursively locates Millennials in the values and norms of consumer culture. In this way, self-branding diverts attention from the female body as a site of objectification, offering instead the frame for a new, more agentic and subjective social arrangement that relies on strategies for identity construction which receive their logic from more progressive ideals such as independence and self-actualization, which will now be discussed. The theme of self-reinvention will be discussed later in the chapter when I examine her cross-over from country music to pop.

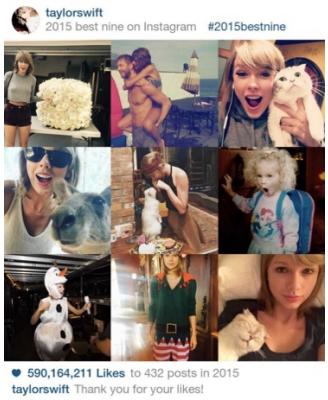
4.3.1 Independence

The majority of Taylor's Instagram posts are focused on her, and only her, which serves to normalize the independent individual, while concurrently providing a blueprint of how to prosper in a society where social status is predicated on the cultural logic of the celebrity structure of online technologies. Her implicit discourse on how to perform ideal neoliberal femininity suggests that it is only attainable for those who have access and resources, a fact which is rendered invisible by the meritocratic underpinning of a neoliberal regime. From a more (post)feminist perspective, the notion that there are clear and accessible steps that a Millennial can follow in order to achieve the neoliberal feminine 'ideal' further obscures long-standing barriers upheld by age, race and class, as Millennials who are culturally marginalized (through media representation, policy, law, etc.) do not have the same access to the practice of self-branding as White, middle-class Millennials. What is at stake here in the normalization of neoliberal ideals such as self-branding is the reactivation and extension of competition, which foster oppressive practices of exclusion.

From her emergence onto the public stage, Taylor has been constructed as not only relatable, but also as a 'girl's-girl' – a narrative that has remained consistent across digital media platforms as well. Initial photos posted to Taylor's Instagram site reveal a down-to-earth image of the star. There are fewer career posts in this early stage (which I have coded as anything related to her music, awards, promotional appearances or product endorsements); most posts focus on her as an individual. Tellingly, the first photo uploaded was one of her grandmother, the opera singer, who inspired Taylor to become a musician. Many images featured her family (including the ubiquitous social media 'throwback' photos of youth) along with her cat, Meredith. Most notably, Taylor used this space to represent hegemonic ideals of gender and femininity by emphasizing her domestic

talents: she was frequently photographed baking, crafting and decorating her home in holiday themes. These photos serve to reinforce the narrative of the country-singer as the 'girl-next-door'.

(Figure 2.2)

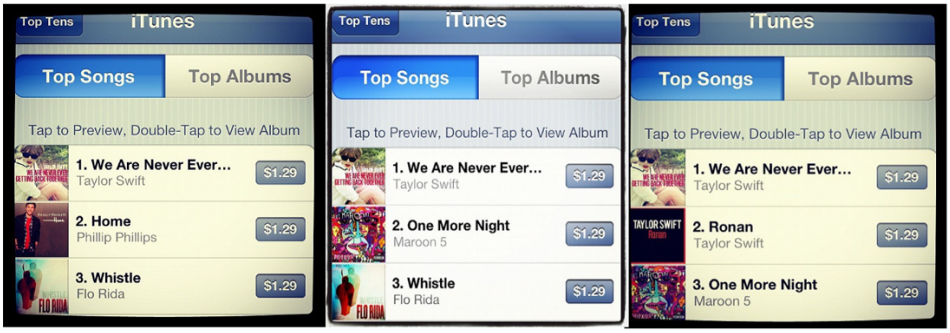


(Figure 2.3)

The photos selected in Figures 2.2 and 2.3 thereby serve to sustain a coherent and consistent identity. As a space for self-disclosure and self-expression, Instagram allowed Taylor to bypass the control of media gatekeepers by producing and distributing her own media images. For Taylor, the platform allowed for creative ways to combine old and new images in order to construct a multifaceted identity. As previously noted, there were few early Instagram photos promoting her music as a 'product'. For instance, compared to the 265 photos and videos related to her album *1989* (which was the most recent album released at the time of coding), the only reference to her *Speak Now* album came in the form of an iTunes screenshot of 'If this was a movie', 'Ours' and 'Superman' claiming the number 1, 2 and 3 spots on the 'Country' chart. It was during this period that she concentrated on personal content to solidify her self-brand. In doing so, she provided a discursive template for the ideal neoliberal Millennial, as the logic behind branding does not simply capitalize on identity construction online, but circumscribes and shapes participation and identity. Celebrity culture serves to further concentrate these discourses and values around the performance of the self. To Marwick (2013), what emerges from celebrities is how they have internalized the culture's proscription of the desired self, which is typically performed as the ideal neoliberal subject. This ideal subject is most apparent in the Digital Age, in which a particular persona – one that is highly visible, entrepreneurial and self-configured for consumption – is not only idealized, but also rewarded.

4.3.2 Self-Actualization

In the Digital Age, the glorification and attention paid to the 'self' have been re-imagined within the context of self-branding. Equally important to 'independence' in shaping the ideological space of Instagram is 'self-actualization', the second core tenet of neoliberal feminism. The discursive construction of Taylor-the-(self)-brand is as a Millennial who is self-reliant and empowered. This can be seen through her 'behind-the-scenes' photos; she shares all of the work that goes into the artistic process, such as hand-writing lyrics, practicing the guitar and recording in the studio. Her Instagram profile is peppered with 14 iTunes screenshots of her songs not only reaching the top of the charts, but also staying at the top of the charts. Figure 2.4 is comprised of a selection of screenshots she posted with regard to one of her hit singles, 'We are never ever getting back together':



(Figure 2.4)

As indicated by these photos, Taylor invites her audience to partake in her triumphs. Along with photos of Grammy wins and sold-out concert arenas during her international tours, Taylor's Instagram serves to reinforce the construction of Taylor-as-a-hard-worker, a fundamental, meritocratic characteristic of the ideal neoliberal American who is deserving of her success. She also likes to post press articles (an example is when *New York Magazine* ran a cover feature titled "Why Taylor Swift is the Biggest Pop Star in the World"). By constructing her narrative of success through the words of others, Taylor avoids the risk of appearing conceited or smug. Her image depends on her ability to relate to her fans, and she goes to great lengths to ensure that while she may continue to climb to new career heights, her discursive formation is that she is still 'just like us'. To counter-balance the fame, she posts Instagram videos of 'awkward' dancing, with one such caption reading "Living proof you can be an iHeart Music Awards artist of the year and also a super embarrassing person" (Swift, 2015).

The presence of Taylor's self-brand as a structuring narrative indicates that self-disclosure, or self-presentation, does not imply any narrative of the self, created within an open cultural script, but one that makes sense according to specific media grammars and literacies of the time. In other words, the kind of branded visibility that often guides Taylor's Instagram photos and videos has historically engaged a kind of double mobilization, in which she has discursively created a visible identity for the market and her audience; Millennials identifying with those representations come to recognize *themselves* within the powerful media system. For example, in a nod to what has become a trademark of the 'basic' girl in popular culture, Taylor posted a photo of her coffee, with the following caption: "Being the girl sitting alone in the café, drinking a latté" (Swift, 2015). As expanded upon in the literature review, the terrain of contemporary feminism is currently occupied in large part by the individualizing feminism of neoliberal consumer culture (Rottenberg, 2014). In her role as a celebrity, Taylor's discursive construction allows for an understanding of how Millennials engage with social media and use consumer culture to self-style; in this way, neoliberalism can stealthily proceed with its intervention and makeover of ideal subjectivity. With Taylor as an ideal, the Millennial is encouraged to be a product within a neoliberal context; she authorizes herself to be consumed through her own online construction.

This sentiment taps into neoliberal feminist discourses of empowerment, acknowledging that there have been historical barriers to women's independence; however, in the online era, women gained an opportunity to carve a space for their 'individual' selves through the development and cultivation of a personal brand. This environment creates the conditions for the Millennial woman to be successful by means of commodifying and selling her 'self'. As a branded product, Taylor has been formulated as the nice girl, and in order to reach her level of success, her image has remained consistent not just across Instagram, but multiple formats. At the beginning of her career, she discursively mastered this persona through slumber party girl-talk lyrics (see *Fearless* and *Speak Now* albums) and the cultivation of young, devoted female fans. She 'grew-up' alongside them, which, as I discussed in the literature review, is imperative for constructing what Mannheim (1952) calls a generation actuality. Taylor's construction allowed for the formation of a concrete bond with her fans in the way that 'silly' (and 'heartbreaking') three-month relationships and cliquey friendships are unique to the hegemonic construction of the ideal female teenage

experience. The down-to-earth, ordinary image that Taylor had cultivated suggests to her followers that under different circumstances, she is the kind of girl who could be their friend.

This is especially important given her decision to cross-over from country music to pop music. The core elements of her constructed persona were instrumental in the initial success of her transition. While 'On-Air with Ryan Seacrest' to promote *1989*, Taylor explained that with her previous album *Red*, she had:

> "one foot in pop and one foot in country, and that's really no way to walk and get anywhere. If you want to continue to evolve, I think eventually you have to pick a lane, and I just picked the one that felt more natural to me at this point in my life. A huge goal for this album was to make songs that were instantly catchy [and] also have meaning behind them. But I really wanted these songs to really kind of bounce out of the speakers…for my own albums, it's all autobiographical because I think it's much more interesting for me to tell a true story than a story I kind of conjured up" (Horton, 2014).

In the next section, I will begin to unpack 'self-reinvention', the third tenet of neoliberal feminism that has become instrumental in not only shaping the discursive and ideological space of 'celebrity', but also by extension, Instagram.

4.3.3 Re-invention: Taylor's Crossover from Country Music Artist to Pop Star

Because I am now going to examine Taylor's crossover in much greater detail, discourse analysis will be applied to three selected music videos, and a content analysis of her Instagram photos will be conducted. However, I will first preface my applied analysis with a brief genealogy that discusses how her transition and emergence as a pop star has been constituted through discourse by the entities who have the industry authority and popular legitimacy to comment on such issues. I will also provide one example of the way Taylor's construction as a pop star is juxtaposed with another (Miley Cyrus) in order to begin illustrating the way her neoliberal 're-invention' operates within certain confines of what the market dictates as acceptable.

Being discursively constructed as the girl-next-door was never a representation that could have sustained Taylor's career as a global superstar. One of the primary functions of pop music is to aid

fans in fashioning a self-definition, which in turn produces the pleasure of identification (Cepeda, 2010). As Taylor entered her late 20s, the previously cultivated image as an innocent 'girl' (Prins, 2020) almost seemed inappropriate for her age and transnational pop audience.

(Figure 2.5)

A month after the release of her first single from the *1989* album, Taylor landed the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, with a headline that boasted "The New Life of Taylor Swift" (Figure 2.5). In the cover photo (taken of her backside), she remained dressed in the attire of a country music star (Levi's jeans and a white tank top); however, the garments were soaked, and she was not wearing a bra. Her trademark long curly hair was cropped short, a popular culture signifier that suggests the time had come for a change.

The first track on the album is titled 'Welcome to New York', in which she proclaims 'Everybody here was someone else before'. The song cover features Taylor at the top of the Empire State building, overlooking lower Manhattan. Playing off previous pop culture constructions by everyone from Frank Sinatra and Jay Z to *Sex and the City*, the photo intimates that she has grown-up and has moved to New York City to make it on her own. Independence and power are two themes that run throughout the album. The mass media further advanced this narrative, with *GQ* running a cover of "Taylor Swift Rules the World" and a *Time* cover expanding upon "The Power of Taylor Swift", creating not only brand and identity coherence for Taylor, but also cementing the attributes of the ideal Millennial woman.

However, as I previously argued, certain elements of her construction that transcend the aesthetic (such as authenticity), have been fundamental to both her initial success and her transition; when juxtaposed alongside other overtly commercial pop acts, Taylor is still discursively constructed as an authentic artist on account of her own songwriting and composition. In this way, she distances herself from the more 'packaged pop' and lends a voice to women. "I think her ability to write about any emotional stage in a woman's life has legs" said Alison Bonaguro, of Country Music Television, about Taylor's transition to pop music, continuing: "I think Taylor will stay genuine" (Sclafani, 2010).

According to former teen star Debbie Gibson, transitioning from a 'good girl' image is not easy within the pop industry: "The danger in projecting an innocent image at a young age is that everyone makes a huge deal over it when you are eventually in touch with your sexuality and dressing 'age appropriate'" (Sclafani, 2010). Despite her efforts to artistically and commercially separate herself from her 'good girl' image (which will be further discussed below), Taylor's representation within the mainstream media (and social media) continues to remain that of a pop cultural icon of innocence. However, it is vital to contextualize her shift in appearance and performing style within the contemporary U.S. and global music industries. Industry dictates make it hard for artists to strike a balance between the creative process of musical production, and the administrative pressure to produce an album that finds commercial success. The apparent inability on the part of the U.S. mainstream media to extricate Taylor's public persona from more stereotypical paradigms of 'America's Sweetheart'– a situation which, to some degree, she and her public relations team have discursively constructed – manifests itself as well in the constant parallels drawn between other contemporary pop stars, such as Miley Cyrus. Miley Cyrus, daughter of Country Music star Billy Rae Cyrus, rose to fame at the age of 11 on account of her starring role in Disney's *Hannah Montana*. But as she made the transition from child to adult star, her proclivity towards nudity and openness to drug use drew tremendous backlash.

In a 2015 interview with *Marie Claire*, Miley took issue with her public perception, claiming that her actions are vilified more than others in the music industry (Glock, 2015). Singer-songwriter Sinead O'Connor framed Miley as a young and naïve woman who was sexually commoditized by the music industry (O'Connor, 2013), a sentiment that echoes a wider moral panic around young

women, as they are situated in American media culture (Jackson & Vares, 2011). The concern that girls were becoming precociously sexualized by the media was evidenced in the outrage that succeeded Miley's *Vanity Fair* cover in which she was naked except for a bedsheet – at the age of 15. The scandal illustrated the way Miley (unlike Taylor) is positioned as both victim and agent of the inappropriate sexualization of young women. In another sense, this example speaks to the historically entrenched acknowledgement of the 'Madonna/whore' complex that informs the way Taylor and Miley are discursively framed within the media.

Speaking out on Taylor's music video 'Bad Blood', Miley says "That's supposed to be a good example? And I'm a bad role model because I'm running around with my titties out?". She later proclaims: "People need more conventional role models, I guess… But I just don't care to be that person" (McIntyre, 2015). However, Taylor's 'self' presentation as the more conventional pop star is a contradictory practice, one that does not demonstrate a freedom from control in crafting identity any more than it is supervised and surveilled by the media industries. Whereas Miley, the discursively constructed 'bad girl', appears topless (with her tongue out) on the October 2013 cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine (Eells, 2013) to openly discuss her drug use, 'good-girl' Taylor admits to only first trying alcohol at the age of 21. (See *Rolling Stone* cover heralding Taylor Swift as a 'Good Girl' – Figure 2.6. I have included it alongside Miley's *Rolling Stone* cover, posing topless – Figure 2.7)

(Figure 2.6)

(Figure 2.7)

In a 2012 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Taylor said:

> "I knew I couldn't get away with it until then. I didn't really care to know what I was missing, and I knew it was illegal, and that my luck would be that I'd get caught. And then you think about all the moms and little girls who would have thought less of me" (Hiatt, 2012).

This quote evidences how Taylor's sense of self is constructed in the way her actions and words are perceived by others. It signals the role of broader societal and cultural forces (e.g., the moms' and little girls' beliefs) that are taken into account regarding individual performances of selfhood. Her narrative crucially depends on the dynamic of not only juxtaposition to other stars (such as Miley), but also feedback. This discourse further reflects empirical work conducted by Jackson and Vares (2015), who found (through observation of participant interviews) that in contrast with her industry counterparts, Taylor stands as the antithesis to a hypersexualized pop culture, and her absence of 'slutty' performances makes her out to be a positive role model. I have juxtaposed Taylor's construction with Miley's to illustrate how the reciprocity of the good/bad binary requires the 'other' to serve as the point of moral difference.

While the evaluation of others' self-disclosures 'empowers' one as a consumer or producer of content, it also reproduces normative neoliberal identities and relations. Self-branding is dependent upon the capability of ranking the product, which is in this case a Millennial woman, who is evaluated, critiqued and remade as the ideal neoliberal subject. Self-branding does not merely involve self-presentation, but participates in the multi-layered, complex process of judging, assessing, and valuing that takes place in a media economy of recognition (Banet-Weiser, 2012). It is with this in mind that I will begin my analysis of Taylor's 're-invention', the third pattern of regularity that points to the way by which her discursive construction fits within new and emerging neoliberal economic and social arrangements.

4.3.3.1 A *Discursive* Re-Invention

The most notable change in Taylor's crossover from country music to pop is rendered through her lyrics. According to freelance music journalist Annie Reuter, the key to Taylor's success as a country music star was that "She seems completely honest, whether it's in her music or interviews.

She lets the whole world know that in high school she wasn't the popular girl. I think that's what people find relatable – she's an everyday girl" (Sclafani, 2012). However, her image as a humble, down-to-earth girl who giggles at her own awkwardness and talks about the importance of her family, or divulges her crushes, did not appeal to those beyond her fanbase, and she was often attacked by detractors. Stereotyped as a feminist nightmare due to her ex-boyfriend-centric musical themes (e.g., her *Fearless* (2008) and *Speak Now* (2010) albums), academics such as Camille Paglia (2012) have been quick to condemn Taylor: "Her themes are mainly complaints about boyfriends, faceless louts who blur in her mind as well as ours".

Over time, Taylor's lyrical style evolved. The first example I will use is drawn from her breakthrough 'pop' album, *1989* (2014), in which Taylor responded to criticisms previously levelled against her. 'Shake it Off', the most popular single from *1989*, sent a message directly to those who have told her to change the subject and style of her music. In one of the catchiest and best-selling songs of 2014, Taylor proclaims:

> I go on too many dates
> but I can't make them stay
> at least that's what people say
> But I keep cruising
> Can't stop, won't stop moving

" 'Shake It Off' is about how I deal with criticism and gossip and humiliation and all those things that used to level me. Now I deal with those things by laughing at them. I didn't want it to feel victimized", Taylor said in an interview with *Billboard* (Graff, 2014). "This album was made completely and solely on my terms, with no one else's opinion factoring in, no one else's agenda factoring in". Previous scholarship links this discourse to authenticity as it aligns with Whiteness, with Dubrofsky (2016) arguing that irrespective of the way Taylor may have choreographed her moves and postures in 'Shake It Off', her authentic Whiteness is the most visible, and the text can be read as an inability to perform otherness. I will examine how Taylor is constituted through her race (Whiteness) at the end of the chapter. By drawing on previous scholarship of Isaksen & Eltantawy (2019), I will think through the pronounced Whiteness of Taylor's articulation of feminism, and the subsequent pushback her discourses received on social media. While the points

advanced in Dubrofsky's (2016) article are insightful – particularly her analysis of the video that sees expressions of authenticity as most easily harnessed by White bodies – I do not situate this particular performance in a post-racial context, but a neoliberal context that requires the individual (regardless of class or race) to reinvest in herself in such a way so as to increase her market value and visibility.

However, what is most interesting to note here is that Taylor is able to reinvent her persona within a limited cultural script. Discursively, by constructing this re-invention 'in her own terms', Taylor obscures the processes that underpin the presentation of the self (the judging, assessment and valuation), and uses this rhetorical device to reposition herself as a confident and independent young woman.

(Figure 2.8)

In the music video, her representation plays off historical tropes of the thin, agile, White ballet dancers in the American popular imagination[7]. However, I do not apply a racialized lens to this particular analysis, as the video informs my understanding of Taylor's reinvention in a different way – a 'breaking-free' from her previously constrained image. In the music video for 'Shake It

[7] For a more thorough understanding of the way Whiteness operates in dance, see 'Tendus and tenancy: Black dancers and the White landscape of dance education' (Davis & Phillips-Fein, 2018).

Off', this is evidenced at the 30-second mark. Taylor transitions from the more rigid, strict adherence to classical ballet positions, to a free-style of dance. Because this song is her first single from her first pop album, I accord significance to this moment and view it as a means through which Taylor is able to discursively reconstruct herself in a way that aligns with the ideals of neoliberal feminism.

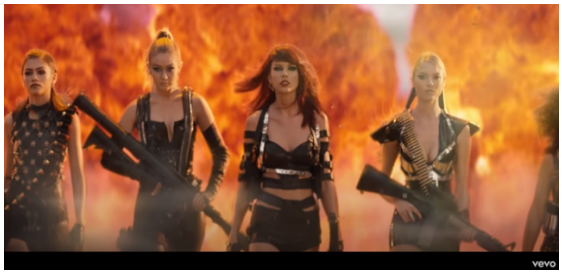
A second example of the way Taylor departs from her previous image is the way in which she speaks back to criticism and takes ownership of her narrative through her music video for 'Blank Space' (2014). Taylor (2014) responds to accusations against her as an anti-feminist by creating that exact storyline. The big-budget, high-concept video, in which Taylor played a *Gone Girl* version of herself as an alluring psychopath, allowed her to demonstrate a sense of humor: "Got a long list of ex-lovers/ they'll tell you I'm insane". The song can be read as a vehicle to declare that she has evolved enough to create a parody of herself. Through an analysis of the lyrics, Taylor's most popular songs indicate the personal transformation (coded as re-invention) that she has undergone within the last five years. This makeover is in line with the neoliberal ideal of the independent woman. The key take-away from her cross-over to pop, however, is that she could attempt to change who she is, but only within certain confines of what the market dictates as acceptable. She was permitted to channel hatred and anger toward an ex-boyfriend under the guise of parody. Thus she maintains consistency with her submissive, 'innocent' image constructed in her early years as a celebrity, as opposed to actually being subversive. This normalizes the idea that while Millennials are required to work on and transform the self, they are also responsible for regulating every aspect of their conduct.

(Figure 2.9)

A still image from ‘Blank Space’ (Figure 2.9) shows Taylor acting aggressively (as indicated by taking a golf club to her lover’s car). However, it is a parody, and is constructed with the idea that she would never behave in such a manner in real life, thus diffusing the tension that was noted by the discourse analysis. This is where patriarchy is defined in the most seductive and limited terms: the new, re-invented Taylor is able to achieve substantial social power by choosing not to break from the disciplinary regimes of neoliberal femininity, but to conform to them.

The third song that I will examine in relation to Taylor’s reinvention is ‘Bad Blood’, which is perhaps her most successful attempt at transforming her image. The song premiered during the Billboard Music Awards, and the music video made news for its cast of female stars, including Hayley Williams, Cara Delevingne, Jessica Alba, Cindy Crawford, Gigi Hadid, Ellie Goulding, Hailee Steinfeld, Lena Dunham, Lily Aldridge, Martha Hunt, Karlie Kloss, Zendaya Coleman, Mariska Hargitay, Ellen Pompeo, Serayah McNeill and Selena Gomez. And while Taylor surrounded herself amongst powerful and influential women, the video was not an ensemble piece, but rather it was about Taylor, and in particular, her newfound ability to reinvent herself. During her first four album cycles, Taylor was promoted as a country artist, and her videos appropriately advanced the same construction as a very sweet girl. From videos like ‘You Belong With Me’ (2009) (see Figure 2.10) to ‘22’ (2012), she appeared to be playing her ‘self’ in her clips.

(Figure 2.10)



(Figure 2.11)

In ‘Bad Blood’, Taylor plays a character in a more literal sense, dressed like an assassin and performing elaborate stunts (Figure 2.11). As seen through the juxtaposition of Figures 2.10 and 2.11, Taylor transitioned from putting herself forward in her videos to using them as a tool to explore various sides of her constructed personality, and create others. The video format was instrumental in allowing Taylor an opportunity to not only craft gender identity but also re-imagine

it. However, her updated branding only makes sense because its discourses and ideologies are so recognizable. For instance, in the 'Bad Blood' video, the moral of the story is not to let others keep her down. Taylor's character, Catastrophe, picked herself up from the fall, surrounded herself amongst powerful, influential and inspiring women, who encouraged her to defeat her opponents. She came back against all odds placed on her, and prevailed. Taylor created a parallel character in 'Catastrophe', which seems to implicitly suggest that she has done the same with her own life. Although she redeployed Frank Miller's neo-noir *Sin City* as a way to resist or redefine her image and the image of contemporary femininity, the subversions emanate from a particular neoliberal brand of femininity. The cast do not espouse a new image of gender by using an innovative and imaginative script, but are rather working within the confines of a cultural definition of femininity. As of December 2016, the Vevo YouTube music video for 'Bad Blood' had 988,773,813 views. The viability and success of such a video depends upon gendered contexts that are commercially produced for profit in the media industries, and therefore serve to not only emphasize, but also normalize neoliberal femininity.

4.3.3.2 Taylor's Re-invention, Quantified

On Instagram, the neoliberal makeover and re-invention of the 'self' can be seen by a transition from a mere self-brand to a self-corporation. Before the release of *Red* (2012), Taylor used Instagram to promote products, such as Elizabeth Arden, Williams and Sonoma and Starbucks. After its release, the posts focused on herself (as a product). The ramp up to the release of *Red* – the album recorded prior to her crossover – featured a ten-day countdown, and 16 promotional posts in total. By contrast, 265 photos were devoted to her first pop album. It began with photos of 'secret sessions' to allow her audience a sneak peek into her life 'behind-the-scenes', followed by lyric releases, and then photos of an international world tour, before concluding with images from awards shows. As previously indicated, 'Bad Blood' served as the breakthrough video for Taylor's 'reinvention' and 39 photos alone were devoted to promoting the track, most of which depicted her celebrity friends. This construction of Taylor's power vis-à-vis association to other famous individuals was not unnoticed; *Vanity Fair* magazine ran a cover of Taylor with the following feature: "Captain of the Girlsquad and most influential 25-year-old in America", and in a span of 60 weeks, she went from 50 million followers on Instagram to 94.2 million.

Importantly, media representation – in both traditional and social formats– forms a crucial element in the relationship between consumer and producer, so that judgment, ranking and evaluation make Taylor, the product and the brand, legible. This kind of popularity works to legitimatize Taylor as a site for gendered, neoliberal self-presentations within normative standards of judgment. The promise of media interactivity is the promise of a new imaginative script, where subject formation can take place on a different terrain – one with new conditions of imaginability for identity formation. However, within a neoliberal configuration of commercial social networking sites, such as Instagram, the space is fraught with contradictions. As my analysis indicates, self-disclosure in one context (e.g., on Instagram) can be empowering for an ideal like Taylor; yet it is concurrently a form of self-branding that is prescribed by a limiting cultural script. For example, Taylor's construction as an empowered woman is not without merit: she sold 1.28 million copies of *1989* within the first week of its release (Caulfield, 2014), and she has won 11 Grammy awards. However, she owes her privileged position to the backing of cultural industries and meritocratic ideals which help render invisible an unfair system. She reinvented herself, but only within the confines dictated by the market and music industry. Though she successfully transitioned to becoming a pop star, her discursive formation ultimately remained the same: she has never fully been able to shake-off the alignment with her 'girl-next-door' image – whether this is to provide a counter to the representation produced by peer artists such as Miley, or as part of the branding of a product that cannot alienate fans. Given that her representation as an ideal figure type is part of a larger power nexus in which hegemonic, neoliberal femininities are normalized, further questions arise in relation to the shifting nature of feminism and feminist identities in the U.S.

4.4 Discussion

Because this research seeks to understand how neoliberalism's ideal constituents are constituted through discourse, the use of text-based data sources has been congruent with my overarching methodological approach. At the outset of analysis, I had selected Instagram as my primary dataset. After having initially coded 836 photos and 130 videos, I had a much better sense of the patterned narratives that emerged, and the way that they are linked to ideals espoused by neoliberal feminism. However, this method was limited in that I was not able to understand – on a deeper level – how such discourses participated in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that

the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to. Subsequently, content analysis was complemented with discourse and visual analysis. The amount of data and material associated with Taylor is vast, and I had to make critical decisions – decisions about not only what to analyze, but also what to include in the narration of my analysis. To help on this front, I asked how each text connected with the contemporary moment – specifically, I asked how it reflects or rejects the views of society, and how it connects with similar texts. In this section, I will extend my analysis further to focus on the challenges and opportunities that arise when a selection of feminist values appears to be inscribed within a more determined attempt – undertaken by pop cultural forces – to re-shape notions of feminism so that it complements the requirements of the neoliberal agenda.

4.4.1 Popular Sisterhood

In the introduction, I claimed that the modern social contract in the U.S. has evolved to a point where women are no longer de facto excluded in its remit. I have argued that the contemporary push for 'equal participation' in the global economy signifies the ambitious reach of neoliberalism, whose wide-ranging and pervasive influence means that its principles have become not only 'common-sense', but also an active forcefield of political values. My empirical analysis demonstrates the many ways neoliberalism has entered a symbiotic relationship with feminism, and in this section, I want to examine this relationship more closely, as it is articulated through Taylor's discourse.

In an interview with the *Daily Beast* in 2012, Taylor is reported as making the following statement with regard to feminism:

> "I don't really think about things as guys versus girls. I never have. I was raised by parents who brought me up to think if you work as hard as guys, you can go far in life" (Frizell, 2014).

Ideologically, this quote is emblematic of the updated social contract that combines commitment to meritocratic ideals with the gender-blind optics of neoliberal feminism. Practically, it reads as a misunderstanding of the definition of feminism, and a subsequent distancing from the term, as it was believed to carry a negative connotation. Two years later, Taylor updated her statement: "I didn't understand that saying you're a feminist is just saying that you hope women and men will

have equal rights and equal opportunities", Taylor said in an interview with *The Guardian.* "What it seemed to me, the way it was phrased in culture, society, was that you hate men" (Frizell, 2014). And in 2014, she not only embraced the ideology, but also became one of its leading celebrity proponents. I argue that as a part of her adherence to strict neoliberal codes, her 'reinvention' strategy incorporated the cultivation of female friendships in order to recast her image as a serial dater to serial befriender. This is most clearly illustrated by the cover story that *Time* magazine ran on Taylor in November 2014, right after the release of *1989.* Taylor discursively constructs herself – through her 'Squad' – as a champion of good-girl, 'bestie' (best-friend) feminism. Even in 'Bad Blood', a song from *1989* about an intense rivalry with another female performer, she has found a way to channel 'negativity' into something positive. A *New York Times* review of the video claimed that it is a "feminist superhero fantasy, with oodles of famous guests – proof of the power and depth of Ms. Taylor's rolodex and her desire to form alliances more than cast aspersions" (Caramanica, 2015). Taylor's discourse is suggestive of using 'feminism' to her advantage. In the late 90s, the *Spice Girls* reconfigured feminism to be synonymous with 'girl power', and in doing so, remade pop stardom into a narrative about modern 'can-do' femininity.

The term girl-power has become normalized in a popular culture that is embedded in a neoliberal sociopolitical climate. David Gauntlett (2002) conceptualized girl power as a celebration of female friendship, as well as self-belief and independence, and illustrated it by drawing a direct link between music culture and the arrival of the *Spice Girls* on the pop scene in 1996. In line with neoliberal principles, the group's message – repeated across interviews and lyrics – is about fulfilling dreams, going against expectations and embodiment of the entrepreneurial spirit by creating opportunities for success (which, interestingly, is the subject of Taylor's most popular video, 'Bad Blood'). The *Spice Girls* positioned themselves as late 20th century modernizers who represented an updated, feminized version of empowerment. In their book *Girl Power*, they claim:

> "Feminism has become a dirty word. Girl power is just a nineties way of saying it. We can give feminism a kick up the arse. Women can be so powerful when they show solidarity" (1997, p. 48).

Taylor also capitalizes on the girl power motif and image of solidarity through the creation of her 'Squad'. Alongside her Victoria's Secret supermodel friends, Taylor offers a vision of success and

vitality to Millennials in a world where sexually attractive, young women are the most visible and fetishized image of femininity.

The construction of Taylor's squad brings to light the many negative emotions that can also be attached to the concept of girl squads that Taylor's narrative of solidarity ignores. The people who buy her music would, in real life, most likely never be allowed into a group comprised of the supermodel girls who fill Taylor's own ranks. By cloaking her 'squad goals' in a veil of neoliberal feminist inclusivity, Taylor offers up a discursive invitation to the millions of girls watching, while ignoring the painful reality of how squads truly work. A squad is not always a source of feminist social support or a space of nurturing female friendship amidst misogyny. Often, it is a more subtle extension of adolescent hierarchy that creates further divide; to have a squad in the first place is to say there are those who are 'in', and those who are unworthy of entry. This fosters competition, reinforces ideals of merit and further exacerbates inequalities.

Like the *Spice Girls*, Taylor has been criticized for being a commercial feminist. As I traced in the literature review, the individualist feminism of neoliberal consumer culture currently occupies significant terrain in the landscape of celebrity feminism. Results from my content analysis of Taylor's Instagram account showed how she was simultaneously able to reinforce her gendered identity through product promotion and consumption. Taylor's highly visible endorsements and mediated appearances serve to cement the link between neoliberal feminism and financial empowerment. Behind such commercial claims to sisterhood is a discourse that dovetails neatly with the neoliberalization of identity and femininity in contemporary U.S. culture. In contemporary neoliberal society and economy, power is defined in terms that are increasingly competitive and individualistic, and measured by wealth. Taylor has been discursively constructed as a hard-worker who has earned her success. However, the individual focus on her success concurrently undermines the solidarity and collective action (upon which Taylor has capitalized), that serve to produce real social change and gender equality in the long term.

In the case of Taylor, it is important to note that I have coded and analyzed 'independence' and 'self-actualization' differently. Paradoxically, despite her highly visible, public salute to female solidarity, Taylor's discursive construction is one in which Millennial women are invited to

interpellate the celebrated neoliberal ideal of individual achievement. Taylor and her 'Squad' identify themselves – and are identified by others – as feminists, but they also espouse individualism, the heteronormative self as an entrepreneurial project, and hierarchy between women. While Taylor demonstrates a shift within the context of feminism in that she acknowledges that 'feminism' is now relevant (or popular), she does so within the neoliberal context of capitalism (as outlined by Brown, 2015) – by advocating personal responsibility, and by investing in herself in such a way so as to appreciate her stock value by attracting a greater number of followers. Under neoliberal logic, it is therefore unsurprising that she is courted by not only the media industries, but also the corporations, in a bid to further legitimize hegemonic ideals of femininity.

In the following section, I will examine how Taylor's narrative reflects hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of a specific social category, such as gender, and construct an homogenized 'ideal' member. The findings presented thusfar suggest that Taylor crafts a specific gendered identity as both a product of and response to new and emerging neoliberal economic arrangements inherent in the modern social contract. Her career trajectory works as proof that the meritocratic formula for success in the U.S. still works, despite the turbulent economic upheavals. For a generation that is facing a profound lack of security in linear progress and mobility, her narrative of success provides a solution; however, this is a solution for a very particular ideal type of Millennial woman, one who is White, heterosexual, and middle-class.

4.4.2 Racialized Sisterhood

As previously discussed, public conversations around contemporary feminism are increasingly indexed to particular celebrity figures. Popular articles like "Celebrity Feminists are Hurting Feminism" identify celebrity feminists who appear threatening to a more 'authentic' version of feminism (Juergen, 2013). Other articles, like Roxane Gay's (2014) "Emma Watson? Jennifer Lawrence? These Are Not the Feminists You're Looking For" liken feminist celebrities to purveyors of a gateway feminism that is 'lite', or not sufficiently complex to be aligned and associated with the movement. However, as Wicke (1994) argues, there is no authentic feminism

that exists beyond its popular culture, celebrity manifestations. My selection of neoliberal cases will attest to the notion that celebrity discourse rarely addresses complex issues such as systemic inequalities, racialized sexualization or a lack of feminist education.

Going back to the aforementioned video 'Bad Blood', Taylor harnesses the affective assemblage of female friendship to represent the benefits of belonging to her 'Squad'. The video went on to be nominated for 'Video of the Year' in 2015 by the MTV Video Music Awards. In response to this, rapper and songwriter Nicki Minaj critiqued the way in which Black women are marginalized in the industry in favor of those promoting slim bodies. Her popular music video 'Anaconda' failed to receive a nomination, and in a series of tweets, she alludes to 'other' girls getting the nod for the top prize:

> "When the 'other' girls drop a video that breaks records and impacts culture they get that nomination" (Minaj, 2015).

Hours later, this tweet was followed by:

> "Black women influence pop culture so much but are rarely rewarded for it" (ibid).
>
> "If your video celebrates women with very slim bodies, you will be nominated for vid of the year" (ibid).

In the middle of Minaj's ongoing tweets, Taylor Swift decided to step in and make herself the subject of those statements by tweeting:

> "I've done nothing but love & support you. It's unlike you to pit women against each other. Maybe one of the men took your slot.." (Swift, 2015).

In this exchange, Nicki Minaj did not explicitly name Taylor, but claimed to be speaking to her own experiences as a Black woman in the music industry and its subsequent affect on her career. Nicki was blaming a system, which she calls "White media" (Minaj, 2015) that favors women like Taylor. By using the affect of girlfriendship, Taylor employs the technique of silencing Nicki's critique, and re-directs blame to men. In this way, she renders invisible the way women continue to be oppressed by categories other than gender.

I have chosen to include this noteworthy Twitter exchange given the volume of attention it garnered online. Scholarship by Isaksen and Eltantawy (2019) explored this interaction in further depth by examining not only the tweets, but also the fan response. They concluded that Taylor's neoliberal form of feminism reinscribes the oppression that she claims to oppose. While I recognize the merit of this argument, I think it further substantiates Hamad and Taylor's claims that no 'authentic' feminism exists amongst celebrities, and there is little to no consensus that exists on what is meant by the term 'feminism' (Hamad & Taylor, 2015, p. 125).

This was not the first time Taylor's logic of solidarity was used to sidestep a media system that has historically benefitted and glorified White hegemonic ideals. In an attempt to persuade female comedians Tina Fey and Amy Poehler to stop making jokes about her, Taylor quoted Madeline Albright when saying, "There's a special place in hell for women who don't help other women". This reasoning is a cornerstone of her self-styling as a feminist, which is the notion that all women have a particular responsibility to help each other.

With this in mind, Isaksen and Eltantawy's (2019) racialized critique of Taylor's feminism could have benefitted from a historical contextualization of Taylor's performances at the VMAs. It should be noted that the racial politics of award-shows had been spectacularly called out six years earlier. As Taylor was accepting her award for 'Best Female Video', she was famously interrupted by Kanye West, who rushed the stage to declare that Beyoncé should have won for 'Single Ladies', but was denied the award on account of her race. In this light, Kanye was discursively constructed as a "demonic, black interloper", while Taylor was portrayed as an innocent "victim" (Cullen, 2016, pp. 36-37). Over the next year, this incident was imbued with an intensely symbolic political dimension that cemented Taylor's representation in the public imagination as a woman marked by Whiteness. In both awards contexts (2009 and 2015), these highly visible interactions were fueled by a larger set of political conflicts surrounding race and gender that were taking place across the cultural landscape in the U.S.

The dramatic interruption at the VMAs worked to mark boundaries by constructing certain individuals and behaviors in terms of 'us' and 'them', and 'good' and 'bad'. Representations are frames for understanding how and why the world works in particular ways. Celebrity

representations are part of a cultural discourse that reinforces a hierarchy found in society, and more often than not, it is a hierarchy that privileges Whites. The aforementioned studies by Dubrofsky (2016) and Isaksen & Eltantawy (2019) also included Miley Cyrus. Her discourse was considered alongside Taylor's in order to problematize the Whiteness of the neoliberal subject, who is mobilized to convert inequality from a structural to an individual matter. In this way, the academics argue (in accordance with McRobbie, 2009) that Miley and Taylor participate in a profound undoing of feminism in the way that Whiteness as a cultural dominant is re-instated. However, my analysis of Millennial pop star Miley Cyrus demonstrates that the White privilege enjoyed by Taylor does not extend to Whites of lower socio-economic status. For example, specifics of Miley Cyrus' Whiteness are made visible by repeated 'hillbilly' references, and the foregrounding of her rural Tennessee roots in the Disney television show *Hannah Montana*. In the construction of the 'White Trash' stereotype, race and class intersect to exemplify how White people should not be. The largely negative public reception of Cyrus' brand of overtly sexual feminism can be contrasted with the far more positive celebration of the neoliberal feminist credentials of Taylor, however the comparison of and distinction between the two female performers are indicative of class-based discrimination. This highlights what is at stake in choosing not to interrogate the "exclusionary operations by which 'positions' are established" (Butler & Scott, 1992, p. xiv) in determining the appropriate spokespeople for neoliberal feminism. In this way, the failure to explore the intersectional relationships between axes other than race (such as class, religion, etc.) means that advocates of a more collective feminism risk reconstituting the very inequalities they purport to oppose. However, this intersectional aspect of the neoliberal feminine ideal – as she is raced and classed – will be explored in greater detail in Chapters Five and Six.

4.5 Conclusion

In this Chapter, I offered a brief discussion of the contemporary cultural climate in the U.S., and the rhetoric that shapes cultural notions of the interactive subject, such as the Millennial, who – in this unique historical moment – has the opportunity to realize her individual empowerment through social media. I examined the ways in which contemporary relationships between Millennials and identity-making have been framed, especially in terms of celebrity and neoliberal feminism. I further discussed neoliberalism as a central framework for normalizing and analyzing Millennial

practices on Instagram, unpacking the ideals shaping the discursive and ideological space of the platform.

I have addressed how the construction of Taylor Swift is done in order to fit within new and emerging neoliberal economic and social arrangements that valorize characteristics of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. In this way, her construction provides a response to the crisis of neoliberalism that sees Millennials encounter a profound lack of security and upward mobility on account of the two economic cataclysms. Because Taylor's core constructed persona is one of 'America's Sweetheart', her career trajectory has followed a limited cultural script in which she could attempt to change her image (e.g., by the cross-over from country to pop), but only within certain confines of what the market has dictated as acceptable. Furthermore, her adaptability to market changes can be read as a response to the havoc wrought by the financial crisis by way of incorporating neoliberal logics that empower the Millennial woman: resilience and self-reliance. She has gained substantial social power by choosing not to break from the disciplinary regime of neoliberalism, but to conform to it.

As a result, her construction as a Millennial ideal can be read as a part of a larger neoliberal power nexus in which hegemonic femininities and ways of living are normalized. In theory, it is her entire "belief system" (Swift, 2020) as a kid that created the conditions for her success as an adult. In practice, her career trajectory renders spectacularly visible the ways the American 'formula' for success still holds true. My findings suggest that Taylor's discursive formation speaks to a contemporary neoliberal ethos in which meritocracy and self-governing rhetoric are advanced. Her highly visible, highly commercialized and highly individualized alignment with 'feminism' should raise further questions about the shifting nature of feminism and feminist identities in the U.S. She has gained substantial social power by choosing to conform to the disciplinary regimes of neoliberal femininity, and as this analysis demonstrates, her relationship to feminism is constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas. In this way, Taylor serves as the ideal response to the crisis of neoliberalism, precisely because she is able to replicate its structure by adopting its logic.

Chapter Five: Beyoncé Knowles Carter – Queen Bey

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I addressed how the construction of Taylor Swift supports neoliberal economic and social logic, specifically through its focus on and celebration of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. I argued that Taylor's figure has gained substantial discursive coherence through its subscription to disciplinary regimes of contemporary femininity. For a generation that is not only struggling to find its identity, but is also facing a profound lack of linear progress and mobility on account of the financial crises in the last 20 years, Taylor's discursive construction provides a solution. However, I concluded by arguing that Taylor's construction serves to promote and legitimize a solution for a very particular ideal type of Millennial woman: one who is White, heterosexual, and middle-class.

As I began to uncover in the previous chapter, independence is upheld as the ideal in not only the American popular imagination, but also the current neoliberal arrangement. By comparison, someone who is *dependent* on the government, such as the stereotype of a Welfare Queen, represents both a moral aberration, as well as an economic drain. Crucially, her 'problematic' status becomes ever more threatening once it is attributed to the destruction of the 'American way of life', which has, since the revolution, so valorized independence that it stripped dependency of any positive associations, emphasized its relationship with powerlessness, and imbued it with stigma (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). In this chapter, I advance the argument that Beyoncé has emerged and has sustained her celebrity presence because she concurrently indicates and a provides a response to the contemporary reproduction crisis that is both gendered and raced: the dependent Black woman. It is against the context of the pernicious stereotypes such as the Welfare Queen and the Strong Black Woman that I set out to uncover how Beyoncé's discursive construction challenges normative conceptions of Black femininity and reconfigures dominant stereotypes, while creating and perpetuating a new, racial variation of the neoliberal ideal.

In order to contextualize my analysis, I will complete a genealogy of the Welfare Queen and Strong Black Woman. This is to foreground the emergence of each figure in the popular imagination. In

a similar way to Taylor's genealogy, this account may appear descriptive and significantly less analytical, but I argue that it is an especially crucial foundation that enables me to later analyze Beyoncé as a site of performances of Black Millennial femininity that overturn tropes that have historically rendered the Black woman as socially deviant; in doing so, she provides the blueprint for ideal neoliberal femininity, as it is both gendered and raced (and implicitly classed). Beyoncé is one of the most visible performers in hip hop music, and her discursive construction shapes in significant ways what it means to be a successful Black Millennial, and what it means to be an independent and empowered modern woman and mother more broadly. In the previous chapter, I drew on previous scholarship on neoliberal feminism to uncover the way patterns of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention manifest in the celebrity ideal. Because Beyoncé's specific 'feminist' identity has been framed through the lens of gender and race, this chapter draws on theories of Black feminism, connecting them to the theoretical critiques of neoliberal feminism that informed the previous chapter. I apply elements from scholar Daphne Brooks' (2008) concept of 'Black feminist surrogation' to Beyoncé's discursive formation in order to explore the contemporary representation of the Black Millennial woman in U.S. popular culture, and highlight how it intersects with identities of race and gender. Brooks (2008) defined this concept as an embodied performance of sociopolitical grief and loss – aspects that I will take up further in Chapter Seven. However in this chapter, I use her concept of 'surrogation' as it is effected through performances that "resist, revise and reinvent the politics of Black female hypervisibility in the American cultural imaginary" (Brooks, 2008, p. 180). I combine her insights with the work of Melissa Harris-Perry (2015), who offers a more positive outlook on the embodied performances of Black women, arguing that their bodies are not exclusively those of destructive assault, but also know joy, pleasure and subjectivity.

Unlike my other two celebrity cases, constructing Beyoncé as a Black feminist surrogate allows me to analyze the way she uses her voice in service of the collective. The analysis in this chapter extends this theory of surrogation by using Beyoncé's discursive construction to argue that she deepens and expands the work of neoliberal feminism through the lens of Black femininity and motherhood. Through a multimodal analysis of Beyoncé's lyrics, music videos, live performances and social media, I further examine the way societal ideals have come to achieve epistemological coherence in the contemporary cultural climate – and the way by which these core neoliberal tenets

(independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention) map onto the Black Millennial woman in particular. The chapter is thus divided into two sections, each starting with a discussion of the historical context of a particular aspect of the construction of the Black woman in the American popular imagination, against which the analysis of how Beyoncé's image is reconfiguring this aspect in the image of neoliberalism is presented. The thematic analysis is guided by the neoliberal codes of independence and self-actualization (which are analyzed in section two), and self-reinvention (which is discussed in section three). These codes served to inform which texts were selected for in-depth analysis.

Previous scholarship (Avdeeff, 2016) has examined Beyoncé's use of Instagram as a means of celebrity branding and connection with fans, and in my empirical analysis, I opted to code Beyoncé's albums instead of her social media account (although noteworthy Instagram posts were analyzed using discourse and visual analysis). Tensions will be teased out and further elucidated; as I have previously indicated in the methodology chapter, texts do not exist in a vacuum, but rather occur in sustained dialogue with other discourses. Furthermore, certain texts were selected for analysis in order to participate in wider academic debates on the intersection of race and celebrity feminism. Much scholarship has emerged over the last decade that explores how Beyoncé has crafted her identity in complex, fluid and multidimensional ways that challenge mainstream expectations for Black women. My study is by no means exhaustive, and as such, I will acknowledge the work that has been central to the debates on Beyoncé's articulation of feminism. The literature that I have drawn upon to theoretically explore Beyoncé's brand of feminism is interwoven throughout the chapter, and the previous empirical work that has been conducted on her mediated image will be incorporated into my analysis where relevant.

5.2 Racialized Crises

Beyoncé's discursive construction as an ideal type suggests that Black Millennials make something of themselves in spite of difficulty, becoming not only the product of, but also the response to, the interrelated crises of education, work and reproduction. While her construction disrupts the negative stereotypical image of the Welfare Queen, it concurrently obscures the fact that Blacks are below national norms in indicators such as housing, income and education (Garcia

& Weiss, 2017). When the aforementioned crises map onto gender and race, there are profound implications for modern constructions of ideal types of Millennial femininity, specifically as it relates to motherhood. Before turning to examine the way Beyoncé's discourses offer a model response to the crises, I will now elaborate upon the racialized aspect in greater detail.

The financial and educational crises represent a turn in the American narrative of 'equal opportunity' by imposing constraints on the individuals attempting to gain franchise in the world of work. This not only cuts across class, but also race and gender. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, women are more likely to enroll in college than men, but they are also borrowing at a higher rate than men. The updated social contract is gender- and race- blind in that men and women are expected to achieve the American Dream which sees Millennials rationally going into debt – but Black women have the highest student loan debt of any racial or ethnic group (AAUW, 2017). Black Millennial borrowing rates (for both Associate and Bachelor's degrees) exceed their White counterparts by 17% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Not only do they borrow at a higher rate, but the data indicate that despite the lower rate of enrolling in college, Black students also borrow more, thereby contributing to the sustained racial wealth gap. Furthermore, the recession's unequal impact is more pronounced when analyses factor in race and gender. As of January 2021, Black women have suffered some of the steepest spikes in unemployment and have fallen victim to the largest drops in labor force participation since the pandemic began (Rattner & Franck, 2021). As a result, they face greater economic insecurity, due in part to unprecedented unemployment.

As indicated in the introduction, in the 21st century, Millennials often shuttle back and forth between postsecondary education and precarious employment, a phenomenon known as 'waithood' (Milkman, 2017); and as a result, traditional markers of adulthood have become increasingly delayed, disorderly and reversible (Silva, 2013). However, when mapped onto race, the compounded crises (financial, educational and reproductive) have even more significant implications for Black Millennial women. The racialized aspect of the reproduction crisis must also be considered.

Between the years of 2007 and 2012, all races experienced a decline in the number of births, but the largest was amongst Hispanics, as the rate dropped 26%, followed by African American women, whose birth rates fell 14% in the same five-year period. Furthermore, racial disparities continue in pregnancy-related *deaths*. From 2007 to 2016, 6,765 pregnancy-related deaths occurred in the U.S., with the highest percentage (40.8) among Black women – a rate 3.2 times the pregnancy related deaths for White women (Astone et al., 2015). As Nash (2019, p. 29) observes, Black mothers are, by all accounts, in crisis.

To better understand the compounded nature of these three interwoven crises (reproductive, financial and educational), it is crucial to note that racial disparities in pregnancy-related deaths increase with age – the disparity between Black and White women was highest among those aged 30–34 years. Additionally, racial disparities were noticeable at the education level. Among women with at least a college-level education, the pregnancy related mortality ratio for Black women was 5.2 times higher than that of their White counterparts (Petersen et al., 2019). This evidence suggests that when the student debt crisis and financial crisis map onto gender, there are not only profound implications for modern constructions of motherhood, but specifically racialized motherhood.

I will now turn to examining the way Beyoncé's discourses offer a model response to both the financial and reproductive crises through an emphasis on building a foundation for stability – both economic and marital. Her discursive construction demonstrates the normalized way to 'have it all' – which is after establishing a career and getting married. Beyoncé's construction solidifies career, family and lifestyle options as interrelated markers of neoliberal success, thereby cementing the logic behind traditional markers of adulthood, and ensuring that they have not become delayed or reversible despite political and economic upheaval. More specifically, in investing the modern Black woman and mother with new meanings related to economic independence and self-sufficiency, Beyoncé has placed the Black feminine subject squarely at the heart, and arguably in the service of, the neoliberal imagination.

5.3 Independent Women

As per the updated social contract, a commitment to meritocratic ideals has combined with the colorblind optics of neoliberal feminism to engender a troubling crisis that implicates the Millennial woman in its address. In this section I focus on how, as a discursive formation, Beyoncé provides a response to the troubling financial crisis that has afflicted the Millennial generation by specifically reinforcing the meritocratic underpinning of the neoliberal ethos in the U.S.; to re-iterate, meritocracy places the burden of success on the individual, whereby primacy of the self, pursuit of self-interest and market-based determinations of achievement and moral worth are widely embraced.

Beyoncé's discursive construction challenges the stereotype of the Welfare Queen, and her initial representation suggests a highly visible reconfiguration of the Black woman who is 'lazy' and 'dependent' to one who is 'motivated' and 'independent'. Following a discussion of the centrality of the former narrative in the American popular imagination, I turn to presenting a content and discourse analysis of 'Independent Women', the theme song from the 2000 'feminist' blockbuster film *Charlie's Angels,* to show how Beyoncé's discourse works to reconfigure negative stereotypes of Black American women, such as the Welfare Queen. The analysis shows that, on the one hand, Beyoncé's lyrical choices do not entirely depart from these patterns. On the other hand, I show how Beyoncé's lyrics introduce a new emphasis, which is reinforced by her image, namely conspicuous consumption and materialism. I will conclude by offering a critique of the way independence, as it operates as a core tenet of neoliberal feminism, has been constructed in the popular imagination.

5.3.1 Stereotypes of Black Women in the American Popular Imagination: The Welfare Queen


(Figure 3.1)

At a campaign rally in 1976, Ronald Reagan disseminated the myth of the Welfare Queen:

> "In Chicago, they found a woman who holds the record. She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running $150,000 a year" (Levin, 2013).

Although Reagan had been known to exaggerate the truth, he did not imagine the woman in the aforementioned quote. In Figure 3.1 is a photograph of Linda Taylor – the 'thief' who drove her Cadillac to the public aid office – who became the embodiment of a pernicious American stereotype: the Welfare Queen. The Welfare Queen became a convenient villain in the popular imagination – she was a woman everyone could hate. She represented the lazy Black con artist, who was unashamed of siphoning money that 'honest folks' worked so hard to earn.

(Figure 3.2)

In the critically acclaimed film, *Precious,* the mother – Mary – is the epitome of the Welfare Queen who uses her daughter and grandchild to obtain money from the welfare department. In Figure 3.2, the still image from the movie depicts the stereotype of the Welfare Queen in that she is portrayed as being happy to shun work; instead she is content sitting around on the couch, cultivating bad habits (such as smoking and an unchecked diet), which in addition to poor values, she then passes on to her offspring. This cycle thereby perpetuates what sociologist Charles Murray refers to as a 'culture of poverty' (Murray, 1984). The key work this image does is to provide the ideological justification for intersectional oppression: Blacks can be racially stereotyped as being 'lazy' by blaming welfare mothers for failing to pass on a hard-work ethic to the next generation.

Creating the stereotype of the welfare mother and admonishing her as the cause of her own poverty (and that of Black communities), diverts the angle of vision away from structural sources and turns the attention to the individual woman. The representation of the welfare mother serves to provide ideological justification for elite interest in limiting the fertility of Black mothers, who have been historically perceived as producing too many economically unproductive children (Collins, 1991). The Welfare Queen is a stereotypical representation that has been used by both Republican and Democratic Party administrations not only to criminalize poor people, but also to justify cuts in social programs.

The politics of welfare, however, did not evolve without contestation. At the very moment when welfare became a hotly debated issue, Black women on welfare organized to challenge not only

the punitive, discriminatory and dehumanizing nature of the welfare program, but also the perversion of democratic attention, an inegalitarian communicative media context, the failure of representational thinking, and a general lack of solidarity. Despite their efforts, the stereotypical image of the Welfare Queen has had enormous longevity and breadth (Collins, 1991). The discursive hegemony of the public narrative of the Welfare Queen prevents accurate information about welfare recipients from being integrated into citizens' pre-existing beliefs about their identities. It also serves to bombard welfare recipients with demeaning images of who society says she should be.

5.3.2 Independence and Self-Actualization

It is against this context that I now turn to examine how Beyoncé's discursive formation has served as a catalyst for reconfiguring the negative stereotype of the Welfare Queen and the accompanying social politics of disgust against poor Black mothers that it has instigated and nourished (Hancock, 2004). As indicated in Chapter Three, a thematic analysis was the initial starting point for this empirical research, because it allowed for a very large corpus of data to be refined according to prominent themes. The naming of the codes resulted from the theoretical framework and preliminary immersion in the textual material, and the neoliberal themes of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention guided the analysis of the data collected in relation to Beyoncé. These codes served to inform which texts were then selected for deeper discourse or visual analysis.

As previously mentioned, the media texts that were selected were chosen on account of their popularity, wide circulation or for being a noteworthy text that functions to make sense of the complex configurations of ideal neoliberal femininity in American popular culture. I now present a content and critical discourse analysis of 'Independent Women', the theme song from the 2000 'feminist' blockbuster film *Charlie's Angels.* By applying critical discourse analysis to one of Beyoncé's most popular early career song lyrics, I aim to show how she has disrupted the negative stereotype of the Welfare Queen by establishing and promoting a close link between the modern Black woman and mother, and economic agency and financial independence. The analysis shows that, on the one hand, Beyoncé's lyrical choices do not entirely depart from neoliberal patterns. On the other hand, I show how Beyoncé's lyrics introduce a new emphasis, which is reinforced by

her image, namely conspicuous consumption and materialism. I will conclude by offering a critique of the way independence and self-actualization, as they operate as core tenets of neoliberal feminism, have been constructed in the popular imagination, before moving on to a discussion of Beyoncé's feminism, as it has been framed in academic debates.

5.3.2.1 Charlie's Angels

Since the early days of her mediated appearance, Beyoncé's construction has highlighted independence, especially financial independence, as a vital characteristic of desirable femininity (or womanhood). This theme is most prominent in her song 'Independent Women'. The song first appeared as the soundtrack to the 2000 film, *Charlie's Angels*. Since the television series debut in 1976, *Charlie's Angels* has been comprised of strong female leads whose images have been central to American popular culture negotiations over feminism and femininity. The multiple iterations of the famous film are suggestive of the way conceptions of femininity move through a process of hegemonic negotiation in which feminist discourses that seek to challenge and dismantle patriarchy are more often incorporated into them. This then helps to sustain the very structures of dominance such discourses have set out to critique and destroy (Levine, 2008). Viewed in this way, the history of *Charlie's Angels* from the 1970s to today is a history of what can be termed neoliberal feminism. As a popular text that has been regularly deployed in broader discursive struggles over feminism and femininity, the movie *Charlie's Angels*, along with the theme song, 'Independent Women', offer a particularly appropriate venue for my analysis.

5.3.2.1.1 Independent Women

Beyoncé's song 'Independent Women' was released in 2001, so its analysis should be read in a socio-political climate that served as an extension of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act put forth by the Clinton administration. The song converges with Clinton's make-over of the ideal neoliberal subject, whereby the public identity of the Welfare Queen highlights individual behavior as the primary cause of poverty, drawing particularly on the political values of economic individualism (and sexual morality). As such, independence is one of the most prominent themes of Beyoncé's early work, as indicated by the lyrics of 'Independent Women' from the soundtrack of *Charlie's Angels* (2000):

If you're gonna brag,
make sure it's your money you flaunt,
don't depend on no one else to give you what you want.

Through these lyrics, Beyoncé attempts to reconfigure the prevailing image of the Black woman and Welfare Queen, who has been judged, at all levels, to be shirking her responsibility to carry her part of the load as a citizen. The Welfare Queen is constituted through discourse purporting that she 'usurps' the taxpayers money. However, an analysis of these lyrics connects discourses of popular culture with those of social and political change. Beyoncé serves as a venue through which discourses of contemporary identity and racial and gender equality are not only communicated, but also naturalized into a kind of 'common sense'.

In the following lyrics, she disrupts the negative stereotype of the Welfare Queen by establishing and promoting a close link between the modern Black Woman and mother and economic agency and financial independence. The lyrics glorify women who make their own money, and depend on themselves:

All the women, who are independent
Throw your hands up at me
All the honeys, who making money
Throw your hands up at me
All the mommas, who profit dollars
Throw your hands up at me.

Here, Beyoncé's discourse shifts the register from one of laziness and dependence to one of not only productivity, but also one of paid work. "Profit dollars" correlates with "hard work" and "sacrifice" (introduced later in the song, in line 34) to be coded under the neoliberal theme of self-actualization. Beyoncé's address to women as not only independent, but also money-makers, further cements the logic behind the updated social contract that I introduced in Chapter One. Furthermore, by making an inextricable link between success and money she subtly disavows the care work performed by individuals – across various economic strata – and not merely in regard to the Welfare Queen. As explained in the literature review on neoliberal feminism, it is through the explicit emphasis on participation in money generating activities that Beyoncé perpetuates the

neoliberal ethos whereby everything of worth or value is able to be captured by (or reduced to) market metrics.

The distinction between productivity and paid work is an important one to make, because unfortunately, under the Clinton administration, women's work in the home as a caretaker and mother was delegitimized. A woman, in particular a Black woman, was only afforded worth and visibility through her achievements that directly contributed to society in a way that could be quantified (Davis, 2004). The neoliberal ethos of self-responsibilization is articulated in illocutionary speech acts such as 'pull yourself up from your bootstraps'. The boundary drawing among Americans in general, and among Black women in particular, reveals that political hierarchy locations are maintained through a complex system of reward and punishment, within both political and social culture. Beyoncé's lyrics disguise the force with which such norms are enforced. In line 34 of 'Independent Women', Beyoncé relates the idea of hard work to independence and success:

> I worked hard and sacrificed to get what I get
> Ladies, it ain't easy being independent.

The song's overarching narrative of achievement reinforces meritocratic principles. This ties back to Chapter One and my previous theorization of meritocracy, which focuses attention on the faults of the individuals as opposed to the social structures that have conditioned the individual (Littler, 2018). One such structure that I discussed is the institution of education. Take for example the following line from 'Independent Women':

> Question, how'd you like this knowledge that I brought?

Throughout the song, Beyoncé poses three rhetorical questions. However, she immediately answers them in order to eliminate any chance of the listener arriving at his or her own conclusion. By asking a question, and offering the answer, she lays out the frame needed to advance her agenda. For example, the previous question works to position her as a 'preacher', who brings knowledge forward, and one whose discourse is a prescription for mass audiences, particularly

Black Millennials, to follow – in this case, her message to women is to be independent and earn her own money:

> Bragging on that cash that he gave you is to front
> If you're gonna brag make sure it's your money you flaunt
> Depend on no-one else to give you what you want.

The word 'depend', as it relates to relying on oneself, repeats throughout the song 7 times. This repetition reiterates the notion of self-sufficiency and self-responsibilization. Thus, while cajoling women to embrace this way of thinking, feeling and behaving, Beyoncé promotes a clear and sharp break from the Welfare Queen. She simultaneously reinforces the repudiation of dependence as abhorrent and shameful – the very politics that the Welfare Queen served to promote.

Importantly, 'Independent Women' constructs the ideal Black Millennial as not only a producer, but crucially, as a consumer. Independence in this song is associated with economic agency only insofar as it relates to the acquisition of material goods:

> I buy my own diamonds and I buy my own rings.

These lyrics are strategically positioned at the beginning of the song to fix the meaning of the song's title of independent women with financial independence, consumer power and autonomy. This meaning is then elaborated in the chorus:

> The shoe on my feet, I've bought it
> The clothes I'm wearing, I've bought it
> The rock I'm rockin', I've bought it.

In a refrain of 12 lines, the action of purchasing something is mentioned in six of the lines, thereby demonstrating how material goods work to constitute what it means to be 'independent'. These lyrics also advance the notion of 'bragging' as being directly related to financial independence, which is signified by material possessions (e.g., cribs, cars, clothes, shoes). Bragging rights, in this sense, are important to note, because Beyoncé flips the script to show how women can buy things with their own money earned through their hard work. Ironically, the materialistic image projected serves as a continuation, not a break from the Welfare Queen. Whereas the behavior of the Welfare

Queen was a parasite on the state, Beyoncé's discourse places the burden of materialistic acquisition on the self. In either representation, the focus on consumption is prevalent.

Thus, Beyoncé's lyrics work to seduce Black Millennials into consumer culture. Many of her other early lyrics proffer a similar message. Notably, the emphasis on and celebration of economic independence and consumer culture that are manifest in 'Independent Women' are supported by, and in turn reinforce Beyoncé's image. From her very entry into the mediated sphere –when she was a young recording artist in *Destiny's Child* to her later professional development – Beyoncé has embodied a culture of extravagant consumption where an endless cycle of manufactured desire maintains the demand for commodities, and where shopping is akin to one of the most fundamental human experiences.

Her mediated figure reinforces the message of the lyrics of 'Independent Women'. Beyoncé has received 28 Grammy awards (as of 2021) thereby rising to the top of the world's female singers, outselling established artists (with more than 120 million CDs sold) and diversifying into film and commercials. Beyoncé has multiple fashion lines and endorsement deals. She is the living embodiment of the American Dream – the narrative that reassures Americans, particularly young Black Millennials, that the social system is not flawed, as it continues to reward hard-working citizens. In turn, this appearance reinforces the message of her lyrics, thereby creating discursive coherence.

5.3.3 Discussion

Through her lyrics and mediated image that were previously analyzed, Beyoncé perpetuates a fundamentally neoliberal discourse. I argue that the release of 'Independent Women' serves as a catalytic moment that frames the neoliberal themes of independence and self-actualization, and identifies Beyoncé as explicitly feminist (even though she would not 'come out' as a 'feminist' until the release of her self-titled album Beyoncé in 2014). Through these lyrics, she displays what Weidhase (2015) argues is a basic and naïve, girl-power inspired feminism (which is similar to the feminism I identified in relation to Taylor). Though the debates surrounding Beyoncé's feminism did not appear more publicly, and more visibly, until over a decade later, the tensions are worth

pointing out now – following my analysis of 'Independent Women' – because they are discursively aimed at the neoliberal framework that I have been using to theorize the ideal Millennial woman.

One of the most noteworthy contributions to the canon of feminist scholarship on Beyoncé is a series of essays compiled in *The Beyoncé Effect* (Trier-Bieniek, 2016). The book begins with "Feminists debate Beyoncé" in which Janell Hobson (2016b) confronts critics of Beyoncé, such as bell hooks, who proffer a vision of feminism that neither calls for an end to patriarchal domination nor challenges intersectional hierarchies. In this way, it is argued that Beyoncé's discourse further infantilizes Black women, and repurposes mainstream Whiteness as a way to reject stereotypes of Blackness (as evidenced by my pervious analysis). Elsewhere, Cashmore (2010, p. 139) has argued that Beyoncé is at the center of "an immaculately ordered industry in which ethnic divisions mean nothing and racism is imperceptible".

As such, her mediated construction has led to what Whittington and Jordan (2016) have called 'Bey Feminism'. This is a term derived from Beyoncé's nickname – Queen Bey – and applied to a strand of Black feminism that allows for a more grassroots platform for women to start discussing feminism and embrace it in a world where feminism has remained rather elitist (Whittington Cooper, 2016, p. 204). Their work further extends the argument of Roxanne Gay (2014), who, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, has argued that celebrities like Beyoncé are merely a 'gateway' to the public embrace of feminism. I follow Hobson (2016a) who argues that despite accusations of exemplifying 'feminism lite', celebrities are not only articulating, but also are theorizing critical issues pertaining to gender, race and class. This is particularly true for the case of Beyoncé, as evidenced by the sheer volume of scholarship that presents the celebrity through a lens of Black and hip hop feminist thought, and intersectional social analysis, which I will examine in greater detail in the following section.

5.4 Building the Black Family

In this section, I will examine how Beyoncé's discourse breaks from her previous construction, finding that in her later career, her discursive formation moves away from the previously glamorized constructed myth of 'independence' and 'individualism' to embrace *interdependency* through marriage and motherhood. In this way, she offers a response to the racialized cultural crisis of the Strong Black Woman who subverts the 'traditional' markers of adulthood through *self*-reliance as a single woman. Similarly to the previous section on the Welfare Queen, this section begins with a brief discussion of the centrality of the Strong Black Woman narrative in the American popular imagination. As I have argued, an understanding of the emergence of this figure is crucial in order to examine the ways by which Beyoncé's mediated construction counters prevailing media discourses. Specifically, my analysis will center on two media texts – Beyoncé's 2011 Video Music Awards (VMA) performance and her 2017 record-breaking Instagram post – to better understand how her presentation of maternity and motherhood works to reconfigure the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman and the dysfunctional Black family. My multimodal analysis shows how Beyoncé's discursive construction serves to counter prevailing discourses that have devalued the Black female body, and have rendered the 'typical' Black family as comprised of "an absentee black father, and an unwed, poor, or welfare-dependent, black mother" (Chatman, 2015, p. 935).

5.4.1 Stereotypes of Black Women in the American Popular Imagination: The Strong Black Woman

Contrary to the Welfare Queen, research indicates that Black women highly endorse the Strong Black Woman stereotype, which is the perception that Black women are inherently resilient and self-sacrificing (Collins, 2004). Characterized as the essence of indestructible superhuman strength, the stereotype is often employed as a compliment that acknowledges the collective resilience of Black women (Donovan & West, 2015). The Strong Black Woman is either a single mother who is able to manage her household while working multiple jobs, or is on welfare, struggling, but still manages to make ends meet to feed her children. Alternatively, the Strong Black Woman is a highly educated workaholic who is single and will never marry – even the men

of her own race would not marry her – because she is too hard to love. The Strong Black Woman has been constructed as emasculating (Collins, 2004). Furthermore, she is too strong to be read as vulnerable; in a narrow, flattened construction of gender, this dominant steadfastness constitutes her as a bearer of masculine essence, as opposed to being the victim of oppressive systems that need to be dismantled. The Black woman's existence in a patriarchal context has been constructed in such a dynamic that she is by default someone who silently endures stress and pain as she carries the onerous weight of society's more oppressive systems, like slavery (Morgan, 1999).

While the characterization of the Strong Black Woman is framed positively, the stereotype ultimately proves problematic in that by re-routing the discourse as agentic, it concurrently denies her vulnerability and obscures the ways in which she is oppressed. In the words of self-proclaimed Strong Black Woman, Tamara Winfrey Harris, the stereotype is visualized as follows:

> "We are the fighters and the women who don't take shit from no man… the sassy women with the sharp tongues and hands firmly on our hips… the ride-or-die chicks. We are the women who have, like Sojourner Truth, 'plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me.' We are the mothers who make a way out of no way. On TV, we are the no-nonsense police chiefs and judges. We are the First Ladies with the impressive biceps" (Winfrey Harris, 2015).

Springer (2007, p. 259) argues that the epitome of the Strong Black Woman is Condoleeza Rice, the "professional black lady at the height of her success who disavows affirmative action, claims success based on merit only, and is determinedly asexual".

The more recent adoption of core neoliberal feminist notions of independence and self-actualization further perpetuates the stereotype in Black communities. In the previous section of this chapter, my analysis of the themes of 'independence' and 'self-actualization' explained how Beyoncé's mediated image and discourse assert that it is up to the individual woman to make her own way. Thus, while influencing women to embrace this way of thinking, feeling and behaving, Beyoncé reinforces the repudiation of dependence as shameful, without acknowledging the need for collective political action or offering a sustained critique of systemic injustices.

The trope of the resolute Strong Black Woman that has been ingrained in the American popular imagination pressures Black women to live up to the image, fueling a growing problem with depression and self-harm. Guised with adoration and superficial empowerment, the Strong Black Woman stereotype is constructed to applaud the Black woman for how well she keeps her dynamic emotions and complex issues from being outwardly expressed, while at the same time casting her as undesirable by men. This is where the myth of the 'independent' woman works to disempower all Black women by pathologizing their human emotions and vulnerabilities, and by creating barriers that limit access to social, political and economic support.

5.4.2 Self Re-invention

It is against this context that I will now turn to examine how Beyoncé's late-career discursive formation has served as a catalyst for reconfiguring the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman. I have divided my analysis into two subsections (interdependence and motherhood), which allow for a more coherent presentation of the data that has been coded as 'self-reinvention'. Using multimodal analysis, I examine Beyoncé's 2011 VMA performance and her 2017 record-breaking Instagram pregnancy-reveal to better understand how her presentation of maternity and motherhood works to simultaneously repudiate her prior image as an 'independent' woman, while investing the modern Black woman and mother with new meanings related to interdependence and transformative communal agency.

5.4.2.1 Interdependence

(Figure 3.3)

In this section, I will investigate the way Beyoncé's deployment of positively-coded representations of Black maternity and, crucially, 'co-parenthood' serve to re-work previous misconceptions of the Strong Black Woman in the popular imagination, which has historically rendered a 'typical' Black mother as single and self-sacrificing. Subjected to the conventions of race and gender that underpin celebrity culture, Beyoncé has spent the majority of her career negotiating the neoliberal norms that are typically critiqued by feminist scholars of intersectional identity politics (such as Cashmore, 2010; hooks, 2016), in order to maintain a celebrity status and level of fame that affords an advocacy platform (Frontin, 2018).

In 2011, she used that platform to publicly announce her pregnancy to the world. On the August 2011 broadcast of the MTV Music Video Awards (VMAs), Beyoncé took to the stage in a purple sequined blazer and invited the audience to stand up and feel the love growing inside of her. Throughout the upbeat song, she traversed the stage singing:

> Baby, you're the one that I love/
> Baby, you're the one that I need/
> Baby, you're the only one that I see.

As the song ended, Beyoncé dropped the microphone, turned sideways and rubbed her stomach in a circular motion, publicly revealing that she was expecting her first child. For the viewers watching the broadcast, the camera panned to Jay-Z, whose friend, Kanye West, grabbed his

shoulders and started shaking him enthusiastically. The brief moments at the end of her VMA performance are critical for examining how multiple discourses work to normalize both heterosexual marriage and Black women's role as mothers. As Beyoncé stood onstage, and Jay-Z looked on proudly, the audience screamed their support, thereby validating the union and parenthood of the duo who have come to be regarded as the "First Family" of the hip hop generation (Labennett, 2018, p. 155).

This exchange is noteworthy because images of a happily married Black couple embarking on parenthood together crucially serve to counter prevailing academic and media discourses that have rendered a 'typical' Black family as comprised of an absentee father and an unmarried mother (Chatman, 2015). In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis (2011 [1999], p.18) offers that the normative representations of marriage as the defining goal of women's lives blatantly contradict the social reality of Black women following emancipation. She argues that blues music has provided a space for prevailing ideals of wifehood and motherhood to be contested by artists who assert their own right to be respected as independent human beings and not appendages or victims of men. Davis analyzed the recorded songs of Bessie Smith (known as the 'Empress of Blues'), finding that 160 allude to rejection, abuse, desertion and unfaithful lovers. In my thematic analysis of Beyoncé's albums, 67 of 85 recorded songs were devoted to relationships, with 14 specifically related to themes of heartache, despair and broken promises. 37 songs were dedicated to the more promising and joyful aspects of partnership. 'Crazy in Love' (2003) – a song recorded by Beyoncé at the age of 21 – is premised on the celebration of the evolution of a woman who is in love (Tinsley, 2018, pp. 25-26). The music video featured her then-boyfriend Jay-Z, which has important analytical implications because she has been in a relationship with him over the entire course of her career as a recording artist. In this way, their mediated image as a couple reinforces the message of her lyrics, thereby creating discursive coherence. The visibility of couples like Beyoncé and Jay-Z, as well as Barack and Michelle Obama, provide an example that Black people are 'just like everyone else' (which in the U.S. tends to assume White, middle-class subjects), provided they make the right choices. Beyoncé's discursive construction demonstrates the normalized way to 'have it all' – which is after establishing a career and getting married.

The image of Beyoncé joyously rubbing her belly (Figure 3.3) as Jay-Z, Kanye and their fans enthusiastically celebrate the pregnancy announcement, works to reconfigure the understanding of love and intimate relationships in the Black community. Historically, Black families have been regarded as dysfunctional due to their deviation from the American ideal of the heteronormative, patriarchal nuclear family (Ferguson, 2004). While Beyoncé's broadcast performance works as a counter to the Strong Black Woman – by recasting her from 'single' and 'unable to attract a suitable partner' to 'married' and 'desirable' – it is also problematic as it reinforces the dominant gender ideology positing that a Black mother's true worth and journey to adulthood should occur through heterosexual marriage. Whittington and Jordan (2014) have noted that within Black communities, Black women face a double bind of their position within the community – and society more broadly – in order to empower themselves. This may help explain the tensions that arise between trying to balance mediated discourses that combine commitment to neoliberal ideals with an 'authentic' Black self. To illustrate, Smith (2017) notes that White feminists took issue with Beyoncé's celebration of wifehood (through her decision to name her tour 'Mrs. Carter World Tour'), and further critiqued their argument by countering that Black women's marriageability has been a frequent topic of discussion in the media, and – following in a similar vein to Rottenberg (2018) – questions whether Black women specifically can ever 'have it all' (Smith, 2017, p. 230).

The pregnancy announcement at the VMAs signals the salience of her intersecting identity as a both a Black married woman and a Black woman in gainful employment. I argue that the tensions between more patriarchal conventions of marriage and feminism do not preclude Beyoncé from celebrating her marriage and maternity, because they serve as a counter to the historical denigrating narrative that constitutes the Strong Black Woman as being unsuitable for marriage. However, other scholars have noted that while the blame is placed on Black women for being too strong, it shifts the frame of analysis by obscuring the role of the Black male in intimate relationships. In her work on the way the socio-politics of the Black family is played out through Beyoncé's mediated construction, scholar Aisha Durham analyzed the video 'Single Ladies' to posit that real single ladies are read as 'threating' because of a (perceived) "fragile black manhood and a broken black family" (Durham, 2014, p. 82). A point of tension arises in the way Beyoncé explicitly engages in the cultural production of self-articulation and empowerment, while implicitly advancing social politics that police Black women's behavior outside of marriage (Halliday &

Brown, 2018). As a response to such perceptions, Beyoncé's discourses offer a model response to Black familial dysfunction through an emphasis on building a foundation for both economic and marital stability. Her discursive construction demonstrates the normalized way to 'have it all'. Beyoncé's construction solidifies career, family and lifestyle options as interrelated markers of neoliberal success, thereby cementing the logic behind traditional markers of adulthood, and ensuring that they have not become delayed or reversible for women who conform to the modern social contract.

In this way, Beyoncé's rhetorical formations still speak to a neoliberal ethos in which meritocracy and self-governing rhetoric are advanced. In the same year as the VMA pregnancy announcement, she also released a song titled 'Run the World (Girls)' (2011) – dedicated to "all my girls that's in the club rocking the latest, who will buy it for themselves and get more money later". As exemplified by 'Independent Women' (which was analyzed in the first section), the woman who can go out and purchase "the latest" before heading back to work, places a strong emphasis on the correlation between success and materialism. In this song, success is not only tied to material goods, but also to self-actualization.

> I'm rapping for the girls who taking over the world
> Help me raise a glass for the college grads.

She implies that in "taking over the world", a college degree is necessary, and in doing so validates the logic behind educational advancement as a means of upward social mobility. She advertises neoliberal values in her shout-out to the women who put in the work and the hours:

> I work my 9 to 5, better cut my check
> This goes out to all the women getting it in
> you're on your grind.

In this song – 'Run the World (Girls)' – an emphasis is placed on women's ability to work, and the lyrics exemplify the strength of the woman who is career-focused. The ideal Millennial is smart, wealthy and can not only have it all, but can handle it all – she has a baby, and then, most importantly, she gets back to work:

> Boy you know you love it how we're smart enough to make these millions
> Strong enough to bear the children then get back to business.

Beyoncé is known for her inability to take a break from work, as she returned to the stage only five months after giving birth. Historically, this might seem insignificant in that Black women in the U.S. have often lacked the ability to take maternity leave, and have been forced back into paid labor out of economic necessity. But I argue that 'bouncing back' is inherent in the terms outlined by the modern social contract. Additional scholarship has explored the rhetoric around Beyoncé's pregnancy and return to work, with Chatman (2015, p. 927) asserting that the woman who can both bear and rear children (in addition to working outside the home) is a highly valued asset in a global capitalist society, providing further validation of the key traits that constitute the ideal neoliberal Millennial woman in the U.S. Beyoncé, whose net worth is over $355 million dollars (Greenberg, 2018) does not need to work, but her desire to return so quickly represents the neoliberal ethos that stresses independence and self-actualization through gainful employment. Beyoncé is an entertainer whose construction can be perceived as a model of conduct to be emulated by other Millennials, specifically Black Millennials.

The discourses surrounding Beyoncé's pregnancy and return to work evoke a problematic discourse about the lives of Millennial Black women, and Millennial women more broadly. As outlined by the updated social contract, the women who are empowered, autonomous, self-governing individuals with an ability to multi-task – by bearing and rearing children and working outside the home – are valued assets in a neoliberal society that prioritizes the maintenance of an active population of both producers and consumers (Chatman, 2015). Getting back-to-business did not mean simply returning to the stage, but also disciplining her body to return to its pre-pregnancy form (ibid). She actively participated in the 'bouncing back' discourse of celebrity motherhood that emphasizes the significance of the female body. Although discourses about women's empowerment are valuable, when opportunities are framed as boundless ('breaking the glass ceiling') and without impediment (for instance, a rigid and grueling workout routine to shed excess pregnancy pounds), there is an expectation placed on the individual of being able to surmount societal obstacles. As such, the social context in which such opportunities are made available is ultimately obscured. Because neoliberal discourses produce a culture of meritocracy (Littler, 2018), other socio-demographic factors such as class, age and race may limit a woman's ability to

achieve the neoliberal feminist ideal. This speaks to the way that the media and popular culture interpellate only certain Black women as ideal neoliberal subjects. Beyonce's mediated construction is ideologically aligned with neoliberal feminism in its acknowledgement of the many roles Black women have as wives, mothers and professionals.

Furthermore, it is illuminating that Beyoncé is referred to as 'Queen Bey'. In the 1970s, the 'Queen Bee Syndrome' was developed to refer to women who celebrated their own success in a way that was not helpful for other women. The representation of the Queen Bee can prove tougher on women than men, because her success is proof that women can make it to the top if they are good enough and make the 'right' choices. These hyper-visible ideal types and discourses either silence or ignore the conditions that continue to systemically oppress Black women, such as workplace discrimination, domestic abuse and attacks on reproductive rights. Subjects like Beyoncé are fashioned as neoliberal ideals who have the freedom of choice when it comes to making decisions about paid work and domestic life (Tasker & Negra, 2007). The caveat is that such an ideal subject is often exclusively identified as young, educated, heterosexual, middle-class and White, like Taylor Swift. Through her neoliberal discourse of 'having it all', Beyoncé's discursive construction can be analyzed as being deployed strategically in order to ideologically indoctrinate Black women into the neoliberal feminist regime. In the following section, I will employ visual analysis to better understand how Beyoncé's discursive construction works to specifically reconfigure Black maternity.

5.4.2.2 Black Motherhood

(Figure 3.4)

Posted on February 2, 2017, it took only 11 hours for Beyoncé's pregnancy announcement to break Instagram's record as the most liked photograph on the social media platform. In an embellished portrait of herself, she announced, on behalf of 'The Carters', that she was pregnant with twins:

> We would like to share our love and happiness. We have been blessed two times over. We are incredibly grateful that our family will be growing by two, and we thank you for your well wishes (Knowles Carter, 2017).

My interest in this photo is to examine its immaculate foregrounding of Black motherhood. In the portrait, the veiled Beyoncé kneels in front of a display of flowers, hands gently resting on her bare stomach. With the arched garland of roses, the portrait bears resemblance to Martin Schongauer's (1473) 'Madonna in a Rose Garden'. The photo reads as a colorful celebration of life, with multicolor roses traditionally symbolizing fertility, purity and chastity. Beyoncé breaks from the typical image of the Madonna in that instead of casting her gaze downward or aside, she looks directly at the camera; her steely gaze invoking power, determination and control. At the same time, the pursing of the lips and the slight tilt of the head relay a certain ambiguity, as well as a hint of vulnerability and uncertainty.

I have selected this photo as deserving of more elaborate visual commentary and analysis on account of its intertextuality with religious, feminist and artistic discourses, and hope to imbue the text with meaning through its interpretation as being historically situated within the particularities

and constraints of the context. This image is but one of a collection with artist Awol Erizku, whose collaboration with Beyoncé draws on the expanse of art history to shine a spotlight on Black culture and identity. In visual imagery, Black citizens have historically performed the ideals of White respectability through the use of props and costume in order to reaffirm their place within discursive fantasies of American identity (Smith, 1999). One possible interpretation of the ideological work performed by this portrait (Figure 3.4) is that by discursively aligning her pregnancy with ideals of White maternity and motherhood (e.g., the Madonna), Beyoncé contests damaging stereotypes of Black motherhood. The image of Beyoncé as the Madonna challenges the function of 'breeding' for economic purposes, and situates Black femininity within the "racialisation of the world of childbirth" (Davies & Smith, 1998, p. 56), thus overturning the negative stereotype of the Welfare Queen whose maternity is deficient in the morality of social reproduction. This image can be read as sitting within a national trajectory which has seen Black women use visual mediums, such as photography and film, to construct representations of Blackness that overturn pernicious and damaging stereotypes (Frontin, 2018). In this post, Beyoncé disrupts the historical narrative, reconfiguring Black maternity from its historically capitalist and economic function to one that is virtuous and essential, and fundamentally religious in its likeness to the Madonna.

Beyoncé's 2017 performance of pregnancy, both in the Instagram announcement (and 10 days later in her Grammy performance), garnered substantial media and academic attention (Winter, 2018). Popular commentary focused on the way she engaged with Black motherhood through theatrical event and created powerful art and an exultant narrative for Black mothers – with Beyoncé herself claiming (in an acceptance speech for best urban contemporary album) that her aim was to reframe her identity through motherhood, and intervene in dominant representations (Baade, 2019).

In this way, Beyoncé's weaves 'intention' into the discourse surrounding her intervention, and explicitly acknowledges how her efforts work to radically reconfigure preexisting racialized conceptions of maternity and womanhood. While White women accrued higher social standing from the idealization of domestic virtues, Black women remained trapped by the reality of their subordination and enslavement (hooks, 1981). This discourse is significant because in the

American popular imagination, Black women's exclusion from the private sphere in an autonomous capacity underpinned their exemption from the virtues of idealized maternity and motherhood in the U.S.

In Beyoncé's record-breaking Instagram post, her visual self-presentation enabled her to reconfigure the public image and narrative of her pregnancy and motherhood, aligning it with religious qualities of virtue that had previously been ascribed to White motherhood. Furthermore, her mediated image contests the way the Black maternal body has been constituted by its imagined proximity to trauma, injury and loss (Brooks, 2008; Nash, 2019). Beyoncé's performance of pregnancy offers an optimistic, positive outlook and demonstrates the potential of Black women to know pleasure, joy and subjectivity. The centering of the Black body – in both the VMA performance and the Instagram post – can therefore be read as a celebration of Black womanhood and motherhood, channeled through the pregnant woman herself. The aforementioned illustrative examples (online and onstage) work as empowerment discourses of Black maternity. Beyoncé further extends this discourse through the visual and textual elements of *Lemonade,* which re-imagines empowered Black womanhood in a similar fashion – Black maternity and motherhood are not only rendered visible as sites of empowerment (rather than inadequacy or dysfunction), but also are celebrated inter- and intra- generationally among Black mothers and daughters.

Critical understandings of the way in which the Black family, specifically Black motherhood, has been ideologically and discursively constructed in the U.S. is essential to the analysis of the case of Beyoncé. Throughout this section, I explored Beyoncé's performances of Black motherhood by interrogating how her body and personal narrative challenge the crisis of contemporary Black femininity and reconfigure dominant stereotypes, such as the Strong Black Woman. Beyoncé's discourse contests the ideological formations of the Black American family as dysfunctional, and instead reconfigures marriage and maternity as essential in preserving and protecting Black life.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I traced Beyoncé's discursive formation to explore the construction of one of the most highly visible Black female celebrities in the U.S., and to highlight how it intersects with identities of race and gender. Through a multimodal analysis of Beyoncé's lyrics, music videos,

live performances and social media, I identified three central patterns (independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention) by which her mediated figure has fundamentally reconfigured the way Black Millennial women can be read. In the first section, I focused on how, as a discursive formation, Beyoncé has reconfigured the image and narrative of the Black woman and mother as a lazy and dependent Welfare Queen. I found that while influencing women to embrace this more neoliberal way of thinking, feeling and behaving, Beyoncé promotes a clear and sharp break from the Welfare Queen and provides a response to both the financial crisis, and the racialized social crisis of state dependency. Beyoncé is similar to Taylor Swift in the way she serves as the ideal response to the crisis of neoliberalism, precisely because she is able to replicate its structure by adopting its logic. At the same time, however, she reinforces the repudiation of dependence as shameful, without acknowledging the need for collective political action or offering a sustained critique of systemic injustices.

In the second section of this chapter, I explored Beyoncé's performances of Black motherhood by interrogating how her body and personal narrative challenge normative conceptions of Black femininity and reconfigure dominant stereotypes, such as the Strong Black Woman. Her discourse contests the ideological formations of the Black American family as dysfunctional, and instead reconfigures marriage and maternity as essential. In doing so, Beyoncé's discourse challenges the normative conceptions surrounding the disempowerment of Black women in the U.S. through sexual exploitation and exclusion from the public sphere. Beyoncé discursively repositions Black motherhood as empowering, and in the process, becomes a discursive site through which Black maternity can be reframed from a negative state of crisis to a more positive, legitimate social influence. As a result, her mediated construction of Black maternity is offered as a solution to the current crisis in reproduction, thereby concealing what Briggs (2017, p. 105) has referred to as the 'new normal' of reproduction (which sees fundamental disruptions to racialized reproduction after the withdrawal of government support and declining wages that mark the neoliberal era).

Beyoncé's discourse offers a solution to the current reproduction crisis more broadly, and the racialized reproduction crisis specifically. Her construction solidifies career, family and lifestyle options as interrelated markers of neoliberal success, thereby cementing the logic behind traditional markers of adulthood, and ensuring that they have not become delayed or reversible

despite political and economic upheaval. More specifically, in investing the modern Black woman and mother with new meanings related to economic independence and self-sufficiency, Beyoncé has placed the Black feminine subject squarely at the heart, and in the service of, the neoliberal imagination.

Chapter Six: Kim Kardashian – Reality Check

6.1 Introduction

In the previous empirical chapters, I addressed the construction of two celebrities – Taylor Swift and Beyoncé Knowles Carter – and have shown how their discursive constructions subscribe to and in turn reinforce disciplinary regimes of neoliberal femininity that give primacy to values such as independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. On account of the financial crisis, the Millennial generation is facing a profound lack of security and upward mobility. Taylor's discursive construction provides a solution; despite turbulent economic conditions, she represents being self-reliant and resilient by adapting and adjusting to new circumstances. In doing so, her career trajectory denies that meritocracy is a myth, and confirms that hard work pays off for talented and ambitious Millennial women.

I then traced Beyoncé's discursive formation to explore the construction of the most visible Black female performer in the U.S., highlighting how it intersects with identities of race and gender. By interrogating how her narrative challenges normative historical conceptions of Black femininity, I demonstrated how her mediated figure has reconfigured the way Black Millennial women, and mothers in particular, are rendered legible in the American popular imagination. I argued that Beyoncé's discourse offers a solution to the current reproduction crisis more broadly, and the racialized reproduction crisis specifically. Her construction solidifies career, family and lifestyle options as interrelated markers of neoliberal success, thereby cementing the logic behind traditional markers of adulthood, and ensuring that they have not become delayed or reversible despite political and economic upheaval.

I will now turn to analyzing the discursive construction of Kim Kardashian as a mediated figure whose discursive formation also speaks to a contemporary crisis faced by Millennials. To better define the parameters of the crises, and illustrate the interrelated nature of the three, I will use educational attainment as a proxy for socio-economic status, or class. My analysis will focus on Kim's emergence as a national figure in response to the crisis encountered by the segment of the Millennial population without a college degree.

Because her rise to fame is not predicated on a perceived talent or aptitude in a given field, Kim's discursive construction appears to fundamentally disrupt the secure meritocratic and neoliberal logic that dictates the boundaries of what it means to be an independent and empowered modern woman worthy of emulation. Drawing on the concept of respectability to analyze Kim's discursive construction, I locate her emergence within the historical trajectory of gender, race and *class* within the U.S. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how her behavior is judged in comparison to neoliberal norms that idealize performances of upper-middle class womanhood and femininity. I thus treat Kim's (initial) discursive formation as a case that defines and delineates the type of femininity that has been rendered 'deviant' in American culture.

Despite her privileged upbringing in Beverly Hills, California, Kim did not escape media disapproval for the release of her adult video, which broke social codes of normative, upper-middle class femininity. In the U.S., socio-economic status encompasses not only income, but also educational attainment and subjective perceptions of social class. Whereas socio-economic status may often appear to empower the wealthy to break moral, legal and social codes with seeming impunity (Negra & Holmes, 2008), Kim's case demonstrates how the privilege of socio-economic position can be withdrawn when an accepted standard of conduct is breached. The elite socio-economic position that Kim occupied prior to the release of the sex tape must thus be read against a backdrop of the wider normative cultural climate in which class and gender operate. Because of her unique position in the socio-economic hierarchy, the release of her adult film could have been read as an attempt to recode offending behavior as socially acceptable, thereby converting a long-standing negative social influence into a construction of acceptable, and possibly desirable, femininity. As a result, the discourses that circulated in the mainstream media were consistent with the harsh criticism and scrutiny typically reserved for female celebrities of working-class

backgrounds (Gies, 2011; Williamson, 2010), with disgrace and punishment being a feature of Kim's early public image. Her downfall is characterized by discourses that strip Kim of her elite status, and this chapter shines a spotlight on class as the context in which her transgression operates.

I apply discourse analysis to critical points in the trajectory of Kim's career to identify the unique ability of her discursive construction to push the boundaries that had previously constrained her low-class, hyper-sexualized public image, and enable her to perform the identity work necessary to move toward a higher social standing as a successful entrepreneur and businesswoman. I argue that Kim has sustained her presence as a public figure because she offers a strategy for Millennial women to respond to the lack of market opportunities by finding alternative paths for achievement, and in doing so, she has become the ideal subject who has been remade in the image of neoliberal feminism. Because Kim lacks a formal education, she is not able to come forward into visibility through more traditional routes, such as certification and qualification (Feher, 2009; McRobbie, 2007). However, through ingenuity and self-promotion – or in other words, through selling herself – Kim's discursive construction follows the formulation of the ideal American worker who pulls herself up from her bootstraps after hardship by exhibiting a clear, relentless commitment to paid work.

In the U.S., the concept of 'pulling oneself up from the bootstraps' dovetails neatly with principles of neoliberalism in that it refers to a general notion that individuals must take personal responsibility for their condition, and initiate change. The expression conveys the sense of self-directed effort that is not only upward and strong, but also pulls the individual up and out of a negative context (Switzer et al., 2006). As evidenced by Kim's discursive construction, the 'self' itself becomes an enterprise. Kim was individually required to perform the role (and work) of the 'entrepreneur of the self' (Rose, 1992) in order to achieve a higher social standing. However, it should also be noted that an integral force in Kim's social repositioning was her mother, Kris Jenner, who helped to discursively engineer the redemptive steps Kim took to re-gain her footing and attract more favorable publicity. As the executive producer of the reality television show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Kris took control of the narrative frame both through the careful selection of facts and through the weaving of familial events into a larger story-line. The early

construction of the 'Mother-Daughter duo' operated in such a way so as to denote that Kim had the proper upbringing to not only know social conventions, but also acknowledge the affront caused to middle- and upper- class sensitivities. Kim's public repentance will be analyzed in further detail in section 6.3.1, but it is symbolically significant because it throws into relief the tension between the conflicting dimensions of her position within society (namely the instrumental reality of her economic privilege on one hand, and her disadvantaged social status – as predicated on a lack of higher education and professional participation in the pornography industry – on the other). Through her confession, she was able to not only atone for deviance, but also renegotiate the constraints of her public image. Underpinning this communications tactic is the notion of respectability, whereby Kim signals socially appropriate behavior in order to afford upward mobility.

In a similar way as scholars in the field of strategic communications (Lueck, 2015; McClain, 2015), I seek to understand how Kim's discursive formation speaks to a neoliberal climate that encourages Millennials to become successful and empowered by means of opportunism. In addition to extensive media coverage on her objectified figure, notable scholarship has centered on Kim's body and the way its popular representation renegotiates ideals of White, middle-class, feminine beauty (Sastre, 2013; Dowden, 2017). However, I do not engage deeply with the more explicit analyses of her body because my primary aim is to locate Kim within a neoliberal framework; as such, my interest is directed toward understanding how she can utilize her body to makeover and rebrand herself, thereby converting the body into a capital producing entity. Ingleton and York (2019) examine how the Kardashian family is the personification of the degraded, lime-light seeking celebrity from whom other celebrities wish to distance themselves. My argument is slightly more nuanced in that it is precisely through a neoliberal framework that I am able to discern how she has become an agent of change in the way the classed Millennial subject is rendered legible through discourse in the Digital Age. In *Kardashian Kulture: How Celebrities Change Life in the 21st Century*, Ellis Cashmore (2019) uses the Kardashians as a lens to examine culture, and argues that it was a clever idea (by E!) to feature a woman and her family in a show about nothing-in-particular (Cashmore, 2019, p. 11). Because the reality television series is arguably Kim's most notable and unique output, I decided to code the episodes of KUWTK, up to and including Season 17, Episode 12. In my analysis, I look at the way 'family' becomes 'work'.

In her talk at the *Conference on Media, Gender and Religion*, Kathryn Lofton (2016) viewed the construction of the Kardashian family as a rationalization of a mercantile cult. In this dissertation, I argue that it is through strict adherence to business codes that Kim has leveraged family to negotiate and reconfigure her discursive label as a social deviant. This entrepreneurial narrative appears as a beacon of hope and a response to a generational cohort (without a higher education degree) as they struggle to find work.

The chapter is divided into four sections. I begin with a brief review of the concept of respectability as it pertains to race, gender and class. I continue by using respectability as an analytical lens to understand the classed ramifications of explicit female sexuality, to which Kim has been notably associated on account of her hyper-visible performances of femininity. Because Kim failed to operate within the normative boundaries of respectability, her actions were labeled deviant, signaling a threat to middle-class standards of femininity. It is against this context that I then turn to examine how Kim's discursive formation has been reconfigured from the negative stereotype of objectified 'porn star' to an agent capable of reclaiming her subjectivity and recognition through entrepreneurial pursuits. I examine the ways in which Kim's mediated figure has challenged contemporary notions of ideal femininity. Specifically, I analyze Kim's visibility in both traditional and digital media spaces. The traditional media space consists of Kim's reality television show, KUWTK, a prominent text in entertainment media that centrally speaks to the 'American' way of life and offers important insights into culture – namely societal norms, values and ideologies as they relate to the changing iterations of feminism. A content analysis of the television series enables me to infer that Kim has been able to fundamentally reconfigure her identity from trashy porn star (a position symbolically aligned with a lack of education) to empowered businesswoman *through* the reality television show. The digital media space that I examine consists of Kim's Instagram account – specifically, I analyze how she uses the Selfie as a discursive vehicle to push the boundaries that had previously constrained her hyper-sexualized mediated image, and enable her to perform the identity work necessary to move toward a higher social standing as a successful businesswoman. Because there is a significant amount of popular commentary (which serve as data) on Kim Kardashian, one particular area of difficulty was choosing which texts to include in analysis. The findings are presented in such a way as to advance a coherent narrative, and should not underscore the rigor of the systematic analysis that was

conducted on the collected data. In addition to conducting a content analysis of KUWTK, I applied discourse analysis to prominent or noteworthy posts. I hope to illustrate, how, over time, Millennial feminine subjectivities are capable of being constructed across a range of sites, thereby enabling movement, investment and repositioning from abject to ideal.

6.2 Respectability

Issues that relate to gender as it intersects with race and sexuality have dominated contemporary feminist debates, and my previous two empirical chapters analyzed the construction of contemporary femininity through the lens of gender and race. In contradistinction to the notion that the concept of social class is no longer relevant or has lost its analytic value in neoliberal feminism, I will now turn to foregrounding the significance of class and the role its re-configuration plays in producing and reproducing the ideal neoliberal feminine subject of the 21st century. As I mentioned in the literature review, Gill (2008) notes that women, particularly White, middle- to upper-class women are uniquely positioned to undertake the 'work-on- the-self' required by the neoliberal regime in order to become the ideal subject. I argue that Kim's discursive construction is unique in that it formulates a strategy for Millennial women to respond to the lack of market opportunities by finding alternative paths for achievement. In doing so, Kim negotiates and redefines respectability as an ideal figure of neoliberal feminism.

6.2.1 The Politics of Respectability

'The Politics of Respectability' was coined by Evelyn Books Higginbotham (1993) to describe a late 19th century, early 20th century performance by Black church women that rigidly regulated the behavior, conduct and appearance of other Black women. For example, by focusing on the National Baptist Convention – the largest religious movement among Black Americans – Higginbotham describes how women were, in large part, responsible for making the church a safe space for self-help. In her account, it was through the efforts of Black women that the church managed to build schools, provide food and clothing to the poor, and offer social welfare services. Respectability politics was seen by Black women as necessary to avoid being hurt by White supremacy, and was a strategy of protection developed by Africans in the U.S. (Horne, 2002).

Embodied by the White middle-class, respectability refers to a set of rules that serve as a political tactic for social uplift. Underlying this tactic is the belief that respectable behavior affords marginalized and oppressed individuals an opportunity to obtain upward mobility (Shaw, 1996). The bid on Black uplift relied on the collective performance of an imagined 'best self'. Critiques of racism take the form of class interest and social anxiety expressed by prominent Black Americans who, in the name of challenging White racism, put forward as a public representation an "idealized notion of blackness" (Gray, 2016, p. 193). Extending Higginbotham's theoretical framing of the 'politics of respectability', Tanisha Ford assesses Black women's strategic style choices to convey progressive political consciousness, thereby reinscribing the Black woman's body as a site of resistance: "With every well-pressed dress and perfectly-coiled tendril of hair, black women were fighting to regain their dignity and assert their political agency" (Ford, 2015, p. 73).

Historically, respectability has manifested in specific ways in Black communities (Wolcott, 2001). Early 20th century Black women sought to present themselves as polite, sexually pure and thrifty to reject their stereotyping as immoral, childlike and unworthy of respect and protection (Higginbotham, 1993). Wolcott (2001) points to the ways in which some Black female reformers represented themselves as bourgeois – therefore separate from poor and working-class Black Americans – thus positioning themselves to better advocate 'respectability' to Black women.

This notion has been carried into the 21st century, and the rhetoric of respectability is still advanced by leaders of the Black community, primarily as a strategy for social uplift (Wolcott, 2001). However, more contemporary notions of Black respectability break from the initial conceptualization, due in part to the rise of post-racial ideologies that blame the victims of racism, as opposed to racism itself. In *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (better known as the 'Moynihan Report'), the then Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) posited that the problem with Black people was not disenfranchisement through racist institutions and histories, but a 'culture of poverty' – the disrespectable cultural standards maintained by Black people, particularly pathological Black mothers. The identity type of the pathological Black mother, as articulated by Moynihan, was later re-imagined in the Reagan Era as the Welfare Queen

(as examined in greater detail in Chapter Five). Previously analyzed through the lens of race, the trope of the Welfare Queen is again relevant in this chapter – which foregrounds class – because she represents a threat to the social order.

6.2.2 Respectability Politics and Race

Respectability politics are a set of attitudes and behaviors that concurrently reproduce dominant norms and provide a counter to negative stereotypes placed upon marginalized groups (Harris, 2003). Because respectability politics require subordinate groups to display deference to the values of dominant groups (Skeggs, 1997), this strategy for social uplift serves to further entrench dominant codes of behavior, reinforcing designations of appropriate and inappropriate behavior rooted in structural inequality. In other words, by privileging sexist, racist and classist values, respectability politics offers the possibility for members of subordinate groups to internalize them.

Paisley Harris (2003, p. 213) summarizes that respectability politics has two target demographics: "African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and White people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable". There are two main tenets of respectability politics. First, respectability politics reinforce hierarchies to juxtapose a respectable 'us' against a shameful other (in this case, unrespectable Black Americans) (Pitcan et al., 2018). While Higginbotham (1993) describes it as a way to negate racist stereotypes and structures, the concept of respectability crucially requires condemning behaviors deemed unworthy of respect. For instance, advising women to dress modestly positions the speaker as more respectable than those who dress immodestly, serving to reinforce sexism (Hasinoff, 2015). Second, respectability politics seek to contradict stereotypes, for example by presenting Black women as modest; consequently, the dominant narrative is reinforced. In this way, respectability politics facilitate social mobility while simultaneously limiting the ability to challenge oppressive systems and structures.

6.2.3 Respectability and Class

As previously discussed, there has been strong sociological interest in respectability as it relates to race (Higginbotham, 1993; Wolcott, 2001; Pitcan et al., 2018). Having discussed this concept in the U.S. context, I will now turn to the British context because this scholarship (Lawler, 2005; Sayer, 2005; Tyler, 2013) primarily examines respectability as it relates to class.

The idea of respectability as a virtue embodied by the bourgeoisie was established in the late 18th century in England. Duncan and McCoy (2007) linked respectability to British nationalism and associated it with the White bourgeoisie. The concept achieved coherence in the 19th century as the White bourgeoisie positioned themselves as superior to the working classes (Smith, 2002, p. 27). Victorian ideas of the working-class as "socially undesirable" began to nourish the popular imagination through their representations as too fertile, criminal and lacking restraint (Webster, 2008, p. 299). However, through childrearing, women were seen as possessing the ability to become civilized. This was measured by scrutiny of their hygiene, sexuality, approach to parenting and domestic orderliness (Skeggs, 1997). This is especially true for marginalized women of color. Recent scholarship by Dawn Marie Dow (2019) examines strategies used by Black mothers to raise their children to maintain status while simultaneously defining and protecting a 'Black' identity.

Measures of respectability were therefore not only raced and classed, but also gendered and used particularly to judge the behavior of women *by* women. Most importantly to critical feminist studies, respectability embodies moral authority. Bennett and Tyler (2010) argue that under neoliberalism, classificatory struggles result in the construction of abject figures that become subjected to moral governance and 'Othering'.

Respectability is the means by which morality is made public and seen to be an object of knowledge. Class and gender divisions are drawn through the projection of negative value onto others; for example, attributing negative value to the working-class is a mechanism for the middle-class to attribute value unto themselves, such as making one group tasteful through judging others

to be tasteless (Skeggs, 2005). In effect, this maintains the position of judgment to attribute value, which assigns 'the Other' as immoral, repellent, abject and worthless.

When applied to working and lower-class people, the notion of 'respectability' is limiting and controlling. Conceptually, it is a significant marker of class due to its influence on behavior (e.g., how people speak, act and associate). Additionally, respectability has been used to both create and maintain class systems. Working-class people, irrespective of ethnicity, have been labeled as "dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 1) and therefore in need of being controlled to prevent them from challenging the authority of the ruling classes. In the same way respectability politics were mobilized as a form of social control to police the behavior of marginalized races, the idea of respectability has been central in the West in an attempt to keep working-class people in order.

While certain class relationships have been reconfigured through different historical periods, core elements remain. Contrary to scholars who maintain that respectability politics reflect *White* neoliberal normativity (Harris, 2003; Wolcott, 2001), class is more a matter of power and status than it is a matter of race. In her discussion of the shifting representation of the working-class, as depicted by the media, Julie Bettie (2003) describes the uniquely American understanding of class relations by noting that class has not been replaced by race or gender, for instance, but is expressed through such categories of difference.

It is within this historical context of respectability politics that I now turn to examine the case of Kim Kardashian's mediated figure. I have chosen her as a site for examination because her case interestingly demonstrates that class is less a matter of financial worth and more an exercise of power and an ability to internalize core values of neoliberalism. Her discursive construction represents social pressures and expectations that function to normalize class standing, thereby limiting upward social mobility. I start with a discussion of Kim's breakthrough moment in Hollywood – the release of her adult film, *Kim Kardashian Superstar* – to examine how the body signals class through moral euphemism. I then move to examine how Kim's discursive formation has been reconfigured from the negative stereotype of objectified 'porn star' to an agent capable of reclaiming her subjectivity and recognition through entrepreneurial pursuits. To do this, I will

analyze Kim's visibility in both traditional and digital media spaces, such as her reality television show and Instagram account. In this way, she offers a response to the crisis of the lack of education amongst Millennials. Kim's discursive construction formulates a strategy for Millennial women to respond to the lack of market opportunities by finding alternative paths for achievement – in doing so, she has become the ideal subject who has been remade in the image of neoliberal feminism. As a case, Kim enables an understanding of how contemporary feminine subjectivities are constructed across a range of sites, thereby enabling movement, investment and repositioning from the abject, or deviant case, to the ideal, or exemplary case.

6.3 Infamy

The Kardashian family first entered the media spotlight when father Robert Kardashian represented O.J. Simpson during the highly publicized 1995 criminal trial. His daughter, Kim, caught her 'big break' into Hollywood through a porn video, and subsequent photoshoot for *Playboy*, which solidified her status as a sex symbol and positioned her to become a tabloid spectacle whose discourse renders visible the rules and boundaries of cultural acceptability and respectability. In March 2007, Kim's 39-minute personal sex tape with former boyfriend Ray J was released to the public by Vivid Entertainment, a top pornography studio known for its big-budget productions and its acquisition and distribution of popular celebrity sex tapes. Following the tape's release, Kim immediately denounced it as despicable and malicious. She sued Vivid Entertainment, before dropping the suit in exchange for a share of the profits. Kim's public visibility increased exponentially. Having worked in the fashion industry as a personal stylist (most notably to best friend and heiress, Paris Hilton), Kim's public persona and sexual persona were initially collapsed; the homemade video was the broader public's introduction to the Beverly Hills socialite.

6.3.1 Social Outsider

The tape *Kim Kardashian Superstar,* and its subsequent treatment by the media, frame the beginnings of a public identity that repeatedly recalled the themes introduced in the video: performativity of the self, privatized sexuality and objectification of a body that had hitherto been

denied access to the privileged and normative sphere of middle-class Whiteness because it was coded as exotic and curvaceous. Although much of the tape is not 'hard-core' porn, Kim's corporeality nevertheless takes center stage. The video is comprised of Kim and her partner Ray J preening before the camera and directly addressing the audience. For a tape that she later claimed was not supposed to 'get out', Kim already indicates an awareness as a public figure. This was done through recognition that the camera serves as a vehicle through which her public self can not only be constructed but also authenticated – even if this self is performed within the confines of the private, intimate sphere.

Kim's representation and self-representation in the video – specifically the knowingness of performing sex for the camera – positions her outside the borders of bourgeois, middle-class behavior, which insists on modesty and propriety, and crucially, sexual restraint. This thereby reinforces the idea that class determines the level to which women can not only protect themselves, but also cast judgement upon those who defy the norms of respectability. As advanced by Pitcan, Marwick and boyd (2018), respectability politics reinforce within-group stratification to juxtapose a respectable 'us' against a shameful other – which is, in this case, Kim Kardashian.

Kim discursively presents herself in such a way that aligns with the image through which (working-class) women are stereotypically represented (e.g., their unruly antics and deviant sexuality) (Greer, 2001, p. 8, as cited in Skeggs, 2005, pp. 966-967). The video is an example of inappropriate conduct for a middle-class ideal type, and as such, Kim is discursively positioned in the realm of 'trash' culture. Indeed, since the release of the video, Kim's construction has been labeled 'deviant', and therefore unworthy of respect, because it challenged the dominant codes of social and moral order normalized by the middle-class.

In the press, this rejection is evidenced by her discursive construction as 'Famous for being famous', having 'no talent other than a big butt and sex tape', and that her only marketable skill is 'taking off her clothes'. Previous scholarship (Brady, 2016b) has considered the uses to which such derogatory framings are put in early Kardashian media coverage. Additionally, as Ingleton and York (2019, p. 372) write:

> "The name 'Kardashian' functions as the ultimate signifier of excessive, shameless celebrity… not only of celebrity, but also of a distinctive (and distinctively unfavourable) cultural shift… We don't see the Kardashians as people. We see them as a soulless entity that exists for no other reason than to make money, take selfies, and get famous".

To provide an illustrative example of the aforementioned quote, I will consider a famous Selfie posted to Instagram, in which Kim is photographed topless in the bathroom, and the image is captioned "When we're like… we both have nothing to wear LOL @emrata" (Kardashian, 2016). Journalist Piers Morgan responded to her Tweet by stating "Try wearing a little dignity". In a subsequent post, Piers shared a black-and-white photo of British suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst, juxtaposed with the topless snap, and captioned it "RIP feminism" (Morgan, 2016). On this thread, comments by various members of Twitter converge around one main theme: Kim is *not* representative of an ideal role model for Millennial women.

To make the most meaning of this text, an analyst must be aware of a set of oppositions – either stated or implied – that inform what the actions of the celebrity signify. According to Saussure (1966), persons automatically make sense of any concept by recognizing that it is not its opposite. This is one of the reasons why I chose to examine the case of Kim Kardashian after Taylor and Beyoncé. The aforementioned 'feminists' not only proudly claim the mantle, but their discursive construction is also authorized and legitimized by an 'in-group' responsible for designating appropriate femininity; on the contrary, Kim's discourses position her as an 'outsider', whose representation is inappropriate by way of comparison.

Initially barred from American 'high society' media events and magazine coverage, Kim was also blamed by the tabloid media for staging her own robbery in Paris, and mocked mercilessly online during her pregnancies for failing to perform the ideal 'cute celebrity pregnancy' (*Star*, 2013). Even in moments of (perceived) vulnerability, Kim was mocked and sneered. During her pregnancy, Kim was repeatedly fat-shamed (Wilkinson, 2013), and when she was robbed at gunpoint in Paris, social media discourse centered around classic victim-blaming ideas (e.g., she *deserved* it) (Dixon-Smith, 2016). Kim has repeatedly been portrayed by the press as uneducated, vapid and materialistic (Kaplan, 2017). Furthermore, she faces continuous scrutiny over the degree of involvement in her productive outputs (such as gaming apps, clothing, makeup and hair lines),

despite her assertions otherwise (Ingleton & York, 2019). In the American popular imagination, Kim and the Kardashian family have come to represent a microcosm of uniquely 21st century, shallow, self-obsessed Millennial Internet-based pop culture. One of the most notorious moments of the press's denigration and abjection of Kim was when she was cropped out of a photo with Kanye at the 2013 Met Gala Ball. The photo ran on the 'Best Dressed' list of *Vogue*, a magazine known for covering the traditions of high society. For most of her career, Kim served as a comic parable and a low class 'other', scoffed at by the general public.

Like her reality television counterpart, Paris Hilton, the case of Kim's sex tape functions as a warning: it instructs women on how to avoid committing classed, racial and gendered transgressions. When Kim was a guest on *The Tyra Banks Show* (2007), she re-iterated that the sex tape was made with her boyfriend of three years. She confirmed that she was in love with him, and that she was entitled to do what she wanted in private, thinking not once that her tape would be viewed by a wider audience. The interview was framed as a cathartic release of the negative stigma associated with porn stars, and as a chance for Kim to redeem herself in the public sphere. In a way, the interview operates as a confession, whereby the admission of transgression serves to condemn the action. Kim places a great emphasis on her remorse, and recognition of the socially constructed negative character of her actions. The interview constitutes a site for the exercise of respectability politics: Through the identification of her public sex act as 'deviance', Kim positions her own experience and choices as lessons in what *not* to do if one wants to be socially and culturally accepted. She continues by announcing that she takes responsibility for her actions. This acknowledgement indicates awareness of a wider social group who create 'deviance' by making the rules of whose infraction constitutes deviance, and the application of those rules to particular individuals who become labelled as 'outsiders' (Becker, 1963). In order to distance herself from this label, Kim attempts to publicly repent for her transgressions by re-asserting sexual and social norms.

6.3.2 The Female Grotesque

In addition to her breakthrough appearance in an adult film, Kim's mediated image achieves coherence in its display of form-fitting, skimpy clothes that position her as a highly visible female

grotesque. The previous analysis of sexual exhibitionism serves to illustrate that the discursive register of the body is deployed to reproduce the historical division of 'respectable' and 'abject' within the working and lower classes (Skeggs, 2005). Class relations are made through these processes, working their way into the very public production and performance of more intimate subjective construction, whereby access to resources, and the ability to commoditize them, is one form that class struggles now take.

Counter to the classical body – the dominant normative model representing middle- and upper-class beliefs and values – Kim's body constitutes the female 'grotesque', a concept put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin that particularly focuses on those parts of the body that are open and visible to the outside world (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 26).

(Figure 4.1)

For example, the image posted by Kim on March 7th, 2016 (Figure 4.1), speaks to the lower- class grotesque body in the way it exaggerates its processes and orifices, whereas the classic, bourgeois body conceals them. This photo is exemplary of the way the grotesque body dissolves the boundary between private and public, whereas the classical, bourgeois body "shores them up" (Rowe, 1995, p. 33). Because women in American society have historically been perceived as the foremost bearers of class (Ortner, 1991), they have been socially subjected to regimes of propriety. This idea is illustrated by the way Kim was socially constructed as a deviant woman because she dared to openly flaunt her excessive corpulence in a manner that poses a moral panic, or potential political threat to the social order. Kim was branded a symbol of all things undesirable and threatening to dominant social norms: she spilled out of her dresses; her flesh was too ample; she tried too hard. This is coded language for a disrespect of the boundaries that separate class from

trash – a distinction that has afflicted Kim from the beginning of her career on account of her association with a tawdry sex tape and her inability to conform to dominant middle-class codes of modest femininity. Furthermore, this is evidenced by the Twitter backlash to the image in Figure 4.1. Celebrity Chloe Moretz directly replied to Kim's Selfie tweet saying, "I truly hope you realize how important setting goals are for young women, teaching them we have so much more to offer than just our bodies" (Moretz, 2016). A more productive examination of such agonistic exchanges will be further discussed in the subsequent section on Selfies, where I will analyze political areas of gendered behavior and online representational practices that utilize neoliberal individualizing frameworks for understanding.

In an interview with *The New York Daily News*, fashion critic Tim Gunn described Kim as follows: "I'm always saying to young people and actually even to adults, I don't care what you wear as long as you don't dress like a Kardashian. It's vulgar, period". Former editor-in-chief of *Vogue*, Anna Wintour, would only allow her on the cover with Kanye – she was photographed in a wedding dress, with the byline #worldsmosttalkedaboutcouple (*Vogue*, 2014). When asked why Kim was allowed on the pages of the world's biggest fashion magazine, *Vogue* creative director Grace Coddington famously responded that "[Kim Kardashian] represents this moment in our culture. I'm fascinated by her, in the same way I'm fascinated by the people I see on the street or the subway" (Friedman, 2014). Crucially, because Kim's fame is predicated on her sexualized self, not merit, she has been discursively dismissed and delegitimized by hegemonic media outlets that subscribe to bourgeois standards of femininity and propriety. Sastre (2013, p. 124) argues that Kim's body is a productive site for the analysis of contemporary understandings of sex, race, power and exposure in American culture. I build on this work to understand how the constant attention to her body works to foreground class in such a way as to make her an accessible (not elitist) commodity, thereby ensuring a wider fanbase and circulation. Kim does not subvert the aforementioned historical racial dichotomies that position White bodies as restrained, and other bodies as over-sexualized; however, what positions her as the ideal neoliberal subject is the way in which she exploits the interstices of these taxonomies for profit. Having been so publicly marked as socially deviant, the possibility that she would go on to leverage her sex tape to become one of the most successful business women in America poses an ideological threat to middle- and upper-class White femininity in its ability to be remade as a neoliberal ideal.

6.4 The Ideal Neoliberal Makeover

In this section, I turn to analyzing Kim as an agent of change whose narrative appears to fundamentally disrupt the secure neoliberal logic that dictates the boundaries of what it means to be an independent and empowered modern woman worthy of emulation. I am interested in using Kim as a case to explore how classed bodies of disgust – those which cannot be displayed correctly and cannot claim or profess propriety – can be transformed into bodies worthy of not only redemption, but also respect. I will first focus my analysis on a key media text, the Selfie. It is in the space of the Selfie that Kim can be recognized as being in a position of marginality. Even though marginality is regarded as dangerous, polluting, or threatening (as I have previously outlined), it is necessary for the social reality of neoliberal transformation.

Serving as not only a location of exclusion, but also a position of power and critique, margins "expose the relativity of the entrenched, universalising values of the center, and expose the relativism of the cultural identities which imply their shadow figures of every characteristic they have denied, rendered 'anomalous' or excluded" (Shields, 1991, p. 277). In culturally marginal practices, subjectivity is destabilized and liminality is embraced. Therefore, the re-coding of the classed body through the Selfie has important implications for embodied subjectivity, and as I will now argue, creates the conditions necessary for Kim to assert 'independence' and reconfigure her identity from disgusting to desirable.

6.4.1 Independence

In this section, I will analyze 'independence' through the medium of the Selfie. Kim has become synonymous with the medium of the Selfie. Hailed as the 'Queen of Selfies', Kim provides the blueprint for the way the Millennial woman is conditioned to represent herself online, and has even created a book of Selfies, aptly titled *Selfish*, published by Rizzoli (2014). The Selfie is defined as a single-frame photograph, and is not generally understood to have narrative content. The fact that Kim is a public figure – with a discernable public identity – suggests that her photos can be read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it. When considered together, Kim's Selfies contain enough information that they can be read as patterned

narratives. As I analyzed her Instagram profile, the images signaled what Amy Shields Dobson (2014) refers to as performative shamelessness. Kim has purportedly admitted to taking 6,000 Selfies on a four-day vacation – thereby averaging 1,500 photos a day (Macatee, 2016). What could easily be read as a narcissistic obsession can also be suggestive of more emancipatory readings of a phenomenon that stresses individual empowerment through control over the representation of self (Walker, 2005).

In Kim's hundreds of thousands of Selfies, the body is both material and representation, and these two domains through which the body comes to be 'known' intertwine in complex ways (Holliday et al., 2000). For example, returning to the Selfie that Kim took in the bathroom in Figure 4.1, the photograph attracted attention, commentary and controversy. The image was both lauded and decried, and served as a point of departure for a public conversation on female sexuality and the representation of women in digitized spaces. Through posts such as this one, Kim signals that she is confident in her autonomy and does not seek social validation; she can knowingly provoke criticism and defend herself against it. Contemporaneously, women can still exercise agency, but oftentimes the analysis of this rendering is read as being subject to the patriarchal gaze. I will contend that it is because Kim discursively exercises agency *outside* of the space that society has designated for her that acts as a counter to dominant cultural norms, thereby causing controversy. She uses the medium of the Selfie to subvert and counter dominant (oppressive) norms related to representation. A parallel can be drawn here to bell hooks' assertion that Black people can take their own photographs as a way to "transcend the limitations of the colonizing eye" (1995, pp. 60-61). Instagram, for instance, has allowed Kim to use the nude Selfie to transcend private boundaries and make personal discourses public. This is critically important because Kim's representation illustrates the idea that the wholly private image has been reconfigured in the Digital Age. As previously noted in the literature review, neoliberalism does not assume an entrepreneurial form, but rather develops institutional practices to enact its agenda (Gilbert, 2013); the enterprise form is thus extended to "all forms of conduct" (Burchell, 1993, p. 275), and has become spectacularly visible on social media platforms. The importance of this shift lies in its redistribution of power to the subjects, allowing them to craft and curate their own image, and control how their image is presented to the world. As Kim discursively demonstrates, women are now more capable than ever

to reclaim their identities, thus rejecting the previous passiveness and exploitation of a patriarchal era.

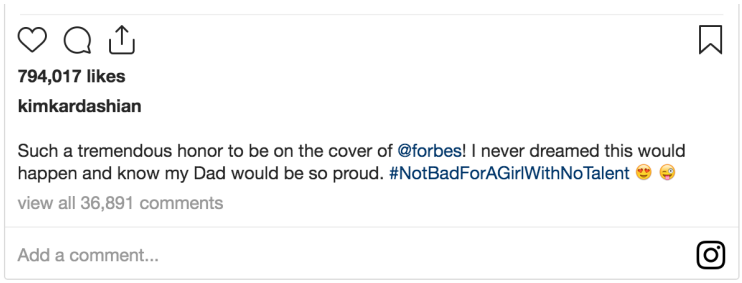
Neoliberalism is theorized as constructing individuals as rational, entrepreneurial actors. It is precisely through this 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' that Kim was able to re-configure her identity from adult film star to businesswoman via the Selfie. She conveys this image through the Selfie, a discursive text that can be read as a complete distillation of her independence. When her posts generate clicks and encourage views, she not only gains capital, but crucially, recognition. Thus, a fuller, and more comprehensive analysis of this neoliberal makeover relies heavily on the discursive measurement of her subsequent 'influence'.

6.4.2. Self-Actualization

With more than 200 million Instagram followers (as of April 2021), Kim is hyper-visible, thus creating a context of intense surveillance around her. In the Digital Age, Selfies are a common form of expression, and the demand of visibility (for Millennial women) is constant. In the current digital landscape, "media turn girls into spectacles – visual objects on display" (Projansky, 2014, p. 5). This is legitimized by the participation in an economy of visibility, where buyers and sellers interact to trade or buy goods. For instance, this interaction manifests in Kim's social media partnerships, where Kim is regularly offered between $300,000 and $500,000 for a single post (Taylor, 2019). As such, this discursive influence serves as a blueprint for Millennials to perform the necessary 'work on the self' in order to be marketable in an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As a result, Millennial women have an unprecedented opportunity to navigate and negotiate self-representation.

In July 2016, Kim was featured on the cover of *Forbes* magazine on account of her digital savviness. Demonstrating ironic knowingness, she framed the discourse surrounding her cover appearance with the hashtag #NotBadForAGirlWithNoTalent.

(Figure 4.2)



(Figure 4.3)

Figures 4.2 and 4.3 are probably the most illustrative examples of the 'self-actualization' code, whereby Kim simultaneously acknowledges and (implicitly) calls out the entities that had previously rendered her as an illegitimate Other, or as a figure unworthy of emulation or praise; in doing so, Kim discursively recognizes how her image has been reconfigured. Furthermore, this cover speaks to the current neoliberal era that constructs women's participation in the workforce as the apotheosis of empowerment. In Figure 4.2, Kim stands defiant, arms-crossed, with a steely gaze directed into the camera. The placement in *Forbes* magazine works as a way to authorize her as a hard-working, self-actualizing individual. A discursive analysis of the text (Figure 4.3) suggests a (familial) understanding of the world through an economic lens. In this tweet she also names her "Dad" – one of the most prominent (and richest) attorneys in the U.S. – writing that he would be "proud" of her success now, since it can be captured quantifiably. Whereas previously she labeled her explicit sexuality as deviant, she is now reclaiming and justifying her hypersexualized discursive construction because it has afforded her the opportunity to grow her brand into a global empire.

To conclude, this section is largely a theoretically grounded exploration of Kim's representation on social media. I have sought to reflexively engage with the many paradoxical treatments of Kim's image in order to understand how they challenge normative understandings of American femininity, as it relates to race and class. Her Selfie posts have important implications for the contemporary feminist movement considering that more than 200 million users follow her on Instagram. Using the Selfie as a tool, Kim's discourses are suggestive of the redistribution of power

in the Digital Age; the didactic importance of her narrative shows how Millennial women now have the power to craft and cultivate their own images, and control how their representation is presented to the world. In this way, the Millennial is more capable than ever in reclaiming her own identity and independence, something that is not only encouraged but also rewarded in the neoliberal era. As evidenced by my analysis, social media has provided Kim with a platform to discursively reconfigure herself as a symbol not for 'sex', but for 'smarter economics', thereby positioning herself as one of the most prominent agents of social change in the Digital Age. In this way, Kim has recoded her previously labeled 'deviant' and grotesque self into a classed self, worthy of not only redemption, but also respect.

I will now expand on this analysis through an examination of the *KUWTK* reality television show and an exploration of how the tropes outlined in the first section, which correspond with the earlier part of Kim's mediated appearance, have been reconfigured in her later media visibility.

6.4.3 Self Reinvention

As denoted by the Selfie, the product in the neoliberal feminist economy is the individual; the Millennial woman is invited to invest in herself so as to appreciate with time, and her value is constantly being evaluated and judged (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In *American Anatomies*, Robyn Wiegman (1995) traces the historical visual inscription of the body, linking the economy of visibility to the proliferation of media and its representation of female bodies as commodities. I will now extend her argument to explore how economies of visibility operate in the Digital Age. In addition to social media platforms, such as Instagram, reality television has come – in the last two decades – to serve as such a site of inscription for neoliberal norms (Marwick, 2010; Skeggs et al., 2008). In order for her previous image (as an adult film star) to have been so palatably reconfigured for mass audiences, I now argue that her reinvention of self is predicated on the performance of traditional family values.

6.4.3.1 Reality Television: KUWTK

The American reality television series *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* (KUWTK) premiered (on E!) on October 14th, 2007. Focusing on the personal and professional lives of the blended Kardashian- Jenner family, the show explores societal norms, values and ideologies as they relate to the changing iterations of feminism. Since its debut in 2007, KUWTK has grown tremendously in popularity and ratings. The proliferation of Kim's public representation and the global success of her 20-season reality television show (which concludes two days after the submission of this thesis) can be read as an attempt to reconstruct the boundaries of regulation of the classed feminine subject.

The show is worthy of study for its prevalence, incredible popularity in entertainment media and its particular relevance to the 'American' way of life. Similar to my analysis of the Selfie, I will first address Kim's reconstruction through an economic lens. As such, this analysis would not be complete without first acknowledging the significance of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis to contextualize Kim's emergence on the public stage. Kim does not reconfigure her identity by adherence to historically formulaic principles that align her construction with White ideals of womanhood and propriety, but instead situates the essentialness of her overt sexuality within an economic framework. As I will now show, the series continuously depicts Kim 'working', a frame that contours each of her decisions.

Throughout the series, Kim is seen commoditizing her birthday by using the occasion as a special chance to promote her personal brand. Even though her second marriage lasted only 72 days, it was reported that her wedding to husband Kris Humphries earned her $17.9 million (Fagen, 2011). Even her romantic life is discussed in terms of how it affects or is affected by her work, thereby perpetuating neoliberal values that conflate personal and professional success, further validating Brown's (2015) claim that neoliberalism has encroached upon the most intimate spheres. This is particularly relevant because KUWTK is a reality television program that foregrounds the ideal neoliberal feminist's extraordinary subjectivity. The excessive, immoral or deviant construction of Kim – that I previously described – can possibly be read as a useful figure for reality television because it suggests who can accrue value in a neoliberal economy where capital plays a significant

role in making the ideal Millennial subject more 'enterprising', and hence more valuable. I purport that Kim's construction on the series is useful for showing who is a proper and successful citizen. Kim is able to exemplify this character via the reality television format precisely because it foregrounds and celebrates the normative, neoliberal subject. As she appears in the show, her construction as an ideal type of entrepreneurial subject stands as an ideological exemplar for the management of disappointment (e.g., her self-reflexive 'confessionals'), the cultivation of hope (e.g., the recording of her marriage and key-stage life moments for public consumption) and the maintenance of belief in meritocracy. The Kardashians repeatedly emphasize the "responsibility and the importance of hard work" (Kardashian et al., 2011, p. 117).

KUWTK also illuminates the way American 'body culture media' serves to position work- on-the-self as a morally correct solution to individual problems. Specifically, the reality show draws from cultural discourses of self-improvement culture that frame the 'make-over' as a way to achieve an authentic self (Raisborough, 2011). This is exemplified by the KUWTK spin-off series *Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian*. In this way, Kim – as an ideal neoliberal make-over subject – is reconfigured as an empowered agent.

Within this (reality) televisual framework, KUWTK provides the moral scenario where performing the 'right' choices are crucial to the reform narratives that Kim employs to overcome negative social stigma. It is also evident that in the transformative focus of her reality television show, class endures as a significant form of social categorization. KUWTK renders visible the way the 'speaking' self has become a key imperative in the spectacle of display and the construction (and re-configuration) of self. Following a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I have conducted a content analysis of key moments from 248 episodes of KUWTK (available from iTunes), and have identified two categories that are crucial to the successful reconfiguration of Kim's discursive construction: an emphasis on 'family values' and 'business acumen'. I acknowledge the underlying tension here whereby the performance of 'family' is labor (or work), but to clarify, when the sisters are filmed making decision about DASH (S3, E11), for example, the episode was coded as 'business'; Kourtney being filmed giving birth (S4, E11; S7, E18) is coded as 'family'. In total, 64 episodes were coded as primarily relating to business matters, and 184 episodes were coded as having a specific focus on the family. At the outset, it should be noted

that this coding was done in order to help me determine which episodes to explore in more detail. As such, I do not claim significance, nor did I endeavor to seek a second coder to secure inter-coder reliability. I recognize that I operate with a specific research agenda, and utilize a particular framework and approach. As such, it is possible for someone operating from a different perspective to interpret the texts in remarkably different ways. In the next section, I turn to interrogate how these emerging themes of the reality television show contribute to the representation of Kim's reinvented and repositioned self.

6.4.3.1.1 Family Values and Business Acumen

Despite her entrance to the public sphere through a sex tape, Kim has been able to reclaim a negative attribute and subvert it. I will now argue that this remake occurs not only through subversion, but also through interpellation of the core tenets of traditional 'American' ideology that focus on family values, a 'hard work' ethic and the development of business acumen.

In their autobiographical book, *Kardashian Konfidential*, the sisters write: "Family values were always so important in our family" (Kardashian et al., 2011, p. 28). The children had a privileged and family-oriented upbringing, which is partially captured in the opening sequence of the reality television show (S1, E1). In this 20-second clip, the viewer catches not only a first glimpse of their life behind the camera in Southern California, but also the character traits they will exhibit throughout the series: for example, Kris, the mother, asserts her matriarchal and managerial dominance; Bruce, the (step) father is commanded to change his clothes, positioning him as passive in relation to his former wife; Kourtney establishes herself as the 'bossy' sister; Rob, the only male son in the family, requests that someone make him laugh; the youngest Kardashian sister, Khloe, makes a joke to build rapport with Rob, and signal that she is the 'funny' one; and Kendall and Kylie (half-siblings whose parents are Kris and Bruce) pose back-to-back, intimating the younger sibling connection and bond to the larger group. Kim, rushing onto the set after everyone else, is placed at the forefront to indicate that she is the star of the show, and center of attention.

There is much written about the Kardashians in the popular press, but there is not much scholarship on the Kardashian family as there is on Beyoncé, for example. In response to tweets reportedly criticizing the Kardashians as not worthy of academic attention, Dr. Meredith Jones said:

> "The Kardashian-Jenner-West clan is known all over the world, and its members have come to occupy powerful social and cultural positions. 25 years ago people were saying that Madonna wasn't important to study, but now we know that her influence on popular culture has been profound. The Kardashians are the same" (Jones, 2015).

Notable work on the television series has been done by Amanda Scheiner McClain (2015), who examines KUWTK to better understand how the Kardashians renovate the 'banal' into character-constructing building blocks of brand, celebrity and profit, thereby positioning themselves as ideal neoliberal subjects. The sisters Kourtney, Kim, Khloe, Kendall and Kylie, along with their mother Kris, have amassed some of the largest numbers of followers on social media. They challenge the public/private binary by sharing daily activities via television and social media sites. "From family arguments to giving birth to divorcing to coming out as trans, it seems that nothing this family does can't be marketed" (Jones, 2015). This is also evidenced by the show's depiction of the family members' visits to the plastic surgeon, and also undergoing more graphic medical procedures. Season 3 (episode 4) saw Bruce detail his colonoscopy. In season 7 (episode 17), Khloe and Kim visit a fertility clinic (Kim to discuss freezing her eggs, and Khloe to better understand ovulation). This episode is followed by the season finale that sees Kourtney deliver her second child (S7, E18), an event that brought together the entire family. Kourtney's first birth was shared on the program via home video, but for her second birth, she permitted the camera crew to enter the delivery room. Analytically, this breakdown of public and private is important because even in the most intimate of spheres, women are expected to be 'on display'. For example, before her first birth (S4, E11), Kourtney shaves before going to the hospital, puts on her make-up and performs a glamorous self while going through labor and delivery. It could be argued that this behavior not only reinforces, but also exemplifies media culture's fascination with women's bodies (Nurka, 2014). However, I would counter that (apart from the very visible blurring between public and private spaces), this birthing video subverts the stereotypical 'to-be-looked-at-ness', objectified gaze, in which Laura Mulvey (1975) suggests the camera has no boundaries in its exploration of female bodies. I argue that this is the very space that celebrates empowerment not in its superficial articulation, but its

physical manifestation. It is an instance of a woman positioning herself in response to and against the perceived weakness, passivity and dependence of traditional femininity (during both labors, Kourtney pulled each child out with her own hands).

The aforementioned childbirth scene indicates the willingness of the family to expose their most intimate moments. From a gendered and cultured perspective, the intimacy of the Kardashian family is illustrated repetitively throughout the course of the series. This is crucially important when juxtaposed with the pervasive individualism of the Selfie that, as I outlined in the previous section, helped Kim to reconfigure her image. In this empirical case, I argue that *both* the social media account and the reality television show are necessary for Kim's reconfiguration and sustained recognition in the limelight. Because the mere informality of the word Selfie suggests that the images are not to be taken too seriously, the focus on family crucially adds more depth to an otherwise superficial construction. As portrayed by the 20-season series, 'family' is more than ephemeral – it is constructed as the bedrock of love, care and support. While initially their closeness appears transgressive (for example, the discussions of Kim's public sexual image breaks traditional taboos and standards), other moments (such as the arrival of a new family member, or the Kardashian's collective grief over the loss of their father, Robert Kardashian Sr.), bond the family members into a more cohesive and relatable unit. Inviting the viewer into their lives on a more personal and intimate level works to solidify their 'closeness'. Throughout the series (most notably in S1, E5; S3, E,1; S15, E5) the family regularly refers back to their father, continually feeling the bereavement upon each new event in their lives. In this way, they discursively and affectively bond over what is construed as an immense loss.

While Robert Kardashian Sr. is mythologized as the 'patriarch' of the Kardashian family, who is a superlative father – loving and knowledgeable – KUWTK both supports and subverts gender stereotypes. While the siblings' intimate closeness reinforces prevailing concepts of the nuclear family, the family dynamic breaks from historic conceptions of men as stoic providers and women as compliant subjects in need of direction. The women in the family are the ones in the driver's seat. In a confessional, Kim's second husband said "I don't want to end up living like Scott and Bruce, like not having any say. Just basically living life in the passenger seat. Not even in the back seat" (S6, E14). On KUWTK, Kris is repeatedly taped evaluating business decisions in her home

office. Duties such as carpooling and buying school supplies – tasks often associated with motherly duties – are delegated to Bruce. More recently, scholarship has focused on Bruce – now known as Caitlyn – in her transgender identity (Lovelock, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). But for the purposes of this dissertation, my observations more closely align with what Pramaggiore and Negra (2014, p. 83) argue is Bruce's most consistent position in KUWTK, which is to "emblematize an earlier era's norms for earned celebrity". Despite his status as an Olympian, Bruce is rendered in the shadow of the deceased patriarch, Robert Kardashian. Bruce takes on the traditionally feminine role of providing care, completing errands, running the household and looking after the youngest children. Like many American women whose roles are relegated to the private sphere, his voice, while appreciated, is often unheeded or unheard on the series.

The portrayal of gender in KUWTK also indicates a significant element within popular culture to investigate. Kris usurps the managerial family duties, and in her role as manager, she controls the family assets, including finances. The gender role convention also plays out through the dynamics between Kourtney and Scott, whereby Kourtney exemplifies matriarchy, and Scott conforms to traditional stereotypes. The ill-fated marriage of Kim to Kris Humphries is also illustrative of the Kardashian gender dynamic whereby women make the decisions and men are typically ignored.

The role of the patriarchal family is reversed in KUWTK. Not only does Bruce represent the role of the 'wife', but he is also the one who adheres to conservative values. When his 11-year old daughter Kylie wanted to go to school in make-up (S3, E11), he forced her to remove it. Later in the series, when Kylie wore make-up and a revealing outfit, Bruce became upset. Interestingly for a family that made millions from clothing and make-up endorsements, Bruce explained that this was his area of control, and the family appeared scared of his moralistic disapproval. Because he is depicted as the voice of prudence, the family oftentimes laughs at his disgust of them. Ultimately, Bruce's voice is silenced, as the women in KUWTK challenge the standard conventions of White men being represented as powerful and dominant. In this way, the Kardashian women break from domestic norms and reconfigure traditional standards of the private sphere.

There are many moments of tension throughout the drama series, but the tension between family and business is a narrative that permeates throughout, quite possibly because it resonates with many working families who struggle to balance the two. In the show, Kim is depicted as industrious and described by colleague and friend, Jonathan Cheban, as:

> "The busiest woman I have ever met, and yet once the show [KUWTK] started, she was out promoting it on the *Today* show and on Twitter. She never flakes on you. That's what sets her apart. Her business model is about morals and standards, never screwing anybody and never flaking" (Halperin, 2016, p. 157).

This amalgamation of ideal neoliberal characteristics suggests that Kim's celebrity existence is not only fabulous, but crucially earned. More often than not, the Kardashians favor 'working' over leisure, although work in the media industry is oftentimes masked as its processes are rendered invisible. Not only does the public/private binary collapse, but so does the distinction between the private self and the public enterprise. As evidenced by Kim's discursive construction, 'the self' itself becomes an enterprise, with this dual process of collapse and reconfiguration shaping the newest iteration of the ideal neoliberal feminist subject (Rottenberg, 2018). As the reality television series demonstrates, the true nature of the family's 'work' entails the promotion of themselves and related product lines. Even though the audience is exposed to their 'work' through the televisual depiction of attending events, the Kardashians are essentially working the entire time because the medium of reality television requires them to perform the work of being watched. On the show, the relationship between family members is depicted as becoming closer through work. In turn, this discursive focus on 'family' works to humanize Kim, and downplay her role as a sexual pinup, thereby reconfiguring her deviant image into one more palatable to middle-class tastes.

Considering the timing of the show's release – when the U.S. was experiencing the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression – the narrative of family and support could possibly work to inspire hope and provide comfort in times of national turmoil. Furthermore, the Kardashian programs and spinoffs are representative of a genre that promotes neoliberal feminist discourse through consumption habits. On KUWTK, Kim's discursive construction renegotiates themes of resilience and individual achievement in order to fit the narrative of successful 'career' businesswoman. However, it is primarily through consumption that she and her sisters are able to

negotiate the tensions between historically traditional gender roles and the assumption of more modern roles. Throughout the 17 seasons that I have coded, the family has found ways to simultaneously re-establish and reinforce their highly feminized identities as they are able, through acts of consumption, to express and articulate individuality and independence while maintaining their prevailing identity as 'business' women.

The ubiquitous commercials, product placements and endorsements of the show serve to bolster the American culture of conspicuous consumption. The Kardashian family is an exemplar of the entertainment, advertisement and consumerism confluence on a multimodal scale, using not only reality television, but also social media, gaming and journalism to create and sustain celebrity. Moreover, they actively encourage commercialism, which further sustains their own brand; while the family members earn $30 million (USD) per season, the program is merely a vehicle to promote the family and sell products: "The popularity of our shows on E! has led to all sorts of ventures – our own clothing line, jewelry, fragrance, diet supplements, skin care, just to name a few" (Kardashian et al., 2011, p. 213). The Kardashians embody the transparent embrace of capitalism that is essential to American commercial culture through their reliance on the show to sell not only themselves but also products. In 2017, celebrity news site TMZ reported that the Kardashians signed a $150 million deal with E! for another 5 seasons. This uncovers the logic behind their hypervisibility which proves that the 'business' aspect of their lives comes first, followed by fame. For example, Season 15 of KUWTK opens with Kim calling out sister Kourtney (a single mother of three children) for being entitled because she was the least busy and did not also run a business or work, apart from being on the show. As this exchange further played out on Twitter (see Figure 4.4), Kourtney responded that her priority is being a mother – a position that started a much more public conversation about women and work and ties back to Rottenberg's (2018) formulation of the happy-work life balance, as well as whether women who are raced and classed can ever 'have it all'.

(Figure 4.4)

While Kourtney could have acknowledged the privilege that affords her the opportunity to choose to spend time with her children, Kim could have recognized that parenting full-time is difficult work. By belittling her contribution, Kim reinforces norms of the updated social contract that renders motherhood an 'invisible' profession, wherein women are expected to labor around the clock with no recognition. Her discourse serves to further divide women by constructing Kourtney as someone who is not a full-fledged partner in the family business enterprise because she does not also pursue a make-up, clothing, accessory or fitness empire like her sisters. This exchange between sisters is particularly noteworthy because it demonstrates the way celebrity discourses on social media have become a predominant domain in which the contestation and unsettling of ideas of contemporary femininity take place. Kim's discourse sets the tone for ideal Millennial work standards that are unsurprisingly consistent with a neoliberal society that devalues motherhood.

Further research can explore how this money-producing family-image is constructed and the significances that reside within it; but for this project, I am most interested in how Kim has been able to leverage her adult video-tape and convert her fame into a revenue-producing brand, thereby re-configuring her identity from porn star to successful businesswoman. Over the course of 17 seasons, Kim repeatedly uses terms like 'entrepreneurialism', 'business', 'individualism' and 'bank' to qualify her success, while endorsing an abundance of products that get regular mentions and appearances. According to both neoliberal feminist and reality television logic, KUWTK's conspicuous consumption is authorized by its implicit goal to transform the self into a better individual.

Kim utilizes not only the reality television format, but also social media to sustain her visibility. These two elements are intricately and symbiotically intertwined in the creation and dissemination of her image. She mobilizes these tools to sell products, narratives and herself. A uniquely digital cultural landscape has enabled Kim to follow an entrepreneurial business model that is not only encouraged, but also given shape by neoliberalism. In Kim's case, her discursive reconfiguration is an investment upon which corporations thrive, and whereby her financial empowerment becomes a function of rational exchange. Kim's entrepreneurial construction serves to re-make class (in the Digital Age) through career success and economic empowerment.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how Kim's discursive formation speaks to the crisis of educational attainment, as it relates to social class. My analysis focused on Kim's emergence as a national figure in response to the crisis encountered by the segment of the Millennial population without a college degree. Because her rise to fame is not predicated on a perceived talent or aptitude in a given field, Kim's discursive construction appears to fundamentally disrupt the secure meritocratic and neoliberal logic that dictates the boundaries of what it means to be an independent and empowered modern woman worthy of emulation. Drawing on the concept of respectability to analyze Kim's construction, I located her emergence within the historical trajectory of gender, race and class within the U.S. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of how her behavior is judged in comparison to norms that idealize performances of upper-middle class, White womanhood and femininity. I thus treated Kim's initial discursive formation as a site that defines and delineates the type of femininity that has been rendered deviant in American culture.

I continued to argue that Kim has sustained her presence as a public figure because she offers a strategy for Millennial women to respond to the lack of market opportunities by finding alternative paths for achievement. While Kim lacks a formal education, her discursive construction is the formulation of the ideal American worker who pulls herself up from her bootstraps after hardship by exhibiting a clear, relentless commitment to paid work. I applied discourse analysis to critical points in the trajectory of Kim's career in order to identify the unique ability of her discursive

construction to push the boundaries that had previously constrained her hyper-sexualized public image, and enabled her to perform the identity work necessary to move toward a higher social standing as a successful entrepreneur and businesswoman. Through strict adherence to business codes, Kim managed to negotiate and reconfigure her discursive label as a social 'deviant'. Her discursive formation speaks to a neoliberal climate that encourages Millennials to become successful and empowered by means of opportunism, ingenuity and self-promotion. As a result, I have argued that her celebrity case is thus repositioned from 'deviant' to 'exemplary'.

Through the performance and commodification of her 'self', Kim has become an agent of change in the way the classed Millennial subject is rendered legible through discourse in the Digital Age. This entrepreneurial narrative appears as a beacon of hope and a response to a generational cohort in crisis as they struggle to find work. Her construction fundamentally disrupts the secure neoliberal logic of empowerment, while simultaneously confirming and cementing the very same logic. As a result, neoliberalism is being reproduced through the 'responses' that incorporate the very same logics that reactivate and extend the ideology. In the following chapter, I will examine this logic across all three celebrity cases to better understand the pervasiveness of neoliberal feminist ideals in a time of crisis.

Chapter Seven: Adding to the Case Load – The Pervasiveness of Neoliberal Ideals in a Time of Crisis

7.1 Introduction

At the outset of this dissertation, I posited that the interrelated social, economic and political crises of the 21st century have had profound gendered implications for the Millennial generation – namely that the traditional markers of adulthood (such as completing schooling, beginning full-time work, becoming financially independent, getting married and becoming a parent) have become delayed. This claim is not new, and has been confirmed by both qualitative and quantitative research – the contributions of which have been covered in Chapter One. However, my celebrity case studies have provided empirical evidence that traditional markers of adulthood have not become delayed

for the Millennial women who conform to the ideals espoused by the neoliberal social contract. In the last three chapters, I have argued that the discursive construction of the American celebrity ideal has been done in order to fit within new and emerging neoliberal economic and social arrangements, and my analysis evidences patterns across constructions that emphasize core neoliberal feminist themes of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. My three empirical cases shed light on American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed, and offer a way to interrogate how popular discourses participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to.

In my accounting for a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, I also discovered patterns of entrepreneurship (specifically as it relates to feminist 'solidarity'), adaptability and resilience that have possibly been activated to offer a discursive response to a time of crisis. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: first, I would like to expand upon these three themes in order to better understand how discourses of Millennial ideal types suggest an attempt to make something of themselves in spite of difficulty, becoming not only the product of crisis, but also the targeted response to crisis.[8] This raises important questions about the shifting nature of neoliberal feminism and feminist identities in the U.S., thus warranting further critical scholarly attention to the future of neoliberal feminism and the future of the feminine ideal. As such, the second part of this chapter looks at how she can be imagined in her next permutation.

7.2 Entrepreneurship

In *Sisterhood*, bell hooks (1986) articulated a conception of female solidarity that not only acknowledged differences across gender, race and class, but also united women through political struggle. In the lead up to the 2016 presidential election in the U.S., there was an emergence in what has been termed 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017), that further gained traction and momentum in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump. The feminist

[8] I had planned to stop data collection in 2017, but because each celebrity's discursive construction continued to evolve, I have therefore continued to follow the trajectory of each woman's career. I have incorporated exemplary texts into the narrative analysis of my findings.

movement's rejuvenation was marked by the *Women's March on Washington*, which saw hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the Capital to protest the administration and the threat to reproductive, civil and human rights. Simultaneously, three million people around the world held protests in a show of global support for the resistance movement. The word "solidarity" served as a key feature of the media framing of the events (Littler & Rottenberg, 2020, p. 6).

The celebrity expansion into feminist solidarity, however, can neither be understood in relation to the long-term exacerbation of social and economic inequalities under four decades of neoliberalism, nor by the rise of an authoritarian neo-nationalism, which is characterized by a resurgence in patriarchal misogyny and homophobia (Brown, 2019). My celebrity cases do offer a solution to the shortcomings, problems and injustices created by the interrelated social crises of the contemporary moment; however, their responses incorporate the very same logics that reactivate and extend the ideology of neoliberal feminism. As I have argued, the logic of neoliberal feminism is predicated on competitive individualism. When celebrities make calls for feminist solidarity, they do not include claims to recognition and redistribution, but rather further entrench modes of neoliberal feminism that disavow the socioeconomic and cultural structures that contour Millennial women's lives.

As evidenced by my three case studies, the contemporary iteration of 'feminism' that circulates in American mainstream media is one that encourages women to focus on their personal brand of empowerment. Appropriating feminism and identifying as a 'feminist' has recently become a mark of pride and source of brand capital for many high-profile women such as Taylor Swift and Beyoncé Knowles Carter (Isaksen & Eltantawy, 2019; Weidhase, 2015), with a vast amount of literature dedicated to how celebrity feminists' legitimacy is constructed (Brady, 2016a; Cobb, 2015; Hobson, 2016b; Weidhase, 2015). I now want to look at the ways their highly visible and intensely mediated performances of the entrepreneurial 'feminist-self', work to solidify their 'brand'; I will then juxtapose the logic behind their feminist construction with that of Kim Kardashian. I conclude this section by thinking through the ways mainstream constructions continue to obscure structural critiques of gender inequality. Celebrity feminism's embrace of neoliberalism arguably limits its political scope, but opens up opportunities for new forms of representation that will be explored in the latter part of the chapter.

Because culture has become viewed as an economic resource in American society, branding validates the evolving boundaries of what products are marketable. My findings suggest that the 'feminist self' has been reconfigured in such a way to be successfully managed and distributed within a cultural marketplace. As indicated by my analysis, Taylor has, from an early age, been constructed and produced as a brand – which involved creating a detachable, saleable image or narrative. In 2014, she worked 'feminism' into her brand by not only embracing the ideology (by assuming the label), but also by becoming one of its leading celebrity proponents. As discussed in my empirical analysis, Taylor has been constructed as pro-actively cultivating female friendships as part of her 'reinvention' strategy. The aforementioned cover story from *TIME* magazine (2014) establishes the way in which she discursively constructs herself – through her 'Squad' – as a champion of good-girl feminism. However, Taylor's discursive integration of feminism elicits a tension with regard to female empowerment and emancipation; a point of contention relates to notions of mainstreaming and commercialization that constitute a 'selling out' of feminist principles through not only their co-option as a marketing device, but also their alliance with the multiple forces that govern the market of mainstream media.

In a 2014 survey of language trends on Twitter, a much different association to the word feminism was discovered: Beyoncé. This finding came in the aftermath of the recording artist's closing performance at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMA). During 'Flawless', Beyoncé's silhouette was illuminated on-stage as the word "FEMINIST" flashed in bold letters across the screen. Popular media writers constructed this performance as the "holy grail" as far as feminist endorsements were concerned, since the "most powerful" celebrity in the world had reclaimed (and rebranded) a word with a very complex history (Bennett, 2014); similarly, scholarly attention has also been dedicated to in-depth analysis of 'Flawless' (McGee, 2018). The projection of the word 'feminist' and its definition (in the words of academic Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) is particularly noteworthy due to the fact that within 24 hours of her performance, Beyoncé would become the subject of 67% of all tweets about feminism, according to a data analysis by Twitter (Bennett, 2014). Similar to her monumental VMA performance, Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* (2016), has also been celebrated by mainstream media outlets from the *Huffington Post* to *The Guardian*, and has been the subject of much academic debate. Most notably, Beyoncé and her

brand of feminism has either been applauded or criticized on the grounds that it is specifically 'Black' (Trier-Bieniek, 2016; Edgar & Toone, 2019). Within a neoliberal framework, this point underscores the importance of the commercial appropriation of a feminist identity, as it is both gendered and raced.

Whereas Taylor and Beyoncé very publicly proclaimed their allegiance to feminism, Kim Kardashian penned an open letter in 2016 on her blog (since removed), explaining why she does not identify as a feminist. In the popular press, she has also been repeatedly constructed as an enemy to the elevation of feminist values – as demonstrated by my discursive analysis of the reaction to her nude Selfie posts. Paradoxically, her construction, specifically as it relates to the development of a self-brand, mirrors the trajectory of both Taylor's and Beyoncé's constructions. Kim's discursive formation has been reconfigured from the negative stereotype of social deviant to an agent capable of reclaiming her subjectivity and recognition through entrepreneurial pursuits. However, because her brand of feminism (predicated on the commercial prostitution of the public self) does not align with more popular constructions of women's empowerment, the conditions of possibility for solidarity are stunted, and further perpetuate a dynamic of 'us vs. them' within Millennial women.

As illustrated by my three cases, the ideal Millennial is – in line with core tenets of neoliberal feminism – required to adopt 'entrepreneurial subjectivities' to navigate conditions of crises by demonstrating a capacity for self-reliance. It is precisely through this 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' that Kim was able to re-configure her identity from one of a less desirable adult film star, to what would logically qualify as a highly desirable neoliberal 'feminist' identity as a businesswoman (Rottenberg, 2018). This is the same logic of visibility that underpins the construction and strategic 'feminist' branding of Taylor and Beyoncé – all three celebrities are CEOs of a billion-dollar business whose marquee product is her own public image. They are the embodiment of neoliberal feminist ideals, not only because their construction places primacy on the 'self', but also their public discourses operate in such a way so as to accrue value by attracting a greater number of followers and visibility. However, Taylor and Beyoncé both advocate a brand of feminism that discursively purports to represent the wider group ('women'), whereas Kim champions the same values of professional attainment and self-actualization, but does so through the lens of the

individual. It is perhaps this explicit focus on the self that is paradoxically at odds with the constitution of an imagined collective feminism, and why there is "little or no consensus" among celebrities as to what is meant by their articulation and performance of feminism (Hamad & Taylor, 2015, p. 125).

The purpose of this comparison across cases was not to determine who 'is' or 'is not' a feminist, but to sketch the way neoliberal feminist ideology conveys the popular expectation that empowered women achieve independence through work in the marketplace. All three celebrity cases provide illustrative examples of how contemporary work on the self allows Millennial women to perform success – with their inspirational politics serving as a tactic for social uplift. And in this way, the entrepreneurial 'work-on-the-self' required to achieve a higher social standing offers an invitation to other, active, aspirational Millennial women to do the same. The benefit to society is that one subset of the population now has a strategy (or blueprint) for being able to make something of herself in spite of difficulty.

7.3 Adaptability

The contemporary online environment encourages Millennials to become successful and empowered through selling themselves. As argued in the previous section, the 'self' is culturally branded, managed and distributed within a market. In order to maintain a competitive edge in the marketplace over a long period of time (such as 10 years), each celebrity has been required to continuously adapt to market demand by re-inventing herself.

Initially, Taylor, the product, had been formulated as the 'nice girl', most recently evidenced by her documentary *Miss Americana* (2020): "You know, my entire moral code, as a kid and now, is a need to be thought of as good". At the beginning of her career, she discursively mastered this persona through slumber party girl-talk lyrics (see *Fearless* and *Speak Now* albums) and the cultivation of young, devoted female fans. The core elements of Taylor's constructed persona were instrumental in the initial success of her cross-over from country music to pop music. Despite her efforts to artistically and commercially separate herself from her 'good girl' image, Taylor's

representation within the mainstream media (and social media) continues to remain that of a pop cultural icon of innocence. Discursively, efforts were made to reconfigure her public persona (evidenced by both her professional and personal 're-invention' in recent years), but Taylor could only attempt to change who she is within certain confines of what the market dictated as acceptable.

In perhaps the most visible effort to break from her previous image, and re-brand her 'self', Taylor deleted all of her social media posts in 2017. By this point, I had already completed my coding of her Instagram account, but I have since returned, with a view to identifying whether deleting all of her previous posts and content signifies a 'fresh start' from her part. In *Look What You Made Me Do*, the recording artist claimed "The old Taylor is 'dead'" (Swift, 2017), and I was curious to see how, and where, the breaks from her previous discursive construction occurred. As a result, I continued to closely follow and code her posts through my analysis of an additional 195 photos and 59 videos. What I found is that while Taylor's rhetoric might have slightly changed, the patterns of her behavior suggest that her discursive formation continues to be tied to the bounds of the 'pop' genre. It is worth noting that there were no significant changes in her efforts to re-brand via social media. The pattern of posts followed in the same way as her first pop album, *1989*. While the move to delete all previous material suggested an interruption in her discursive formation, all photos and posts were directly linked to her professional career – whether promotional material for the upcoming album, sessions with fans or public promotional appearances. Put differently, the patterns did not break from the characteristics of ideal Millennial femininity. In this way, her adaptability to market changes can be read as a response to the havoc wrought by the financial crisis by way of incorporating neoliberal logics that empower the Millennial woman.

The same neoliberal logic of adapting to changes in the (cultural) marketplace holds true for Beyoncé. From her early days as a member of *Destiny's Child*, to her breakthrough as a solo artist, to collaborating – and marrying – one of the most successful rappers in the music industry, Beyoncé's career has undergone several transformations. In her recent Netflix documentary *Homecoming* (2019), she states:

> "As a black woman, I used to feel like the world wanted me to stay in my little box. And black women often feel underestimated…I wanted us to be proud of not only the show, but the process. Proud of the struggle…Rejoice in the imperfections and the wrongs that are so damn right".

Through Beyoncé's embrace of her career trajectory, she acknowledges the process and the struggle. The last statement is nearly a complete turn-around from her early career discourse. As a Black woman, Beyoncé's constructed narrative has specific implications; by overturning prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions of Black women, her public construction re-positions Black women as ideal citizens. In the latter part of her career, this is extended to Black mothers through her reconfiguration and normalization of representations of the Black family.

In what might be the clearest example of Beyoncé's adaptability, she returned to the stage only months after giving birth to her first daughter, Blue Ivy Carter, in January 2012. In a promotional video for her 'comeback' shows in Atlantic City, NJ, she comments "It's important that you don't lose yourself… I'm back to work. I'm back to business" (Dinh, 2012). However, this discourse can be read as problematic by more collectivist-oriented feminists, in that by hailing Black women as self-governing subjects who make the right choices with regard to marriage, motherhood and career (Chatman, 2015), Beyoncé reroutes the Black feminist political agenda (focused on the struggle against racism and sexism) to the neoliberal, economic terrain.

Kim's example of adaptability relates most closely to the market – the medium through which she successfully managed to reconfigure her personal brand from being objectified to being empowered. I identified Kim's unique ability to push the boundaries that had previously constrained her hyper-sexualized construction, and enabled her to perform the identity work necessary to move toward a higher social standing as a successful businesswoman. Any question about her adaptability can be acknowledged by her staying-power as a reality television star. Her multimedia franchises (that include, for example, 20 seasons of *KUWTK* and 4 spinoff series) have achieved unparalleled success. In addition, Kim was one of the first celebrities to adapt and replicate almost every aspect of her life in cyberspace:

> "I have a blog that has 40 million hits a month. People leave comments…. My mom told us, 'So why not be a brand for our fans and give them what they want?' Many of our ideas

> [about what to endorse] come from our fans and then our mother makes it happen" (Newman & Bruce, 2011).

Selling the self is now an online practice that has not only been normalized in the Digital Age, but also encouraged. The 'performative intimacy' (Marwick & boyd, 2011) of social media platforms provided Kim a space to assert authority over her discursive construction at a distance from the industrial hierarchies that had previously marginalized her, creating a sense of agency with which she could engage with the reframing of her identity. As a result, the blueprint for thriving online, as advanced by Kim, requires Millennial women to work on and transform the self, in addition to regulating every aspect of their conduct. Kim's method of adaptation was never to break from the disciplinary regimes of femininity, but to conform to them.

This poses a serious issue for contemporary feminism. Throughout this thesis, I have advanced the argument that each celebrity has emerged and has sustained her celebrity presence because she is either a product of, or response to, a crisis. For a Millennial generation that is not only struggling to find its identity, but is also facing a profound lack of security of linear progress and mobility, the three cases represent being self-reliant and resilient by adapting and adjusting to new circumstances. However, as a solution, adaptability further limits the collective feminist agenda, as neoliberal values combine with capitalist ideology to render visible an image of an ideal Millennial who is only secure when abiding by particular gendered, raced and classed parameters.

7.4 Resilience

In response to ideal attributes in the aftermath of crisis, my three cases are powerful vehicles for analyzing contemporary feminist 'resilience' discourses. Significant research has been done in this area, with scholars tracking its use across arenas such as the workplace (Gill & Orgad, 2015), the media (Gill & Orgad, 2018), as well as public policy (Burman, 2018). It has been argued that resilience discourse has heavily classed undertones (Dabrowski, 2021); middle-class women embody the characteristics of the idealized bounce-backable resilient neoliberal subject, and more often than not, this figure is represented in news as White (Gill & Orgad, 2018). However, my previous discussion of the Strong Black Woman in Chapter Five adds an additional racialized

dimension to the notion of the resilient woman. Within a framework marked as neoliberal feminism, I argue that the woman who has interpellated meritocratic discourses, and has been able to remake herself in the image of the ideal (e.g., one who is independent, has self-actualized and has been able to re-invent herself) is best poised to surmount difficulty; in other words, by making herself in the image of neoliberal feminism, she has developed the skills required to activate resilience.

Across cases, I have uncovered a resilience discourse that recycles 'damage' into more resources and follows a very specific logic: after having first been incited and made manifest, the damage is publicly and spectacularly overcome so that Taylor, Beyoncé or Kim is rewarded with increased celebrity capital, status and other forms of recognition. Taylor is emblematic of the Millennial woman that needs to be resilient in the face of unavoidable, persistent sexism. To illustrate, Taylor has deployed her fame to confront the gender bias in the music industry. *TIME* magazine identified her as one of its 'People of the Year' in 2017 on account of her testimony regarding sexual assault during a 2013 interview with DJ David Mueller. This public acknowledgment thereby positioned her as a 'silence breaker' in the #MeToo movement and an ideal figure through which to channel discursive resilience. Taylor's ability to negotiate her resistance to the power structures of the music industry and its intersection with the patriarchy is evident in her choice to take the case to trial, in which she sued the DJ for $1 – and won. Her fight against sexism in the music industry and her ability to overcome and continue a successful and lucrative career sheds light on the way 'resilience' is a discourse mobilized by Millennial women to turn objectification into a means of subjectification.

Crisis has been important to this study on account of the insecurity and instability that it signifies. The controlling images that I explored in Chapter Five are also suggestive of the way dominant representations (such as the Welfare Queen) that suture Black femininity to pathology can be overturned. I now want to return to the site of Black maternity because the terrain of Black maternal life has historically been tethered to grief and death in the popular imagination (Brooks, 2008). Most notably, the Black mother has been rendered visible through trauma. Such representations are amplified in the contemporary #BlackLivesMatter moment, where competing political actors (including feminists) constructed Black motherhood as a political identity – one that is born and

made urgent, respectable and legible through loss, forging its politics through the defense of the dead (Sharpe, 2016). In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts (1999) implicates the state in making Black maternity impossible (e.g., through policing, surveilling and regulating women's reproductive lives). If the visibility of Black motherhood is constituted by its historical (but new iteration) of the killing of the Black male, it has simultaneously reimagined itself as the space of crisis in which maternal resilience is foregrounded.

Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* was an attempt to better understand how Black women's losses unfold on multiple registers. This album has received considerable academic attention regarding its overtly politicized construction – the visual aesthetics and sonic charge of the album were derived from the synthesis of personal and political discontent (Olutola, 2019; Salzano, 2020; Tinsley, 2018). "Stop shooting us" is scrawled in the background of her most political song to date, *Formation*, which was performed live at the Superbowl L Halftime show to an audience of 115.5 million viewers (Pallotta & Stelter, 2016). By using her platform as a channel through which to represent Black anger, rage and grief, Beyoncé is rendered spectacularly visible not by cloaking her politics, which is often the case in the neoliberal turn, but by re-routing the political subjectivity of the Black maternal figure into the terrain of the universal. In doing so, she activates neoliberal discourses of resilience by situating the significance of her role within Black feminist thought that celebrates motherhood as a site of resistance to hardship and oppression. Through her artistic performance in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé recycles damage into resource by taking the "bitter fruit of life and [creating] sweetness" (Martin, 2016, p. 176).

With regard to the case of Kim Kardashian, I use the term 'resilience' in a theoretically and historically specific way to refer to a distinctly neoliberal ethical ideal. Following the release of her adult film, Kim managed to negotiate and reconfigure her label as social 'deviant' through strict adherence to business codes. Her case most clearly illustrates the way neoliberalism upgrades constructions designed to secure against, conquer or cover damage, with a view to making these constructions a more efficient means of social and economic management. Kim had to reconfigure the negative image she had internalized, and in doing so, she had to do the work of overcoming damage inflicted by patriarchy. Paradoxically, this work was done with a particularly cruel irony

that actually reinforces and strengthens patriarchal capitalism. Kim's strategic deployment of 'resilience' is not about overcoming patriarchy, but upgrading it.

To conclude, I have argued that three interrelated, contemporary crises (financial, educational and reproductive) have had profound implications for the construction ideal Millennial femininity. In my empirical chapters, I examined how discursive responses to crises facing the Millennial generation are embodied by the feminine subject. The development of the coding frame for analysis was guided by three core tenets of neoliberal feminism (independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention). However, in my accounting for a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, I also discovered patterns of entrepreneurship, adaptability and resilience. In this chapter, I threaded these themes across cases to understand how discourses of Millennial ideal types suggest an attempt to make something of themselves in spite of difficulty, becoming not only the product of, but also the response to, the interrelated crises of education, work and reproduction. Neoliberal feminism needs the kind of woman she represents to show that the system works for Millennials who make an active commitment to overcoming hardship, damage and oppression. The individual's spectacularly visible 'overcoming' thereby works to boost society's resilience, and generate surplus value for hegemonic institutions. This raises important questions about the shifting nature of neoliberal feminism and feminist identities in the U.S., thus warranting further critical scholarly attention to the future of feminism and the future of the feminine ideal, to which I will now turn.

7.5 America's Next Ideal

In this dissertation, my findings about Millennial ideal types, as they are rendered visible through celebrity, indicate a commitment to making something of themselves in spite of difficulty, becoming not only the product of, but also the response to, the interrelated crises of education, work and reproduction. In this section, I cannot make an attempt to predict the next crisis, but I can extend my findings to imagine the construction of a stronger celebrity ideal as a discursive preventative.

Because I've taken an approach that privileges history and has analyzed discourse as the embodiment of neoliberal ideology, genealogy has been the most appropriate method for my

research. My reason for drawing on historical discursive narratives is to offer a way of viewing new futures; if the present is reconstructed to yield better futures, a grip on the materials out of which the present has been constructed from the past is essential. And perhaps it is this diagnostic grip that is the greatest advantage of genealogy – in what follows is the application of a thought experiment that imagines the next permutation of the neoliberal celebrity ideal.

7.5.1 Neoliberal Feminism 2.0

In this dissertation, I have used neoliberal feminism as a central framework to theorize the ideal Millennial constituent. My research does not contradict, but rather validates scholarship positing neoliberalism's symbiotic relationship with feminism. As my analysis indicates, neoliberal feminism rarely critiques capitalism and its meritocratic values; on the contrary, values such as independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention are essential to the conceptualization of successful femininity in the U.S. My findings also suggest that in a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, patterns of entrepreneurship, adaptability and resilience are foregrounded.

The ideal type is constructed to select and accentuate certain characteristics. For this reason, it would be unproductive to imagine the future celebrity ideal in any way that does not reactivate and extend the ideology. In the paragraphs that follow, I will expand upon the three core tenets of neoliberalism and offer ways that my celebrity cases can update the status quo.

7.5.1.1 Independence

As evidenced by the data included in Chapter One, women are now achieving even higher levels of educational attainment than men (Ryan & Bauman, 2016.) Prior to Covid-19, women were on track to comprise a majority of the college-educated labor force, thereby marking a noteworthy

turning point in gender parity (Rosalsky, 2020). As per the updated social contract that I previously delineated, women are now expected to compete and achieve on similar levels to men in order to attain educational and professional parity. However, as Hochschild argues in the *Second Shift* (2012 [1989]), women have gone into the workforce, but the workplace they go into – and the men they come home to – have changed less rapidly, if at all. This stark inequality was recently brought to light in the disruption wrought by Covid-19, as women continued to shoulder the majority of caregiving responsibilities while also continuing their professional responsibilities. Up-to-date statistics show that for men, the difference in work hours before and after the disruption on account of the pandemic was not significant (Kashen et al., 2020). Despite the efforts to make men 'equal partners' in relationships, interruptions to work schedules caused by childcare affect women more than men, with the impact on short-term work productivity borne entirely on the backs of mothers with children (Heggeness, 2020).

There is something unnervingly wrong about the aforementioned disparity, which can be corrected by a return to the neoliberal ideal of independence. As women become more empowered, they cannot become complacent and tolerant of blatant injustice – neither in the workplace, nor in intimate relationships. In accordance with neoliberal principles, the Millennial ideal applies a rational, cost-benefit analysis to her relationships, and feels enabled and empowered to leave when the math does not work out. I suspect that in the future, if women continue to outperform men in both the public and private spheres, there will be a rise in the number of single parent families. To prepare for this radical disruption to the nuclear family, the celebrity ideal type can begin to reconfigure and modernize the "ideal of the White European nuclear family" (McRobbie, 2020, p. 79). As McRobbie writes (ibid):

> "The Facebook world of happy nuclear families with their regular posting in the Mumsnet mode can only further intensify the feelings of inadequacy or failure for those women who have children but no partner to pose alongside them".

McRobbie correlates feelings of inadequacy and failure with socially disadvantaged women. Going forward, this statement should be negotiated by the neoliberal figurative ideal. This is not the terrain of the socially disadvantaged, but the independent woman. If there is an absence of a partner, that should be indicative of that individual's failure to adhere to the increasing demands of parenting in the 21st century. In terms of the neoliberal ideal, the 'independent' woman is the

one who is smiling with her children but does not have a partner posing alongside her. She is the one who 'has it all' and 'does it all', signifying an upgrade to the current protype of the ideal in that she makes no concessions by having to share power within a relationship. The single parent is then poised to emerge as a new trope of successful femininity and independence.

As far as my celebrity cases are concerned, Kim Kardashian is the one most uniquely positioned to disrupt not only the prominence of the one-name celebrity couple (prior to her divorce, she and Kanye were known as Kimye), but also the image of the smiling nuclear family. In *First Comes Love: Power Couples, Celebrity Kinship and Cultural Politics,* Cobb and Ewen (2015) explore the celebrity power couple phenomenon, which sees an individual celebrity's identity become inseparable from her identity as a duo. This creates an interesting tension for neoliberal feminism: on the one hand, the union of powerful celebrities can increase celebrity stock value (measured in followers and media coverage) – thereby leading to financial gain. Scholarship by Leppert (2015) provides illustrative evidence for my case study of Kim through her analysis of the way 'Momager' Kris Jenner has leveraged the Kardashian weddings (and divorces) for a profit. On the other hand, the ideal neoliberal figure is constituted by independence, and through the process of de-coupling, Kim can regain subjectivity for herself – or in other words, construct herself as a 'whole' entity, rather than a constitutive part.

Furthermore, as a single mother to four children, she can open up a space for rethinking the boundaries of family. Families exist in many configurations, and in the popular imagination, it tends to be assumed that single parenting is the result of women's poor decisions. According to results from Pew Research Center (Heimlich, 2011), seven out of ten people believe that single women who have children are bad for society. However, single motherhood no longer reflects this stereotype – firstly, the majority (53%) of babies born to women under 30 are born to unmarried mothers (Roiphe, 2012). Secondly, more than 50% of single parents have a college education, with only 13% using food pantries and 9% receiving TANF (or welfare) (Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2014).

As one of the most followed celebrities on social media (and one of the most covered celebrities in traditional media), Kim's discursive construction as a single mother can challenge hegemonic

norms of the nuclear family. My analysis demonstrates how she has overcome social stigma and shame to reposition herself as a businesswoman worthy of emulation. Given her history and career trajectory, Kim appears to be the one most capable of reconfiguring a long-standing, crude stereotype such as 'the single mom', and turning it on its head by showing the variety and richness of families who do not conform to the nuclear ideal. In doing so, her discursive construction concurrently validates the choices made by women who opt not to parent with a partner, and reactivates and extends neoliberal ideology by reclaiming the key attribute of 'independence' entirely for herself.

7.5.1.2 Self-Actualization

As discussed in the literature review, the Millennial ideal has been an implicit, not explicit figure in neoliberal feminist critiques, with numerous feminist scholars having specified that it is "young" women who have been constructed as ideal neoliberal subjects (Rutherford, 2018, p. 619). As such, the next iteration of the neoliberal feminine ideal will need to contend with the issue of age to the extent that it cannot be a factor that renders her invisible. The true test of the Millennial generation's ideal type, as she is located in popular culture, is her 'staying power'. Put differently, the celebrity ideal must maintain her relevance and appeal in order to garner attention, lest she be replaced as a favored subject of attention by women of the younger generation.

In her critique of contemporary feminism, Gill (2008) notes that women, particularly White, middle- to upper-class women are uniquely positioned to undertake the 'work-on- the-self' – by becoming more educated, qualified and professional – which is required by the neoliberal regime in order to become the ideal subject. In the same way that I mapped the ideal characteristic of 'independence' onto the future discursive formation of Kim, so too will I position Taylor as the case who is best suited to complete the 'work-on-the-self' required by the aging Millennial woman who wishes to remain visible on the public stage, thereby securing the longevity of her career. I argue this based on the evidence presented in my empirical chapter.

In Chapter Four, I have addressed how the construction of Taylor is done in order to fit within new and emerging neoliberal economic and social arrangements that valorize characteristics of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. Because Taylor's core constructed persona is one of 'America's Sweetheart', her career trajectory has followed a limited cultural script in which she could attempt to change her image (e.g., by the cross-over from country to pop), but only within certain confines of what the market has dictated as acceptable.

However, the media 'market' is not kind to women who are no longer youthful. In Hollywood, the age of 40 is known as the 'sunset year'. Data on American films produced between 1920 and 2011 reveal that women in their early 20s played nearly twice as many roles as men in the leading position, but after the age of 40, men are casted in 80% of the leading roles, while women play only 20% (Fleck & Hanssen, 2016). This disparity should be shocking, but as quoted earlier in this dissertation, cultural commentator Andi Zeisler (2016, p. 133) remarked that the Hollywood machine is one that "runs on neither complexity nor nuance, but cold, hard cash". Producers have been constructed as casting actors based on who they believe will make money. If Hollywood serves as a mirror to reflect the world, then this provides a defense that the industry is not sexist, but rather society is. If neoliberalism champions a free market, then producers justify the disparities (regarding age and gender imbalances) as a reflection of what the audiences want to see.

From an intersectional perspective, this marketing strategy can help explain the message that 'diversity' sells, as the statistics for people of color in key entertainment roles has steadily increased (Hunt & Ramón, 2020). But this 'inclusion' does not hone in on the glaring absences of older women in leading roles on screen. The task for the ideal neoliberal feminist is to thus understand societal shifts in such a way as to carve out a space for herself in an industry well known to disavow the aging feminine face.

Despite advances in age, the ideal neoliberal subject must continue to self-actualize in meaningful ways. This is where Taylor's history and proven track record make her an ideal subject for this challenge. As illustrated by my analysis, Taylor represents being self-reliant and resilient – always adapting and adjusting to new circumstances – but forever remaining true to her representational

core. As illustrated through my analysis, Taylor has become a leading face in the fight against sexism in the entertainment industry, deploying her fame to confront gender bias in the music industry. Her public acknowledgment of sexual assault positioned her as a 'silence breaker' in the #MeToo movement, and an ideal figure through which to channel discursive resilience. Her fight against sexism in the music industry and her ability to overcome and continue a successful and lucrative career sheds light on the way 'resilience' is a discourse mobilized by Millennial women to turn objectification into a means of subjectification. In this way, Taylor's resilience can be viewed as an ideal response to the crisis of neoliberalism by adopting neoliberal logics. She has gained substantial social power by choosing to conform to the disciplinary regimes of neoliberal femininity, and as my analysis has demonstrated, her relationship to feminism is constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas. Discursively, she has been able to replicate neoliberalism's structure by adopting its logic. The question now becomes whether she will continue to provide an ideal response as she ages, and how.

7.5.1.3 Self-Reinvention

In the introductory chapter to this thesis, I posited that changes to the social contract have particularly gendered implications, and have possibly prolonged the transition to adulthood for American Millennial women. In Chapter Five, I advanced the idea that Beyoncé's discourse offers a solution to the current reproduction crisis more broadly, and the racialized reproduction crisis specifically. I argued that Beyoncé's discursive construction works to reframe Black motherhood from a negative state of crisis to a more positive, legitimate social influence. I want to extend this line of thinking further to determine how she can position herself as a positive, legitimate social influence on *parenting*, which I argue is the next permutation of the neoliberal ideal who has achieved the aforementioned markers of success (such as career, marriage and family).

Along with mediated appearances, the images of family togetherness posted to her Instagram account are crucial in countering prevailing media discourses that have rendered a 'typical' Black family as comprised of an absentee father and an unmarried mother. However, they are limited in that they do not show young Black mothers how to overcome barriers that impede access to social,

political and economic support. Statistics continue to show that Blacks are below in critical national norms such as education, housing, income and health. The crucial role that Beyoncé (and her husband Jay-Z) have to play is in using their platform and visibility to broadcast intensive neoliberal parenting strategies, particularly as they pertain to education.

Beyoncé has been publicly criticized by talk show host Wendy Williams who claimed: "You know Beyoncé can't talk. She sounds like she has a fifth-grade education" (Randolph, 2020). I would argue that Beyoncé's resounding success as a recording and performing artist suggests that she demonstrates her intelligence through alternative modes. However, in her capacity as a Black feminist surrogate who uses her voice in service of the collective, she can upgrade the neoliberal ideal by placing an emphasis on the behavior that allows marginalized parents to obtain upward mobility for their children. Research has shown that the continuous gap in educational achievement poses a severe risk, and is the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession (Auguste et al., 2009, p. 6). Several factors have been identified that contribute to the educational achievement gap between Blacks and other races, such as the lack of parental involvement in their children's education on account of family structure and education level; the devaluation of education through different ways of acquiring income; and the lack of personal responsibility of the parents for not being able to instill the value of education and its role in upward social mobility (Scott & Kronick, 2006, p. 2). As I mentioned in Chapter One, recent studies show that unemployment is higher among those without a college degree (Torpey, 2018), and there is a discrepancy between opportunities afforded to Millennials with more education and skills than those with less. This widening gulf is even more pronounced for minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged young adults.

Prior research has confirmed that elite culture gradually becomes mass culture (Pinsker, 2019). Because Beyoncé's discursive construction as a Black mother 'surrogate' serves as a form of social uplift, a focus on academic performance (and school attendance) could serve as encouragement, especially considering that Black students are the group most likely to drop out of school. This is not a departure from the values espoused by her lyrics. For example, in Chapter Five, I analyzed 'Independent Women' (where she stresses "I worked hard to get what I get"), as well as 'Run the World (Girls)' (in which Beyoncé indicates she's 'reppin' "the college grads" who are taking over

the world). The lyrics of the latter song are indicative of the primacy she places on education as a pathway to upward social mobility.

Under neoliberal commercial logic, it follows that Beyoncé's children are photographed taking selfies at promotional events – the photo of family bonding that occurs during a Knowles-Carter family vacation, for example, is crucial in representing both aspirational consumption, as well as child-parent bonding. But rare is the photo of the children collectively putting forward (or performing) an imagined 'best self' that works toward obtaining a job that correlates with wealth and intelligence. #BlackExcellence is more than an aesthetic or awareness campaign; it is a mindset geared toward overcoming systemic racism – which requires a concerted cultivation of ideal neoliberal characteristics (Lundberg, 2015). The role of the ideal neoliberal Black surrogate entails an investment in race as an enterprise, where all parental activities and practices are understood as investments that appreciate the value of the race. As Springer (2007, p. 272, as cited in Cobb, 2018, p. 716) argues, "education and career advancement is black women's twenty-first-century uplift work".

It is a mindset that I argue needs to be developed at a young age on account of the stark educational inequities that persist (Rahali, 2017). As such, the ideal neoliberal mother (often a figure similar to Chua's (2011) conceptualization of the strict and demanding 'Tiger Mom'), would instill the belief that hard work leads to confidence. The ideal neoliberal mother is invited to interpellate the strategies employed by the intensive, or helicopter, parent. The hands-on approach to parenting was once the hallmark of upper middle-class households, but considering widening economic inequality, it is an approach that should register across race and class, as the downside of a child falling behind educationally and financially is the largest it has been in generations. Millennial parents cannot determine the future for their children. The ideal Millennial mother, however, assumes a duty to ensure that she takes every measure of preparation to achieve the best possible outcome for her child.

In the next iteration of the neoliberal feminine ideal, high achieving mothers must be validated by producing high achieving children. It will no longer suffice to be confined to what Angela McRobbie constructs as the 'aesthetic' ideal: "The modern woman is not 'that name' unless she is in possession of a well-dressed toddler or 'mini me'" (2020, p. 32). The cultural intelligibility of

the Millennial ideal should not simply consist of a young woman who can achieve a slim body, manicured appearance and also carry an attractive baby. Rather, all of those features should be in addition to being highly educated, highly successful and raising highly intelligent and highly achieving children (Glucksberg, 2016).

With the case of Beyoncé, the fact that her children were born to not one, but *two* highly successful parents, suggests that they will have to work additionally hard to ensure that they do not become the reverse of the American dream. This was the same attitude cultivated by Taylor's financial executive parents, who raised her to believe that she was never entitled to success, and that she had to work hard for it. Furthermore, in the age of wokeness, an increasing resentment toward elites has reconfigured the idea of 'privilege'. In an era of #checkyourprivilege, never before has the biblical phrase "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required" rung more true (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Luke. 12:48). The aforementioned hashtag was a trend that encouraged Millennials to reflect on their advantageous position because of the particular social category to which they belong. Unique to the Digital Age, performing the hard-work ethic is now part and parcel to the concept of meritocracy.

To safeguard her children against future attacks on entitlement, the neoliberal mother must actively work to prove that her children have climbed the ladder of success based on merit. In other words, in order to prove that her children did not end on top because they started on top, the neoliberal ideal must offer her offspring enough opportunities for their talents to combine with effort in order to achieve success. In a social media age where 'seeing is believing', it will no longer suffice for millionaires or billionaires, celebrities and children at elite schools to code their hard work as "graft" (Littler, 2018, p. 93) without proving it. As a result, the children of the neoliberal feminine ideal have to not only embody the traits, but also perform them, so they can be disseminated on a wider scale and at a faster speed. This is a unique historical moment to conduct genealogical research, because the children of the Millennial ideal will be some of the first to have their lives documented online since birth. While the rich and famous prefer (selective) privacy (Barnes, 2010), the tables have turned insofar as their children will be required to mediate their public image from an early age. This fills a need to identify both the ideological leanings of meritocratic extremism, and the character it takes, while serving to document the extent to which the modern

neoliberal ideal types must rely on actively constructing such images in order to maintain their power, and foster the belief in an egalitarian society that awards each according to his and her talents.

In *Tyranny of Merit*, Michael Sandel (2020) makes a counter argument that Americans need a political agenda that focuses less on the rhetoric of rising, less on arming individuals for meritocratic competition as if that were a solution to inequality, but instead focuses more on the dignity of work. I recognize the merit to his argument, but in this dissertation, I do not study the average Millennial, but the discursive construction of the neoliberal ideal, who is constituted by her desire to strive. The broader benefit of this 'aspirational' blueprint is that it has the potential to serve as a strategy of social uplift (providing both the example *and* the evidence of the cultivation of a hard work ethic and attainment of success). In keeping with the American Dream, the next permutation (or generation) of the ideal cannot become 'less' – as Sandel seems to imply – but must seek to be better, bolder, stronger and 'more' imaginative.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In this research project, I asked how the ideal Millennial constituent is produced, and reproduced, in American society as a response to crisis. I began by offering that the interrelated social, economic and political crises of the 21st century have had profound implications for the Millennial generation, who came of age against a backdrop of 9/11, the Global Financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, rising costs of living, unparalleled student loan debt and stagnant wages. Distilling this idea further, I argued that the social conditions since the turn of the century have had particularly gendered consequences, and thereby began my exploration of the construction of ideal Millennial femininity.

The starting block was to understand how the social contract has been reconfigured for the Millennial generation. I outlined an updated social contract that combines commitment to meritocratic ideals with the gender-, race- and class-blind optics of neoliberalism to engender a troubling crisis that implicates the Millennial woman in its address. As per the modern social contract, there is a cultural expectation that women of working age in the U.S. fully define as laborers, and operate in service of the neoliberal agenda (or in other words, women are regarded as a subset of the population that is not dependent on the state). As such, one key element of the societal transition to a fully neoliberal regime is that American Millennial women are compelled to prioritize paid labor over and above maternal obligations or the desire to become a mother. Planning reproduction now follows a similar cost-benefit analysis as does investment in a Millennial woman's education and career – with the formal markers crucially being ordered in such a way that reproduction is preceded by education and career, but nevertheless essential to the construction of successful neoliberal femininity. For Millennials who choose to be mothers, the logic of the aforementioned social contract requires them to play a dual role, one in which they are active in the workplace and one in which they are primarily responsible for raising children and domestic orderliness. On the one hand, Millennial women are expected to compete and achieve on similar levels to men in order to attain educational and professional parity. On the other hand, workplaces often fail to accommodate the adjustments required by the working mother. As a result, Millennial women find themselves coping with the long period of education that is the price of the ticket for upward social mobility, which then requires gainful employment and, consequentially, delayed-child bearing. For Millennial women, this is a process that inevitably prolongs the delay of reaching successful markers of adulthood, and engenders three interrelated crises in its propositional formula: financial, educational and reproductive.

To briefly recap, the post-2008 economy has divided the country along a fault line that is demarcated by higher education. The biggest financial recession since the Great Depression was particularly harmful to the Millennial generation. Many older Millennials were initially entering the workforce when the crisis occurred. As a result, their careers suffered early setbacks that have hindered Millennials' ability to afford aspects of the lifestyle that their parents may have enjoyed at similar ages. Finally, there are many factors that converge around the current reproduction crisis,

with perhaps one of the most potent reasons driving the falling birth rate being that Millennial women in their prime child-bearing years do not have the financial security to start a family.

The aforementioned evidence suggests that when the education crisis and financial crisis map onto gender, there are significant implications for modern constructions of successful, neoliberal femininity. However, my study aims to show that traditional markers of adulthood have not become delayed for the Millennial women who conform to the ideals espoused by the neoliberal social contract. As such, neoliberal feminism has been chosen as the central framework through which I have theorized the feminine ideal. Admittingly, it has become increasingly difficult to define the parameters of neoliberal feminism: as Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020) have indicated, there are many similarities – as well as differences – between neoliberal, popular and post-feminism variations. I have extended Gill's (2007) elements of a post-feminist sensibility by using three characteristics (independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention) as key tenets of neoliberal feminism. My articulation of neoliberal feminism follows more closely to Rottenberg (2018), because I have argued that its formulation is the prerequisite for understanding the 'ideal' subject. Put differently, neoliberal feminism engenders a specific subject (the American societal ideal) who – through her constitution by market metrics – is able to further entrench U.S. imperialist logic.

However, I depart from Rottenberg's permutation of the neoliberal ideal in that I do not envision the ideal as increasingly predicated on being able to craft a felicitous work-family balance. In my formulation, I follow the self-as-entrepreneur model (Rose, 1992), because this conceptualization of the figurative ideal aligns with the version of the 'self' that is always looking to alter and diversify assets or modify behaviors – and in the very act of doing so, is therefore never able to achieve 'balance'. Instead, I further integrate ideas advanced by Michael Feher (2009) and Wendy Brown (2009; 2016) (whose work also serves to underpin Rottenberg's theorization of neoliberal feminism). Specifically, Feher's articulation of neoliberalism's subjective apparatus illustrates how female subjects can be converted into self- investing capital, for instance through the gaining of qualifications (e.g., education and career) that subsequently enable the American Millennial woman to obtain intelligibility and step forward into visibility. I couple his work with Brown's (2015, p. 177) declaration that neoliberalism has produced a subject through which not only

education and career are configured as practices of self-investment, but so too is mate-selection, thereby indicating how neoliberalism is encroaching upon even the most intimate of spheres. In this way, I was better positioned to articulate the inextricable link between the modern social contract and the neoliberal feminist ideal.

In order to better understand the challenges and opportunities that arise when neoliberal values appear to be inscribed within a more determined attempt – undertaken by both cultural and economic forces – to re-shape notions of American femininity so that it complements the requirements of the social contract, I examined the ideal Millennial's discursive construction across three intensely mediated and highly popular celebrity subjects. My three empirical cases shed light on American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed, and offer a way to interrogate how popular discourses participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to. It was by taking these discursive formations as an object of study that I could determine how popular narratives cohere in response to the social and political climate of the time, and provide an answer to my research question that asked how the ideal Millennial constituent is produced, and reproduced, in American society as a response to crisis.

In this final chapter, I note the key findings from my empirical analysis. I then discuss the major theoretical and methodological contributions of my dissertation, considering what my work adds to core debates, as well as to the development of an intersectional understanding of neoliberal feminism. Following a reflection of the study's limitations, I discuss possible avenues for future research.

8.2 Findings from the Celebrity Case Studies

The starting point for my empirical analysis was the Foucauldian idea that power works through the production of subjects. I have argued that the Millennial is a part of a larger neoliberal power nexus in which certain practices, ideas and ways of living are normalized. The social construction of contemporary femininity has material effects; thus the creation of ideal figures and hegemonic

femininities prompt an exploration of the ways in which gender is currently represented and negotiated. I asked under what historical conditions the Millennial has come to achieve epistemological coherence, and sought to understand the forces (such as the crises, and the rise of digital technology) and beliefs (anchored in contemporary neoliberal feminism) that have generated such coherence, along with the consequences.

Using multimodal analysis, I examined the Millennial's discursive construction across three cases who, in their capacity as celebrities, provided the spectacular visibility for understanding American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed. Constructed as an individual not only worthy of admiration, but also as one who serves as a role model for a younger generation of women, the contemporary 'feminist' celebrity has come to assume the role of society's ideal type, which enables the construction of a social reality that links the figurative ideal with the conditions through which she has been constructed, or with the consequences that follow from her emergence. In each of my empirical chapters, I examined how discursive responses to financial, education and reproductive crises are embodied by the celebrity subject, and I will now summarize the key findings from each case.

8.2.1 Taylor Swift

For a generation that is not only struggling to find its identity, but is also facing a profound lack of security in linear progress and mobility on account of the financial crisis, I have found that Taylor's narrative of success offers a solution. In Chapter Four, my analysis of empirical data suggests that her discursive construction is done in order to fit within new and emerging neoliberal economic and social arrangements that valorize characteristics of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. Taylor's adaptability to market changes can be read as a response to the havoc wrought by the financial crisis by way of incorporating neoliberal logics that empower the Millennial woman: resilience and self-reliance.

As a result, Taylor's construction as a Millennial ideal can be read as a part of a larger biopolitical power project in which neoliberal femininities are normalized. Her career trajectory renders

spectacularly visible the ways the American 'formula' for success still holds true, despite turbulent economic upheavals. My findings suggest that Taylor's discursive formation speaks to a contemporary neoliberal ethos in which meritocracy and self-governing rhetoric are advanced. She has gained substantial social power by choosing to conform to the disciplinary regimes of neoliberal femininity, and as my analysis demonstrates, her relationship to feminism is constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas. In this way, Taylor serves as the ideal response to crisis, precisely because she is able to replicate neoliberalism's structure by adopting its logic. However, through my investigation, I determined that Taylor offers a solution for a very particular ideal type of Millennial woman – one who is White, heterosexual and middle-class. This finding thus warranted further critical examination of the Millennial ideal, as she is raced and classed.

8.2.2 Beyoncé Knowles Carter

In Chapter Five, I traced Beyoncé's discursive formation to explore how the mediated construction of one of the most highly visible Black female celebrities in the U.S. has fundamentally reconfigured the way Black Millennial women can be read. I began by focusing on the way Beyoncé's representation overturned the image and narrative of the Black woman and mother from lazy and dependent to agentic and independent. Findings show that in motivating women to embrace this more neoliberal way of thinking, feeling and behaving, Beyoncé promotes a clear and sharp break from the Welfare Queen, and provides a response to both the financial crisis, and the racialized social crisis of state dependency. As an ideal neoliberal feminist, Beyoncé's rhetoric advances the idea that women are responsible for creating the life they desire, and prompts them to do so through hard-work, sacrifice and perseverance. In doing so, she obscures the need for collective political action and disavows systemic injustices.

Further to my exploration of Beyoncé's construction as an empowered, independent woman, I examined her performances of Black motherhood by interrogating how her body and personal narrative challenge normative conceptions of Black femininity and reconfigure dominant stereotypes (such as the Strong Black Woman). My analysis demonstrates the way her discourse contests the ideological formations of the Black American family as dysfunctional, and instead reconfigures marriage and maternity as essential. I found that Beyoncé's construction both offers

a solution to the current reproduction crisis more broadly, and the racialized reproduction crisis specifically. Her discursive formation solidifies career, family and lifestyle options as interrelated markers of neoliberal success, thereby cementing the logic behind traditional markers of adulthood, and ensuring that they have not become delayed or reversible despite world-changing, paradigm shifting developments. More specifically, in investing the modern Black woman and mother with new meanings related to economic independence and self-sufficiency, Beyoncé has placed the Black feminine subject squarely at the heart, and in the service of, the neoliberal imagination.

8.2.3 Kim Kardashian

In Chapter Six, I explored how Kim Kardashian's discursive formation speaks to the crisis of educational attainment, as it relates to social class. My analysis focused on her emergence as a national figure in response to the crisis encountered by the segment of the Millennial population without a college degree. Because her rise to fame is not predicated on a perceived talent or aptitude in a given field, Kim's initial discursive formation was analyzed as a site that defines and delineates the type of femininity that has been rendered deviant in American culture.

However, as my analysis continued, I found that Kim's entrepreneurial narrative appeared as a beacon of hope and as a response to a generational cohort in crisis as they struggle to find work. Kim offers a strategy for Millennial women to respond to the lack of market opportunities by finding alternative paths for achievement. Through the performance and commodification of her 'self', Kim has become an agent of change in the way the classed Millennial subject is rendered legible in the Digital Age. In doing so, Kim's discursive construction appears to fundamentally disrupt the secure meritocratic and neoliberal logic that dictates the boundaries of what it means to be an independent and empowered modern woman worthy of emulation.

Paradoxically, Kim's construction fundamentally disrupts the secure neoliberal logic of empowerment, while simultaneously confirming and cementing the very same logic. As a result, neoliberalism is being reproduced through the response mechanisms that incorporate the logics that reactivate and extend the ideology. While Kim lacks a formal education, her discursive

construction is the formulation of the ideal American worker who pulls herself up from her bootstraps after hardship by exhibiting a clear, relentless commitment to paid work. Her discursive formation speaks to a contemporary cultural climate that encourages Millennials to become successful and empowered by means of opportunism and self-promotion. As a result, Kim offers a solution to the crisis of education and class.

8.2.4 Conclusion

In this study, I questioned whether the construction of the ideal Millennial is done in order to fit within new and emerging neoliberal economic and social arrangements. Using multimodal analysis, I examined the ideal Millennial's discursive construction across three intensely mediated and highly popular feminine subjects. My celebrity cases shine a spotlight on American feminism's ideal constituent, as she is gendered, raced and classed, and offer a way to interrogate how popular discourses participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to. The analysis of my cases has elicited patterns across constructions that emphasize core neoliberal feminist ideals of independence, self-actualization and self-reinvention. My findings also suggest that in a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, patterns of entrepreneurship, adaptability and resilience are foregrounded.

8.3 Contributions

This dissertation represents a valuable and original contribution to discussions on neoliberal feminism in relation to the Millennial in celebrity culture, as she is gendered, raced and classed. The significant theoretical and methodological feature of my research has been pairing the literature of media studies, generation studies and feminist studies with an intersectional empirical analysis.

As indicated in my literature review, the scholarship on the Millennial is vast. To date, Millennials have been looked at from various angles as an ontological entity with little reflection on how they

have been discursively constructed. Thus, my understanding of the Millennial through a Foucauldian lens makes a unique and original theoretical contribution. My perspective is unique in that the generational literature has not fully examined the cross-over between generations and feminism, and even less work has been done on the gendered Millennial subject as she is situated within media and celebrity popular culture. While she has been imagined as the implicit figure in feminist critiques over the past two decades, research has not explicitly focused on the Millennial woman, as she is constituted through celebrity discourses. This draws attention to the lacuna in the literature that my study has aimed to fill.

My research also makes a contribution to feminist debates. Because feminist politics encapsulates a variety of perspectives and experiences, many different definitions exist (hooks, 1981). In the academy, there is theoretical recognition of the importance of multiple, intersecting inequalities, but there remain significant differences as to how feminist theorizing and analysis should proceed. With regard to the contemporary iteration of feminism, there are significant differences and similarities between three central variations: neoliberal, popular and post-feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). My scholarship builds on previous work in contemporary feminism, but with a specific emphasis on neoliberal feminism, which I have argued is the prerequisite for understanding the 'ideal' subject in the U.S. Put differently, neoliberal feminism engenders a specific subject (the American societal ideal) who – through her constitution by market metrics – is able to further entrench U.S. imperialist logic and ensure that traditional markers of success have not become disorderly or delayed despite turbulent economic and political upheavals. However, I depart from Rottenberg's (2018) permutation of the neoliberal ideal in that I do not envision the ideal as increasingly predicated on being able to craft a felicitous work-family balance. By combining insights from Rose (1992), Feher (2009) and Brown (2009; 2016), I have redefined the parameters of neoliberal feminism in such a way so as to articulate the inextricable link between the modern social contract and the neoliberal feminist ideal.

Furthermore, I have expanded Rottenberg's conceptualization of the ideal neoliberal figure, arguing that it is through the examination of celebrity that scholarship can better illuminate the convergence of neoliberal and feminist ideologies. In this way, my review of the literature shifted from 'feminism' more broadly, to 'celebrity feminism' specifically. Celebrity, as it intersects with

feminism, functions as a discursive tool for negotiating the parameters that define feminist subjects. As previously indicated, celebrity feminism has been richly theorized and critiqued, with key debates organized around questions that ask whether or not celebrity discourses constitute 'legitimate' feminist identities (Cobb, 2015). As suggested by my discourse analysis of Taylor, Beyoncé and Kim, there is "little or no consensus" about what feminism means (Hamad & Taylor, 2015, p. 125). But the findings from my case study suggest that neoliberal feminism – if accepted as "feminism" in the same way as Rottenberg (2020, p. 1074) formulates – is an umbrella under which the celebrity manifestation of feminism can stand. In 1994, Jennifer Wicke argued that there is no authentic feminism that exists beyond its popular culture, celebrity manifestations. However, as of 2021, reflection on my analysis would lead me to add that there is no authentic 'celebrity' feminism that exists beyond its neoliberal manifestation.

As my results have indicated, the intersectional aspect of (celebrity) feminism precludes any notion of collective solidarity. Neoliberal feminism has been the core framework through which I have theorized the feminine ideal; having now conducted the analysis, I offer that celebrity feminism cannot be understood without being situated (in part) within a neoliberal framework. Neoliberal feminism offers a 'common ground' for analysis, not by disavowing socio-demographic characteristics, but by reifying them, and capitalizing on them in such a way so as to enhance the value of the self. Put differently, neoliberal feminist ideals are *not* being re-inscribed through socio-demographic characteristics (such as gender, race or class), but are re-activated and extended through *character* traits (that may, or may not, entail the performance or invocation of a salient identity in order to gain leverage over competitors). As a result, the neoliberal ideal knows how to navigate and integrate the many discourses that impinge on her identity.

My examination of celebrity discourses was unique in that it spanned a period of over ten years of their career. The purpose was not to determine who 'is' or 'is not' a feminist, but to understand the way truth claims about Millennial ideals obtain epistemological coherence. My contribution to debates on celebrity feminism stem from my empirical casework. Methodologically, the strength of the analysis is derived from its intersectional lens. My approach illuminated the way the attribution of neoliberal characteristics to the Millennial celebrity – as a series of interpellative processes – took different forms. However, because my data is longitudinal, I was able to show

how the frequency of such neoliberal discourse, across various sites, has come to function as a key mechanism of social transformation.

I was able to see additional codes emerge from the text that had not previously been drawn from the original theoretical framework and literature. I was attentive to moments of disruption, and closely considered their potential implications for analysis. In my accounting for a social climate of economic fragility and political instability, I also discovered patterns of entrepreneurship (specifically as it relates to feminist 'solidarity'), adaptability and resilience – discourses that could have possibly been activated to provide a response to crisis.

While I acknowledge that this finding does not take into account or elaborate upon wider structural inequalities, I will insist that such considerations are outside the scope of a project focused on American society's ideal type. Furthermore, I do not devote significant attention to the structural supports (such as the care staff, hair, make-up and wardrobe stylists, etc.) that enable the celebrity to perform her best self – unless evidenced through discourse. My analysis contributes to a wider discourse that purports that the 'formula' for success in the U.S. still works, and that traditional markers of adulthood have not become delayed for the Millennials who conform to the ideals espoused by the neoliberal social contract. Discourses of the American Millennial ideal type, as constituted by my celebrity cases, suggest making a name for oneself in spite of difficulty, becoming not only the product of, but also a targeted response to the gendered crises of education, work and reproduction. For a Millennial generation that is not only struggling to find its identity, but is also facing a profound lack of security in linear progress and mobility, the narrative of success constructed by my three cases contribute to the blueprint of a solution.

8.4 Implications, Limitations and Future Directions

8.4.1 Implications

The spectacular visibility of my three empirical cases offered a way to interrogate how popular discourses are constructed, and how they participate in larger cultural and societal conversations about the world that the Millennial woman is not only inheriting, but also responding to. The critical purchase of drawing on discursive narratives has been to not only understand how ideal attributes achieve epistemological coherence, but also to offer a way of discursively constructing new futures. In Chapter Seven, I built upon my analysis of the ideal Millennial subject to conduct a thought experiment that imagines the discursive construction of the future celebrity subject – extending further the neoliberal narrative of each case to open a potential space for thinking through the next permutation of the feminine ideal.

My analysis has shown that the reactivation and extension of neoliberal logic obscures deep structural inequalities – inequalities that are created and reinforced by institutions, corporations and ideologies that are designed to benefit the most powerful. However, in my thought experiment, I did not consider how neoliberal celebrity discourses can create a more equitable society because my neoliberal solutions are predicated on fostering an environment of competition and stimulating growth. The body of literature in the area of neoliberal feminism is vast and makes a range of important contributions, not least in the realm of critique. However, my imaginative component of the next permutation makes a unique contribution to the field by arguing that there is a need for neoliberal feminism to be updated, in order to ensure it continues to be reactivated and extended.

Logically, the next iteration of the celebrity ideal will – at the very least – function to strengthen the hegemony of neoliberal feminism. As such, future discursive constructions should be developed with an aim to further push the capabilities of the American ideal. Strategies that were discussed in the previous chapter pertain to elevating independence through de-coupling discourses and the celebration of singledom; challenging market dictates that determine a woman's 'sell-by' date by continuing to self-actualize in meaningful ways; and investing in the next generation, either through reproduction or through work with lasting impact, as a means of self-reinvention. This conceptualization may appear to be shorn of liberal trappings, but it offers the possibility of investing and strengthening the self in such a way so as to (potentially) level the playing-field, and lead to a more equitable and just future in the long run.

I recognize that my proposal may not satisfy the feminist scholars who contemplate prospects for a revival of feminist radicalism in a time of neoliberal crisis. To be clear, I do not believe that my imagined permutation is a quick fix for deep-seated structural inequalities. As much as I would like to conjure a new synthesis of social justice, it is not within the scope of this project. The spectacularly visible ideal figure, as she is located in popular culture, is *not* the one upon which the neoliberal feminist imagination can be re-invented. Hollywood is underpinned by neoliberal, capitalist logic. And therein lies the limitations of a feminist study that intersects with the media institution. To enact discursive feminist change that centers collectivist principles like equality and social justice, the issue must be examined through a discipline that has the potential to effect concrete social change, or must be enacted by figurative ideals who are independent from corporate conglomerates.

8.4.2 Limitations

It must be noted that the aforementioned section serves to reflect on the way the neoliberal feminine ideal can be upgraded to complement the requirements of an evolving neoliberal agenda. It should read as a logical extension of neoliberal principles that operate at a particular place and time. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that social identities are discursively constructed in social contexts that are historically specific. And in this way, my study is limited by its sole focus on the U.S.

Furthermore, I have claimed that my intersectional approach to empirical analysis is a significant contribution to this research. Through my analysis, I have discovered patterns that indicate how each celebrity figure, as she is gendered, raced and classed, is similarly constituted by neoliberal ideals. However, my interest is very much rooted in stable categories that help understand how the ideal Millennial woman is constructed. As a result, I prioritized stability over fluidity, which could be limiting considering that stable categories can be problematic in reifying social relations.
Finally, this study is limited by its use of data that is only publicly available. I have relied heavily on secondary data (which suggests the constitution of yet another instance of influenced construction of reality). Furthermore, my use of primary data sources (such as social media) fails

to interrogate whether such rhetoric is motivated and/or constrained by contractual obligations, which could have a significant impact on the findings. As I searched secondary sources, I found instances of collaborators who had worked with each celebrity, but did not comment on the nature of their engagement, suggesting that the celebrity's mediated image is constructed – and constrained – by more dominant, hegemonic powers.

8.4.3 Future Directions in Neoliberal Feminist Research

My research question has asked how the ideal Millennial constituent is produced, and reproduced, in American society as a response to crisis. I took a discursive approach, seeking to uncover truth claims about this figure (through the lens of celebrity). Future research could explore the ideal feminist subject and her lived reality. Audience research could also be conducted to investigate how Millennial women actively negotiate neoliberal ideals as espoused by celebrities. From a longitudinal perspective, it would be interesting to chart how the formal markers of adulthood may (possibly) change; instead of completing schooling, beginning full-time work, becoming financially independent, getting married and becoming a parent, will new markers be introduced – and normalized? Will the minimum threshold to reach 'adulthood' be lowered? And will the identities that fail to conform to the extant ideal lend their voice to reconfiguring the social contract?

Theoretically, an alternative thought experiment could draw on illustrative examples from my celebrity cases to imagine how more egalitarian principles can be not only integrated into the next iteration of feminism, but also incorporated into celebrity discourses. If this is the direction feminist studies is taking, then neoliberal discourses have closed down the space available for the articulation of oppression or inequality in social relations; as a result, contemporary discourses over-emphasize a sense of agency and self-determination. The extracts from previous chapters demonstrate the pervasiveness of independent, empowered discourses as they relate to the highly visible neoliberal ideal. In this way, my cases' emphasis on self-transformation facilitates social reproduction through reframing an account of a life not necessarily envisioned so that it can be represented as desirable. Such a narrative warrants further critical feminist scholarship that

examines the way positive accounts of responding to crisis can obscure, and thereby perpetuate, oppression on a broader scale.

In contrast, a lack of investment in neoliberal discourses would bring the regularity of alternative responses into sharper relief, thereby facilitating an allegiance to a more collective approach to feminism. Going forward, the ideal emphasis on individual improvement through difficulty is less likely to facilitate receptiveness to historical iterations of a collective feminism, or even an orientation to activism for social change. In response to the neoliberal overemphasis on responsibility and transformation, discourses of celebrity ideal types suggest an attempt to make something of themselves not just in spite of difficulties but through them. Future studies can determine whether or not this is sustainable, or whether it represents a cruel accountability that has wide-ranging implications for the way future marginalization and oppression of Millennial women (and subsequent generations) are recognized, understood and responded to.

This project sheds light on the American ideal, a figure who by her very construction is an exemplary exception to the average Millennial constituent. Future research on combatting these social inequities can be prioritized by departments and researchers who can push forward ideal types as they are situated in government or public agencies (who purport to serve the interest of the public, and who can offer concrete solutions to constituents in times of crisis). It is highly unlikely that a response to an overemphasis on responsibility and transformation will emanate from the business sector, or any entity that values investment in the self as a key driver of long-term economic competitiveness.

Epilogue

I started this dissertation with a reflection on my experience of 9/11. And it was against the backdrop of paradigm shifting world events that I positioned the Millennial neoliberal subject as the ideal response to crisis. The area of individualized, neoliberal 'feminist' research (which has been so widely critiqued by scholars in the field) could potentially be re-routed to the terrain of strategic culture and security studies to explore how the personal embodiment of neoliberal ideals is more closely linked to the benefit – not the expense – of the collective. Instead of maintaining a

'Me'/ 'We' binary (across generations, and across feminisms), it may be possible to open up a space to think about the ways in which the ideal American Millennial constituent is subsumed not only under the logic of neoliberalism, but the logic of neoliberalism as it intersects with national security.

Topically, my dissertation looks at contemporary crises that frame the Millennial generation. Never would I have imagined that my own student experience – from undergraduate to PhD – would be bookended by collective uncertainty. Writing this dissertation during lockdown brought to light how fundamentally critical it is for neoliberal discourses to have already been accepted by a population in order to maintain control in times of uncertainty. Media coverage compared responses and actions of governments across the world, foregrounding the harsh realities of inequality. The seriousness and gravity of the global health pandemic evidences the dangers of further critiquing neoliberal feminism, and the notion that suggests women who pursue their own self- interest do not care to support others. It was from each person doing her individual part during Covid-19 that enabled the prevention of the spread and the prioritization of the most vulnerable and 'at-risk' cases; paradoxically, it was through the attention to oneself that a collective spirit of solidarity could emerge.

Going forward, it is critical to diminish the impact of future disasters through measures that enhance and strengthen the capacity of individuals *before* crisis occurs. Upgrading the ideal type will hopefully spawn a generation of women who interpellate the neoliberal characteristics that make her smarter, stronger, more resilient and better equipped to handle whatever comes her way. In the absence of state support or a network of care, the cultivation of key neoliberal characteristics ultimately works to help safeguard the individual (and the collective) against future threats and crises.

Bibliography

AAUW. (2017, July 24). The path to a pay gap starts early for black women and girls. https://ww3.aauw.org/2017/07/24/pay-gap-black-women-and-girls/

Aboim, S., & Vasconcelos, P. (2014). From political to social generations: A critical reappraisal of Mannheim's classical approach. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *17* (12), 165–183.

Adams, J.T. (1931). *The epic of America*. Little, Brown, and Company.

Adamson, M., & Salmenniemi, S. (2017). The bottom line is that the problem is you: Aesthetic labour, postfeminism and subjectivity in Russian self-help literature. In A. Elias, R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism*. (pp. 301-316). Palgrave MacMillan.

Allen, K., Finn, K., & Ingram, N. (2020, April 7). Discursive constructions of millennials and generation through Covid-19. *University of Leeds*. https://northernnotes.leeds.ac.uk/discursive-constructions-of-millennials-generation-through-covid-19/

Allen, K., & Mendick, H. (2013). Making it and faking it? Social class, young people and authenticity. *Sociology, 47* (3), 460–476.

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association.* (7th ed.), American Psychological Association.

Amsler, S., & Motta, S.C. (2019). The marketised university and the politics of motherhood. *Gender and Education, 31*(1), 82–99.

Arnett, J.J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties.* Oxford University Press.

Arnett, J. J. (2015). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Aronson, P. (2008). The markers and meanings of growing up: Contemporary young women's transition from adolescence to adulthood. *Gender & Society, 22*(1), 56–82.

Astone, N.M., Martin, S., & Peters, H.E. (2015). *Millennial childbearing and the recession*. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/49796/2000203-Millennial-Childbearing-and-the-Recession.pdf

Auguste, B.G., Hancock, B., & Laboissière, M. (2009). *The economic cost of the US education gap.* The McKinsey Quarterly. https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/The%20economic%20cost%20of%20the%20US%20education%20gap/The%20economic%20cost%20of%20the%20US%20education%20gap.pdf

Avdeeff, M. (2016). Beyoncé: Social media, authenticity, and the presentation of self. In A. Trier-Bieniek (Ed.), *The Beyoncé effect: Essays on sexuality, race and feminism.* (pp. 109 - 123). McFarland & Company.

Baade, C. (2019). A complicated transformation: BEYONCÉ, "Blue," and the politics of black motherhood. *Popular Music and Society, 42*(1), 42–60.

Babcock, B.A., & American Anthropological Association. (1978). *The reversible world: Symbolic inversion in art and society [Papers]*. Cornell University Press.

Baker, J. (2008). The ideology of choice. Overstating progress and hiding injustice in the lives of young women: Findings from a study in North Queensland, Australia. *Women's Studies International Forum, 31*, 53–64.

Baker, J. (2010). Claiming volition and evading victimhood: Post-feminist obligations for young women. *Feminism & Psychology, 20*, 186–204.

Bakhtin, M. (1968). *Rabelais and his World* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1965).

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York University Press.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered*. Duke University Press.

Banet-Weiser S., Gill, R., & Rottenberg, C. (2020). Popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation. *Feminist Theory, 21*(1), 3–24.

Banet-Weiser, S., & Portwood-Stacer, L. (2017). The traffic in feminism: An introduction to the commentary and criticism on popular feminism. *Feminist media studies, 17*(5), 884–888.

Barnard, M. (2001). *Approaches to understanding visual culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Barnes, R.D. (2010). *The price of fame: Celebrities' private vives, media and the law*. Oxford University Press.

Becker, H.S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. Free Press of Glencoe.

Bell, A., & Garrett, P. (1998). *Approaches to media discourse*. Blackwell.

Bennett, B., & Tyler, I. (2010). Celebrity chav: Fame, femininity and social class. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 13*(3), 375–393.

Bennett, J. (2014, August 26). How to reclaim the F-word? Just call Beyoncé. *Time Magazine.* https://time.com/3181644/beyonce-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/

Berlin, G., Furstenberg, F., & Waters, M. (2010). Introducing the issue. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 3–18.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

Bettie, J. (2003). *Women without class: Girls, race and identity*. University of California Press.

Billig, M. (1990). Stacking the cards of ideology: The history of the "Sun Souvenir Royal Album". *Discourse & Society, 1*(1), 17–37.

Binkley, S. (2011). Psychological life as enterprise: Social practice and the government of neo-liberal interiority. *History of the Human Sciences, 24*(3), 83–102.

Biressi, A., & Nunn, H. (2013). *Class and contemporary British culture*. Springer.

Blouin, M.J. (2018). Neoliberalism and Popular Culture. *Journal of popular culture, 51*(2), 277–279.

Bowles, H. (2014, March 24). Kim Kardashian and Kanye West: Keeping up with Kimye. *Vogue*. https://www.vogue.com/article/kim-kardashian-and-kanye-west-keeping-up-with-kimye

Brady, A. (2016a). Taking time between g-string changes to educate ourselves: Sinead O'Connor, Miley Cyrus and celebrity feminism. *Feminist Media Studies, 16*(3), 429–444.

Brady, A. (2016b). Keeping away from the Kardashians: Celebrity worth and the re-masculinising of Caitlyn Jenner. *Celebrity Studies, 7*(1), 115–118.

Briggs, L. (2017). *How all politics became reproductive politics: From welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump*. University of California Press.

Brooks, D.A. (2008). All that you can't leave behind. *Meridians (Middletown, Conn.), 8*(1), 180–204.

Brooks, K. D., & Martin, K. L. (2019). *The Lemonade reader.* Routledge.

Brown, W. (2003). Neoliberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory & Event, 7*(1).

Brown, W. (2005). *Edgework: Critical essays on knowledge and politics*. Princeton University Press.

Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Zone Books.

Brown, W. (2016). Sacrificial citizenship: Neoliberalism, human capital, and austerity politics. *Constellations, 23*(1), 3–14.

Brown, W. (2019). *In the ruins of neoliberalism: The rise of antidemocratic politics in the West.* Columbia University Press.

Budgeon, S. (2011). The contradictions of successful femininity: Third wave feminism, postfeminism, and "new" femininities. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism, and subjectivity.* (pp. 279-292). Palgrave Macmillan.

Burchell, G. (1993). Liberal government and techniques of the self. *Economy and Society, 22*(3), 267–282.

Burman, E. (2018). (Re)sourcing the character and resilience manifesto: Suppressions and slippages of (re)presentation and selective affectivities. *Sociological Research Online*, *23*(2), 416–437.

Burns, C., Barton, K., & Kerby, S. (2012, July 12). The state of diversity in today's workforce. *Center for American Progress*. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2012/07/12/11938/the-state-of-diversity-in-todays-workforce/

Butler, J. (2013). For white girls only? Postfeminism and the politics of inclusion. *Feminist Formations, 25*(1), 35–58.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.

Butler, J., & Scott, J.W. (1992). *Feminists theorize the political*. Routledge.

Caramanica, J. (2015, May 22). Review: On Taylor Swift's '1989' tour, the underdog emerges as cool kid. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/22/arts/music/review-taylor-swift-1989-tour.html

Carnevale, A.P., Jayasundera, T., & Artem, G. (2017). America's divided recovery: College haves and have-nots. Center on Education and the Workforce. Georgetown University, McCourt School of Public Policy.

Cashmore, E. (2010). Buying Beyoncé. C*elebrity Studies, 1*(2), 135–150.

Cashmore, E. (2019). *Kardashian culture: How celebrities changed life in the 21st century*. Emerald Publishing.

Castells, M. (2002). *The internet galaxy: Reflections on the internet, business, and society*. Oxford University Press.

Caulfield, K. (2014, November 4). '1989' debuts with 1.287 million sold in first week. *Billboard*. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/6304536/official-taylor-swifts-1989-debuts-with-1287-million-sold-in

Cepeda, M. (2010). *Musical ImagiNation: U.S-Colombian identity and the Latin music boom*. New York University Press.

Chatman, D. (2015). Pregnancy, then it's 'Back to Business'. *Feminist Media Studies, 15*(6), 926–941.

Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering*. Sage Publications.

Chua, A. (2011). *Battle hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Penguin.

Coakley, J. (2011). Ideology doesn't just happen: Sports and neoliberalism. *Curitiba, 1*(1), 67–84.

Cobb, S. (2015). Is this what a feminist looks like? Male celebrity feminists and the postfeminist politics of 'equality'. *Celebrity Studies, 6*(1), 136–139.

Cobb, S. (2018). "I'd like y'all to get a black friend": The politics of race in friends. *Television & New Media*, *19*(8), 708–723.

Cobb, S., & Ewen, N. (2015). *First comes love: Power couples, celebrity kinship and cultural politics*. Bloomsbury.

Collins, P.H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Collins, P.H. (1998). It's all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation. *Hypatia, 13*(3), 62–82.

Collins, P.H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. Routledge.

Confidential. (2015, December 12). Fashion guru Tim Gunn rips Kanye West and the 'vulgar' Kardashians. *New York Daily News*. https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/gossip/confidential/tim-gunn-rips-kanye-vulgar-kardashians-article-1.2463255

Cooper, B. (2013). Maybe I'll be a poet, rapper: Hip-hop feminism and literary aesthetics in push. *African American Review, 46*(1), 55–69.

Corsten, M. (1999). The time of generations. *Time and Society, 8*(1), 211–229.

Couldry, N. (2009). Does 'the media' have a future? *European journal of communication, 24* (4), 437–449.

Cox, T. A. (2019, July 2). How different generations use social media. *The Manifest*. https://themanifest.com/social-media/how-different-generations-use-social-media

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *1989,* 139–168.

Crenshaw K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299.

Crenshaw, K. (2017). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.

Crossley, A.D. (2017). *Finding feminism: Millennial activists and the unfinished gender revolution*. New York University Press.

Cullen, S. (2016). The innocent and the runaway: Kanye West, Taylor Swift, and the cultural political of racial melodrama. *Journal of Popular Music Studies, 28*(1), 33–50.

Dabrowski, V. (2021). Neoliberal feminism: Legitimising the gendered moral project of austerity. *The Sociological Review, 69*(1), 90–106.

Daniels, L. (Director). (2009). *Precious* [Film]. Lionsgate.

Davies, B. (2005). The (im)possibility of intellectual work in neoliberal regimes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 26*(1), 1–14.

Davies, J., & Smith, C. (1998). Race, gender, and the American mother: Political speech and the maternity episodes of *I Love Lucy* and *Murphy Brown*. *Journal of American Studies, 39*(2), 33–63.

Davis, A.Y. (2011)[1999]. *Blues legacies and Black feminism*. Doubleday.

Davis, C.U., & Phillips-Fein, J. (2018). Tendus and tenancy. In A.M. Kraehe, R. Gaztambide-Fernández, & B.S. Carpenter II (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of race and the arts in education.* (pp. 571-584). Palgrave Macmillan.

Davis, D. (2004). Manufacturing mammies: The burdens of service work and welfare reform among battered black women. *Anthropologica, 46*(2), 273–288.

Debevec, K., Schewe, C.D., Madden, T.J., & Diamond, W.D. (2013). Are today's Millennials splintering into a new generational cohort? Maybe. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 12*(1), 20–31.

Dejmanee, T. (2018). Popular feminism and teen girl fashion blogs. *Continuum, 32*(3), 345–354.

De Saussure, F. (1966). *Course in general linguistics* (B. Wade, Trans.). McGraw-Hill.

Dickey, J. (2014, November 24). The power of Taylor Swift. *Time Magazine* [cover].

Dickler, J. (2011, September 21). The rising cost of raising a child. *CNN Money.* https://money.cnn.com/2011/09/21/pf/cost_raising_child/index.htm

Dinh, J. (2012, May 25). Beyoncé gives first look at Atlantic City shows. *MTV*. http://www.mtv.com/news/2498064/beyonce-comeback-performance-atlantic-city/

Dixon-Smith, M. (2016, October 4). The reaction to Kim Kardashian's robbery reveals some of our most insidious problems with women. *Junkee*. https://junkee.com/reaction-kim-kardashians-robbery-reveals-insidious-problems-women/86541

Dobson, A.S. (2014). Performative shamelessness on young women's social network sites: Shielding the self and resisting gender melancholia. *Feminism & psychology, 24*(1), 97–114.

Donnelly, K., Twenge, J.M., Clark, M.A., Shaikh, S.K., Beiler-May, A., & Carter, N.T. (2015). Attitudes toward women's work and family roles in the United States, 1976–2013. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 40*(1), 41–54.

Donovan, R. A., & West, L. M. (2015). Stress and mental health: Moderating role of the strong black woman stereotype. *Journal of Black Psychology, 41*(4), 384–396.

Dosekun, S. (2015). For Western girls only? Post-feminism as transnational culture. *Feminist Media Studies, 15*(6), 960–975.

Dow, D.M. (2019). *Mothering while black*. University of California Press.

Dowden, E. (2017). Othered body, obscene self(ie): A Sartrean reading of Kim Kardashian-West. *Hecate, 43*(1/2), 117–130.

Driessens, O. (2013). The celebritization of society and culture: Understanding the structural dynamics of celebrity culture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *16*(6), 641–657.

Duboff, J. (2015, August 11). Captain of the Girlsquad and most influential 25-year-old in America. *Vanity Fair*. https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2015/08/taylor-swift-cover-mario-testino-apple-music

Dubrofsky, R. E. (2016). A vernacular of surveillance: Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus perform White authenticity. *Surveillance & Society, 14*(2), 184–196.

Duggan, M., Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2015). Social media update 2014. *Pew Research Center*. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/socialmedia-update-2014/

Duits, L., & van Romondt Vis, P. (2009). Girls make sense: Girls, celebrities and identities. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 12*(1), 41–58.

Du Gay, P. (1996). *Consumption and identity at work*. Sage.

Duncan, G.A., & McCoy, H. (2007). Black adolescent identity and respectability. *The Negro Educational Review, 58(*1-2), 35–48.

Durham, A. (2012). 'Check on It': Beyoncé, southern booty, and black femininities in music video. *Feminist Media Studies, 12*(2), 35–49.

Durham, A. (2014). *Home with hip hop feminism: Performances in communication and culture*. Peter Lang.

Edgar, A.N., & Toone, A. (2019). She invited other people to that space: Audience habitus, place, and social justice in Beyoncé's Lemonade. *Feminist Media Studies, 19*(1), 87–101.

Eells, J. (2013, October 10). Good golly Miss Miley. *Rolling Stone* [cover]. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/miley-cyrus-confessions-of-pops-wildest-child-115353/

Eells, J. (2014, September 25). The new life of Taylor Swift. *Rolling Stone* [cover].

Esser, F., & Hanitzsch T. (2012). On the why and how of comparative inquiry in communication studies. In F. Esser, T. Hanitzsch, & International Communication Association (Eds.), *Handbook of comparative communication research* (ICA handbook series). (pp. 3-22). Routledge.

Elias, A., Gill, R. & Scharff, C. (2017). *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism*. Palgrave MacMillan.

English Standard Version Bible. (2001). *ESV Online*. https://esv.literalword.com/

Evans, J., & Hall, S. (1999). *Visual culture: The reader*. Sage.

Fagan, C. (2011, August 21). Kim Kardashian set to make $17.9 million on nuptials. *New York Post*. https://nypost.com/2011/08/21/kim-kardashian-set-to-make-17-9-million-on-nuptials/

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as Social Interaction*. (pp. 258-284). Sage.

Farjam, F., Seacrest, R., Jenkins, J., Jenner, K., Goldschein, G. (Executive Producers). (2007-2021). *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* [TV series] Bunim Murray Productions; E!.

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. (2018). The demographics of wealth: How education, race and birth year shape financial outcomes. *The Center for Household Financial Stability*. https://www.stlouisfed.org/~/media/Files/PDFs/HFS/essays/HFS_essay_2_2018.pdf?la=en

Feher, M. (2009). Self-appreciation; Or, the aspirations of human capital. *Public Culture, 21*(1), 21–41.

Ferguson, R.A. (2004). *Aberrations in Black: Toward a queer of color critique*. University of Minnesota Press.

Ferro, S. (2013, August 23). Study: More millennials are living with their parents than ever before. *Salon*. https://www.salon.com/2013/08/22/study_more_millennials_are_living_with_their_parents_than_ever_before_newscred/

Fleck, R.K., & Hanssen, F.A. (2016). Persistence and change in age-specific gender gaps: Hollywood actors from the silent era onward. *International Review of Law and Economics, 48,* 36–49.

Fleming, J. (2016, May 19). Gallup Analysis: Millennials, marriage and family. *Gallup*. https://news.gallup.com/poll/191462/gallup-analysis-millennials-marriage-family.aspx

Ford, T.C. (2015). *Liberated threads: Black women, style, and the global politics of soul*. The University of North Carolina Press.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archeology of knowledge* (A.M Sheridan Smith, trans.). Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1981). The order of discourse. In R. Young (Ed.), *Untying the text: A post-structural anthology*. (pp. 48-78). Routledge and Keegan Paul.

Foucault, M. (1984). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In. P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader*. (pp. 76 -100). Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1997). What is critique?. In S. Lotringer (Ed.), *The politics of truth*. (pp. 41-81). Semiotext(e).

Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics*. Palgrave.

Fraser, N. (2013). *The fortunes of feminism*. Verso.

Fraser, N., & Gordon, L. (1994). A genealogy of dependency: Tracing a keyword of the U.S. welfare state. *Signs, 19*(2), 309–336.

Friedman, V. (2014, April 25). Lunch with the FT: Grace Coddington. *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/71dd2cf4-ca35-11e3-8a31-00144feabdc0#axzz301D40bEo

Frizell, S. (2014, August 23). Taylor Swift finally explains why she's a feminist and how Lena Dunham helped. *Time Magazine*. https://time.com/3165825/taylor-swift-feminist-lena-dunham/

Frontin, S. (2018). Beyoncé's Lemonade: The black feminist auteur in the black feminist film text. *Caméra Stylo, 18*.

Garcia, E., & Weiss, E. (2017). Education inequalities at the school starting gate: Gaps, trends, and strategies to address them. *Economic Policy Institute*. https://files.epi.org/pdf/132500.pdf

Gauntlett, D. (2002). *Media, gender, and identity: An introduction*. Routledge.

Gay, R. (2014). *Bad feminist*. Harper Perennial.

Gay, R. (2014, October 10). Emma Watson? Jennifer Lawrence? These are not the feminists you're looking for. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/10/-sp-jennifer-lawrence-emma-watson-feminists-celebrity

Gee, J., & ProQuest. (2010). *An introduction to discourse analysis theory and method* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Genz, S. (2009). *Postfemininities in popular culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Genz, S. (2015). My job is me. Postfeminist celebrity culture and the gendering of authenticity. *Feminist Media Studies, 15*(4), 545–561.

George, A., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.

Gerring, J. (2004). What is a case study and what is it good for? *American Political Science Review, 98*(2), 341–354.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Polity Press.

Gies, L. (2011). Stars behaving badly. *Feminist Media Studies, 11*(3), 347–361.

Gilbert, J. (2013). Neoliberal culture. *New formations: A journal of culture/theory/politics, 80,* 5–6.

Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media and the politics of antipoverty policy.* University of Chicago Press.

Gill, R. (2000). Discourse analysis. In M. Bauer & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound: A practical handbook for social research*. Sage.

Gill, R. (2003). Power and the production of subjects: A genealogy of the new man and the new lad. *The Sociological Review (Keele), 51*(1_suppl), 34–56.

Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Polity.

Gill, R. (2008). Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity, 25*, 432–445.

Gill, R. (2016). Post-postfeminism?: New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times. *Feminist Media Studies, 16*(4), 610–630.

Gill, R., & Kanai, A. (2018). Mediating neoliberal capitalism: Affect, subjectivity and inequality. *Journal of communication*, *68*(2), 318–326.

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2015). The confidence cult(ure). *Australian Feminist Studies, 30*(86), 324–344.

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The amazing bounce-backable woman: Resilience and the psychological turn in neoliberalism. *Sociological Research Online, 23*(2), 477–495.

Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2011). *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gilroy, P. (2013). We got to get over before we go under: Fragments for a history of black vernacular neoliberalism. *New Formations: A journal of culture/theory/politics, 80/81*, 23–38.

Giroux, H. A. (2011). Neoliberalism and the death of the social state: Remembering Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. *Social Identities, 17*(4), 587–601.

Glock, A. (2015, August 8). Miley Cyrus is just trying to save the world. *Marie Claire*. https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/a15323/miley-cyrus-september-2015/

Glucksberg, L. (2016). Gendering the elites: An ethnographic approach to elite women's lives and the re-production of inequality. *International Inequalities Institute,* London School of Economics and Political Science.

Graff, G. (2014, October 24). Taylor Swift to the haters: 'If you're upset that I'm just being myself, I'm going to be myself more'. *Billboard*. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop-shop/6296366/taylor-swift-on-new-album-1989

Gray, H. (2016). Introduction: Subject to respectability. *Souls, (18)*2-4, 192–200.

Greenberg, Z. (2013, June 26). Toby Keith, cowboy capitalist: Country's $500 million man. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2013/06/26/toby-keith-cowboy-capitalist-countrys-500-million-man/?sh=aed2156f9305

Greenberg, Z. (2018, July 11). Beyoncé's net worth: $355 Million in 2018. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2018/07/11/beyonces-net-worth-355-million-in-2018/?sh=a57f0d94f7dd

Gumpert, G., & Cathcart, R. (1985). Media grammars, generations and media gaps. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 2*(1), 23–35.

Hague, R., & Harrop, M. (2010). *Comparative government and politics. An introduction (8th edition)*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.

Hall, S. (2020). Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular". In D. Morley (Ed.), *Essential Essays, Volume 1*. (pp. 347-361). Duke University Press.

Halliday, A.S., & Brown, N.E. (2018). The power of black girl magic anthems: Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and 'Feeling Myself' as political empowerment. *Souls, 20*(2), 222–238.

Halperin, I. (2016). *Kardashian dynasty: The controversial rise of America's royal family*. Gallery Books.

Hamad, H., & Taylor, A. (2015). Introduction: Feminism and contemporary celebrity culture. *Celebrity Studies, 6*(1), 124–127.

Hamilton, H. (Director). (2011). *Video Music Awards* [TV Special]. MTV.

Hancock, A.M. (2004). *The politics of disgust: The pubic identity of the welfare queen*. New York University Press.

Hancock A.M. (2007). When multiplication doesn't equal quick addition. *Perspectives on Politics, 5*(1), 63–79.

Handy, B. (2008, April 28) Miley knows best. *Vanity Fair*. https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2008/06/miley200806

Hansen, A. (1998). *Mass communication research methods*. New York University Press.

Harris-Perry, M. (2015). Foreword. In T. Melancon & J.M. Braxton (Eds.), *Black female sexualities*. (pp. vii–xi). Rutgers University Press.

Harris, P.J. (2003). Gatekeeping and remaking: The politics of respectability in African American women's history and black feminism. *Journal of women's history, 15*(1), 212–220.

Hasinoff, A.A. (2015). *Sexting panic: Rethinking criminalization, privacy, and consent*. University of Illinois Press.

Heggeness, M.L. (2020). Why is Mommy so stressed? Estimating the immediate impact of the COVID-19 shock on parental attachment to the labor market and the double bind of mothers. *Institute working paper No.33*. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. https://www.minneapolisfed.org/institute/working-papers-institute/iwp33.pdf

Heimlich, R. (2011, January 6). Disapprove of single mothers. *Pew research center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2011/01/06/disapprove-of-single-mothers/

Hiatt, B. (2012). Taylor Swift in wonderland. *Rolling Stone Magazine*. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/taylor-swift-in-wonderland-180107/

Higginbotham, E.B. (1993). *Righteous discontent: The women's movement in the black Baptist church, 1880-1920*. Harvard University Press.

Hill, L. A. (2008). Where will we find tomorrow's leaders? *Harvard Business Review, 23*, 123–129.

Hill, M.S., & Yeung, W.J. (1999). How has the changing structure of opportunities affected transitions to adulthood? In A. Booth, A.C. Crouter, & M.J. Shanahan (Eds.), *Transitions to adulthood in a changing economy: No work, no family, no future?* (pp. 3-39). Praeger.

Hobson, J. (2016a). Celebrity feminism: More than a gateway. *Signs Journal*. http://signsjournal.org/currents-celebrity-feminism/hobson/

Hobson, J. (2016b). Feminists debate Beyoncé. In A.M. Trier-Bieniek (Ed.), *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism*. (pp. 11-26). McFarland & Company.

Hochschild, A. (2000). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. Henry Hold and Company.

Hochschild, A., & Machung, A. (2012). *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. Penguin Books.

Holliday, R., Willmott, H., & Hassard, J. (2000). *Body and organization*. Sage.

Hook, D. (2005). Genealogy, discourse, 'effective history': Foucault and the work of critique. *Qualitative research in psychology, 2*(1), 3–31.

Hook, D. (2007). *Foucault, psychology and the analytics of power*. Palgrave Macmillan.

hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman?.* Taylor and Francis.

hooks, b. (1986). Sisterhood: Political solidarity between women. *Feminist review, 23*(1), 125–138.

hooks, b. (1995). In our glory: Photography and black life. In b. hooks (Ed.), *Art of my mind: Visual politics*. (pp. 54-64). The New Press.

hooks, b. (2016, May 9). Moving beyond pain. bell hooks Institute, Berea College. http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/movingbeyond-pain

Horne, G. (2002). *Race woman: The lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois*. New York University Press.

Horton, C. (2014, November 6). Taylor Swift on going country to pop: 'Eventually you have to pick a lane'. *Taste of Country*. https://tasteofcountry.com/taylor-swift-on-going-country-to-pop/

Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (1997). *The fourth turning: What the cycles of history tell us about America's next rendezvous with destiny.* Broadway Books.

Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising*. Vintage Books.

Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2007). *Millennials go to college* (2nd ed.). LifeCourse Associates.

Hunt, D. and Ramón, A.C. (2020). *Hollywood diversity report 2020: A tale of two Hollywoods*. The Division of Social Sciences at UCLA. https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2020-Film-2-6-2020.pdf

Ingleton, P., & York, L. (2019). From Clooney to Kardashian: Reluctant celebrity and social media. *Celebrity Studies, 10*(3), 364–379.

Isaksen, J.L, & Eltantawy, N. (2019). What happens when a celebrity feminist slings microaggressive shade?: Twitter and the pushback against neoliberal feminism. *Celebrity Studies,* 1–16.

Jackson, S. (2019). A very basic view of feminism: Feminist girls and meanings of (celebrity) feminism. *Feminist Media Studies,* 1–19.

Jackson, S., & Vares, T. (2011). Media 'sluts': 'Tween' girls' negotiations of postfeminist sexual subjectivities in popular culture. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity*. (pp.134-146). Palgrave MacMillan.

Jackson, S., & Vares, T. (2015). Too many bad role models for us girls: Girls, female pop celebrities and sexualisation. *Sexualities, 18* (4), 480–498.

Jenks, C. (1995). *Visual culture*. Routledge.

Jones, M. (2015, November 23). First academic conference to be held on the Kardashians. Brunel University London. https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/First-academic-conference-to-be-held-on-the-Kardashians

Juergen, M. (2013, November 20). Celebrity feminists are hurting feminism. *Mic*. https://www.mic.com/articles/74211/celebrity-feminists-are-hurting-feminism

Kaplan, A. (1998). Manifest domesticity. *American literature, 70*(3), 581–606.

Kaplan, I. (2017, September 25). How the Kardashians have forced us to 'Keep Up' for 10 goddamn years. *Vice Magazine*. https://www.vice.com/en/article/kz73bn/how-the-kardashians-got-famous-kuwtk-10-years

Kardashian, K. [@kimkardashian] (2016, March 30). *When we're like… we both have nothing to wear LOL @emrata* [Tweet]. Twitter.

Kardashian, K. [@kimkardashian] (2016, July 11). *Such a tremendous honor to be on the cover of @forbes! I never dreamed this would happen& know my Dad would be proud* [Tweet]. Twitter.

Kardashian, K. [@kimkardashian] (2018, August 5). *And mine is not? The shoot was with our kids!!!!! My #1 priority is being a mother as well and I can work too, so can you!* [Tweet]. Twitter.

Kardashian, K [@kimkardashian] (2016, March 7). *When you're like I have nothing to wear LOL* [Photographs]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BCpQBQROS5l/?hl=en

Kardashian, K. (2014). *Kim Kardashian: Selfish*. Rizzoli International Publications.

Kardashian, K.N., Kardashian, K.M., & Kardashian, K. A. (2011). *Kardashian konfidential: Revised and updated.* St. Martin's Publishing.

Kardashian, K., Frankel, E., & Seacrest, R. (Executive Producers). (2017-2021). *Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian* [TV series] Rogue Atlas Productions; E!.

Kashen, J., Glynn, S.J., & Novello, A. (2020). How COVID-19 sent women's workforce progress backward. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/10/30/492582/covid-19-sent-womens-workforce-progress-backward/

Keller, J., & Ringrose, J. (2015). But then feminism goes out the window!: Exploring teenage girls' critical response to celebrity feminism. *Celebrity Studies, 6*(1), 132–135.

Kelly, Y., Zilanawala, A., Booker, C., & Sacker, A. (2018). Social media use and adolescent mental health: Findings from the UK millennium cohort study. *EClinicalMedicine, 6*, 59–68.

Kim, C., & Ringrose, J. (2018). Stumbling upon feminism: Teenage girls' forays into digital and school-based feminisms. *Girlhood Studies, 11*(2), 46–62.

Klosterman, C. (2015, October 8). Taylor Swift rules the world. *GQ*. https://www.gq.com/story/taylor-swift-gq-cover-reveal

Knowles Carter, B. (2003). *Dangerously in Love* [Album]. Columbia.

Knowles Carter, B. (2006). *B'Day* [Album]. Columbia.

Knowles Carter, B. (2008). *I am… Sasha Fierce* [Album]. Columbia.

Knowles Carter, B. (2011). *4* [Album]. Columbia.

Knowles Carter, B. (2013). *Beyoncé* [Album]. Columbia.

Knowles Carter, B. (2016). *Lemonade* [Album]. Columbia.

Knowles Carter, B. (@beyonce). (2017, February 1). *We would like to share our love and happiness. We have been blessed two times over. We are incredibly grateful that our family will be growing by two, and we thank you for your well wishes. - The Carters*. [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BP-rXUGBPJa/?utm_source=ig_embed

Knowles Carter, B. (Director). (2019). *Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé* [Video]. Netflix.

Koopman, C. (2013). *Genealogy as critique: Foucault and the problems of modernity*. Indiana University Press.

Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.

Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. Edward Arnold.

Labennett, O. (2018). Beyoncé and her husband: Representing infidelity and kinship in a black marriage. *Differences*, *29*(2), 154–188.

Lawler, S. (2005). Disgusted subjects: The making of middle-class identities. *The Sociological Review*, *53*(3), 429–446.

Leiss, W., Kline, S., & Jhally, S. (2005). *Social communication in advertising: Persons, products, and images of well being*. Routledge.

Leppert, A. (2015). Momager of the brides: Kris Jenner's management of Kardashian romance. In. S. Cobb & N. Ewen (Eds.), *First comes love: Power couples, celebrity kinship and cultural politics*. (pp. 133-150). Bloomsbury.

Levin, J. (2013, December 19). The Welfare Queen. *Slate*. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2013/12/linda_taylor_welfare_queen_ronald_reagan_made_her_a_notorious_american_villain.html

Levine, E. (2008). Remaking Charlie's Angels. *Feminist Media Studies, 8*(4), 375–389.

Lino, M., Kuczynski, K., Rodriguez, N., & Schap, T.R. (2017). *Expenditures on children by families, 2015*. Miscellaneous Report No. 1528-2015. United States Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion.

Littler, J. (2018). *Against meritocracy: Culture, power and myths of mobility*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Littler, J., & Rottenberg, C.A. (2020). Feminist solidarities: Theoretical and practical complexities. *Gender, work, and organization*, 1–14.

Lofton, K. (2016). Race and empire in the American family. *Conference on Media, Gender and Religion*. Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado, Boulder. https://vimeo.com/162902320

Lovelock, M. (2017). "I Am...": Caitlyn Jenner, Jazz Jennings and the cultural politics of transgender celebrity. *Feminist Media Studies, 17*(5), 737–754.

Loza, S. (2014). Hashtag feminism, #solidarityisforwhitewomen, and the other #FemFuture. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, 5*.

Lueck, J.A. (2015). Friend-zone with benefits: The parasocial advertising of Kim Kardashian. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 21*(2), 91–109.

Lundberg, S. (2015). Tiger parenting and American inequality: An essay on Chua and Rubenfeld's 'The triple package: How three unlikely traits explain the rise and fall of cultural groups in America'. *Journal of Economic Literature, 53*(4), 945–960.

Macatee, R. (2016, September 14). Kim Kardashian took 6,000 Selfies on vacation in Mexico. *E!.* https://www.eonline.com/news/794560/kim-kardashian-took-6-000-selfies-on-vacation-in-mexico

Madgavkar, A., Tacke, T., Smit, S. and Manyika, J. (2020). COVID-19 has revived the social contract in advanced economies – for now. What will stick once the crisis abates? McKinsey Global Institute. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-has-revived-the-social-contract-in-advanced-economies-for-now-what-will-stick-once-the-crisis-abates

Mannheim, K. (1952)[1928]. The problem of generations. In P. Kecskemeti (Ed.), *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*. Routledge.

Marshall, P.D. (1997). *Celebrity and power: Fame in contemporary culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Marshall, P.D. (2010). The promotion and presentation of the self: Celebrity as marker of presentational media. *Celebrity Studies, 1*(1), 35–48.

Marshall, P.D. (2014). Persona studies: Mapping the proliferation of the public self. *Journalism*, *15*(2), 153–170.

Marston, C. (2007). *Motivating the "What's in it for me?" workforce: Manage across the generational divide and increase profits*. Wiley.

Martin, K.L. (2016). *Envisioning black feminist voodoo aesthetics: African spirituality in American cinema.* Lexington Books.

Marwick, A.E. (2010). There's a beautiful girl under all of this: Performing hegemonic femininity in reality television. *Critical studies in media communication, 27*(3), 251–266.

Marwick, A.E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press.

Marwick, A.E. and boyd, d. (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence (London, England), 17*(2), 139–158.

McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs, 30*(3), 1771–1800.

McClain, A.S. (2015). *Keeping up the Kardashian brand: Celebrity, materialism, and sexuality*. Lexington Books.

McG. (Director). (2000). *Charlie's Angels* [film]. Columbia Pictures.

McGee, K. (2019). Biopolitics and media power in the online dance remake: Remixing Beyoncé's "Flawless" in the YouTube archive. *Popular Music and Society, 42*(1), 22–41.

McIntyre, C. (2015, August 10). Miley Cyrus says 'Bad Blood' video proves she's a better role model than Taylor Swift. *National Post.* https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/miley-cyrus-says-bad-blood-video-proves-shes-a-better-role-model-than-taylor-swift

McNamee, S. J., & Miller, R.K. (2009). *The myth of meritocracy*. Rowman & Littlefield.

McNay, L. (1992). *Foucault and feminism: Power, gender and the self*. Polity Press.

McNay, L. (1994). *Foucault: A critical introduction.* Continuum.

McNay, L. (2009). Self as enterprise: Dilemmas of control and resistance in Foucault's 'The Birth of Biopolitics'. *Theory, Culture & Society, 26*(6), 55–77.

McRobbie, A. (2004). Notes on postfeminism and popular culture: Bridget Jones and the new gender regime. In A. Harris (Ed.), *All about the girl: Culture, power and identity*. (pp. 3–14). Routledge.

McRobbie, A. (2007). Post-feminism and popular culture: Bridget Jones and the new gender regime. *Feminist Media Studies, 4*(3), 255–264.

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Sage.

McRobbie, A. (2020). *Feminism and the Politics Of 'Resilience'*. Polity Press.

Mendick, H., Ahmad, A., Allen, K., & Harvey, L. (2018). *Celebrity, aspiration and contemporary youth: Education and inequality in an era of austerity*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Milkman, R. (2017). A new political generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 wave of protest. *American sociological review, 82*(1), 1–31.

Miller, P.R., Flores, A.R., Haider-Markel, D. P., Lewis, D.C., Tadlock, B., & Taylor, J.K. (2020). The politics of being "Cait": Caitlyn Jenner, transphobia, and parasocial contact effects on transgender-related political attitudes. *American Politics Research, 48*(5), 622–634.

Minaj, N. [@nickiminaj]. (2015, July 21). *When the 'other' girls drop a video that breaks records and impacts culture they get that nomination.* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/NICKIMINAJ/status/623574103757209600

Minaj, N. [@nickiminaj]. (2015, July 21). *Black women influence pop culture so much but are rarely rewarded for it.* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/nickiminaj/status/623617003153035264?lang=en

Minaj, N. [@nickiminaj]. (2015, July 21). *If your video celebrates women with very slim bodies, you will be nominated for vid of the year.* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/nickiminaj/status/623608271774072832?lang=en

Minaj, N. [@nickiminaj]. (2015, July 21). *Nothing I said had to do with Taylor. So what jabs? White media and their tactics. So sad. That's what they want.* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/nickiminaj/status/623631068680163328?lang=en

Minkin, R. (2020, July 14). Most Americans support gender equality, even if they don't identify as feminists. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/14/most-americans-support-gender-equality-even-if-they-dont-identify-as-feminists/

Mohanty, C.T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review, 30*(1), 61–88.

Moretz, C. [@chloegmoretz]. (2016, March 7). *I truly hope you realize how important setting goals are for young women, teaching them we have so much more to offer than just our bodies* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/chloegmoretz/status/706986603810394112?lang=en

Morgan, J. (1999). *When chickenheads come home to roost: A hip-hop feminist breaks it down*. Simon and Schuster.

Morgan, P. [@piersmorgan]. (2016). *RIP feminism* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/piersmorgan/status/715259296544501760?lang=en

Morris, H.E. (2021). Constructing the millennial "Other" in United States press coverage of the Green New Deal. *Environmental Communication, 15*(1), 133–143.

Moynihan, D.P. (1965). *The Negro family: The case for national action*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen, 16*(3), 6–18.

Murray, C.A. (1984). *Losing ground: American social policy, 1950-1980*. Basic Books.

Musu-Gillette, L., Robinson, J., McFarland, J., Kewal Ramani, A., Zhang, A., & Wilkinson-Flicker, S. (2016). Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups 2016 (NCES 2016-007). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC. http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch

Myers, K.K., & Sadaghiani, K. (2010). Millennials in the workplace: A communication perspective on Millennials' organizational relationships and performance. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 25*(2), 225–238.

Nash, J. (2019). *Black feminism reimagined: After intersectionality.* Duke University Press.

National Forum on Education Statistics. (2015). *Forum guide to alternative measures of socioeconomic status in education data systems*. (NFES 2015-158). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

National Partnership for Women and Families. (2019). Our strength is in our unity. 2019 Annual Report. https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/development/annual-report.pdf

Negra, D., & Holmes, S. (2008). Introduction. *Genders, 2008-12-01*(48).

Negra, D., & Tasker, Y. (2013). Neoliberal frames and genres of inequality: Recession-era chick flicks and male-centred corporate melodrama. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 16*(3), 344–361.

Negra, D., & Tasker, Y. (2014). *Gendering the recession: Media and culture in an age of austerity*. Duke University Press.

Newman, J., & Bruce, L. (2011, February 16). How the Kardashians made $65 Million last year. *The Hollywood Reporter*. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/how-kardashians-made-65-million-100349

Newport, F., & Wilke, J. (2013). Desire for children still norm in U.S.
U.S. birthrate down, but attitudes toward having children unchanged. *Gallup*.
https://news.gallup.com/poll/164618/desire-children-norm.aspx

Nightingale, V., & Ross, K. (2003). *Media and audiences*. Open University Press.

Novak, A.N. (2016). *Media, millennials, and politics*. The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

Nurka, C. (2014). Public bodies. *Feminist Media Studies, 14*(3), 485–499.

O'Connor, M. (2013, March 6). A brief history of Taylor Swift's 'Special place in Hell for women'. *The Cut*. https://www.thecut.com/2013/03/brief-history-of-taylor-swifts-hell-quote.html

O'Connor, S. (2013, October 3) Sinéad O'Connor's open letter to Miley Cyrus. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/sinead-o-connor-open-letter-miley-cyrus

Olutola, S. (2019). I ain't sorry: Beyoncé, Serena, and hegemonic hierarchies in Lemonade. *Popular Music and Society, 42*(1), 99–117.

Orgad, S. (2009). The survivor in contemporary culture and public discourse: A genealogy. *The Communication Review, 12*(2), 132–161.

Orgad, S. (2019). *Heading home: Motherhood, work and the failed promise of equality*. Columbia University Press.

Orgad, S. (2020). The sociological imagination and media studies in neoliberal times. *Television and New Media, 21*(6), 635–641.

Ortner, S.B. (1991). Reading America: Preliminary notes on class and culture. In R.G. Fox (Ed.), *Recapturing anthropology: Working in the present*. (pp. 163-190). School of American Research Press.

Paglia, C. (2012, December 6). Camille Paglia: Taylor Swift, Katy Perry and Hollywood are ruining women. *The Hollywood reporter*. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/taylor-swift-katy-perry-hollywood-398095

Pallotta, F., & Stelter, B. (2016, February 8). Super Bowl 50 audience is third largest in TV history. https://money.cnn.com/2016/02/08/media/super-bowl-50-ratings/

Parker, C. (2015, October 1). Women more than men adjust their careers for family life. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/

Pennycock, A. (1994). Incommensurable Discourses?. *Applied Linguistics*, *15*(2), 115–138.

Petersen, E.E., Davis, N.L., Goodman, D., Cox, S., Syverson, C., Seed, K., Shapiro-Mendoza, C., Callaghan, W.M., & Barfield, W. (2019). Racial/Ethnic disparities in pregnancy-related deaths — United States, 2007–2016. *MMWR Morb Moral Wkly Report, 2019 (*68), 762–765.

Pew Research Center. (2007). A portrait of generation "next". https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2007/01/09/a-portrait-of-generation-next/

Pew Research Center. (2013). Social networking fact sheet. http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/

Pilcher, J. (1994). Mannheim's sociology of generations: An undervalued legacy. *The British Journal of Sociology, 45*(3), 481–495.

Pinsker, J. (2019, January 16). 'Intensive' parenting is now the norm in America. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/01/intensive-helicopter-parenting-inequality/580528/

Pitcan, M., Marwick, A.E., & boyd, d. (2018). Performing a vanilla self: Respectability politics, social class, and the digital world. *Journal of computer-mediated communication, 23*(3), 163–179.

Pramaggiore, M., & Negra, D. (2014). Keeping up with the aspirations: Commercial family values and the Kardashian brand. In B.R. Weber (Ed.), *Reality gendervision: Sexuality & gender on transatlantic reality television*. (pp. 76-96). Duke University Press.

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants, Part 1. *On the Horizon, 9*(5), 1–6.

Prins, A. (2020). From awkward teen girl to aryan goddess meme: Taylor Swift and the hijacking of star texts. *Celebrity Studies, 11*(1), 144–148.

Pritchard, K., & Whiting, R. (2014). Baby boomers and the lost generation: On the discursive construction of generations at work. *Organization Studies*, *35*(11), 1605–1626.

Projansky, S. (2014). *Spectacular girls: Media fascination and celebrity culture*. New York University Press.

Prügl, E. (2014). Neoliberalising feminism. *New Political Economy, 20*(4), 614–631.

Rahali, M. (2014). Identity theft: Stealing the life of a 'Real Housewife'. [Unpublished master's dissertation]. The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Rahali, M. (2017, June 6). Tiger mom 2.0: (over)parenting for a digital future?. *Parenting for a digital future*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2017/06/06/tiger-mom-2-0-overprinting-for-a-digital-future/

Rahali, M. (2021, March 2). Lecture 3: Language, discourse and power [Lecture recording]. Panopto@CambridgeUniversity. https://www.vle.cam.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=218462&section=5

Raisborough, J. (2011). *Lifestyle media and the formation of the self*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Rampell,C. (2014, September 15). Many life milestones are out of millennials' reach. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/catherine-rampell-many-life-milestones-are-out-of-millennials-reach/2014/09/15/4947ce34-3d12-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f_story.html

Randolph, E. (2020, November 25). How the Beyhive reacted to Wendy Williams saying Beyoncé speaks like she has a 'Fifth-Grade Education'. *Cheatsheet*. https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/how-the-beyhive-reacted-to-wendy-williams-saying-beyonce-speaks-like-she-has-a-fifth-grade-education.html/

Rank, M.R., Hirschl, T.A., & Foster, K. A. (2014). *Chasing the American dream: Understanding what shapes our fortunes*. Oxford University Press.

Rattner, N., & Franck, T. (2021, March 5). Black and Hispanic women aren't sharing in the job market recovery. *CNBC*. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/05/black-and-hispanic-women-arent-sharing-in-the-job-market-recovery.html

Ray J. (Director). (2007). *Kim Kardashian, Superstar* [Film]. Vivid Entertainment.

Rich, E. (2005). Young women, feminist identities, and neo-liberalism. *Women's Studies International Forum, 28*, 495–508.

Redfern, C., & Aune, K. (2010). *Reclaiming the F word: The new feminist movement*. Zed Books.

Ringrose, J. (2007). Successful girls? Complicating post-feminist, neo-liberal discourses of educational achievement and gender equality. *Gender and Education, 19*, 471–489.

Ringrose, J., & Walkerdine, V. (2008). Regulating the abject. *Feminist Media Studies, 8*(3), 227–246.

Risam, R. (2015). Toxic femininity 4.0. *First Monday, 20*(4).

Risman, B.J. (2018). *Where the millennials will take us: A new generation wrestles with the gender structure*. Oxford University Press.

Roberts, D.E. (1999). *Killing the black body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty*. Vintage.

Robinson, J. (2014, September 30). Taylor Swift demonstrates why Emma Watson's UN feminism speech was so important. *Vanity Fair*. http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/09/taylor-swift-emma-watson-feminism-speech

Robinson, N. (Writer). (2007, September 13). *The Tyra Banks Show* [TV Episode]. Bankable Productions; CW.

Roiphe, K. (2012, August 12). In defense of single motherhood. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/opinion/sunday/in-defense-of-single-motherhood.html

Rojek, C. (2001). *Celebrity*. Reaktion Books.

Rosalsky, G. (2020, August 18). How the pandemic is making the gender pay gap worse. https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2020/08/18/903221371/how-the-pandemic-is-making-the-gender-pay-gap-worse

Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. Sage.

Rose, N.S. (1992). Governing the enterprising self. In P. Morris & P. Heelas (Eds.), *The values of the enterprise culture*. Routledge.

Rose, N.S. (1999). *Governing the soul: The shaping of the private self*. Free Association Books.

Rottenberg, C.A. (2014). The rise of neoliberal feminism. *Cultural studies (London, England), 28*(3), 418–437.

Rottenberg, C.A. (2017). Neoliberal feminism and the future of human capital. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 42*(2), 329–348.

Rottenberg, C.A. (2018). *The rise of neoliberal feminism*. Oxford University Press.

Rottenberg, C.A. (2019). Women who work: The limits of the neoliberal feminist paradigm. *Gender, Work, and Organization, 26*(8), 1073–1082.

Rowe, K. (1995). *The unruly woman: Gender and the genres of laughter*. University of Texas Press.

Rudick, C.K., & Ellison, S. (2016). The power of language: A constitutive response to millennial student research. *Communication education, 65*(3), 373–375.

Rutherford, A. (2018). Feminism, psychology, and the gendering of neoliberal subjectivity: From critique to disruption. *Theory & Psychology, 28*(5), 619–644.

Ryan, C.L., & Bauman, K. (2016). *Educational attainment in the United States: 2015*. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P20–578. http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf

Ryssdal, K., & Hollenhorst, M. (2020, April 6). What's gonna happen to the consumer economy? *Marketplace*. https://www.marketplace.org/2020/04/06/whats-gonna-happen-to-the-consumer-economy/

Salmenniemi, S., & Adamson, M. (2015). New heroines of labour: Domesticating post-feminism and neoliberal capitalism in Russia. *Sociology, 49*(1), 88–105.

Salzano, M. (2020). Lemons or lemonade? Beyoncé, killjoy style, and neoliberalism. *Women's Studies in Communication, 43*(1), 45–66.

Sandel, M. (2020). *The tyranny of merit*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Sastre, A. (2013). Hottentot in the age of reality TV: Sexuality, race, and Kim Kardashian's visible body. *Celebrity Studies, 5*(1-2), 1–15.

Sayer, A. (2005). *The moral significance of class*. Cambridge University Press.

Scharff, C. (2012). *Repudiating feminism: Young women in a neoliberal world*. Ashgate.

Scharff, C. (2016). Gender and neoliberalism: Young women as ideal neoliberal subjects. In S. Springer, K. Birch & J. MacLeavy (Eds.), *The handbook of neoliberalism* (pp. 271-281). Routledge.

Scherger, S. (2012). Concepts of generation and their empirical application: From social formations to narratives – A critical appraisal and some suggestions. *CRESC Working Paper no. 117*. University of Manchester, UK.

Schudson, M. (1984). *Advertising, the uneasy persuasion: Its dubious impact on American society.* Basic Books.

Sclafani, T. (2010, October 25). Why Taylor Swift's good girl image sells. *NBC News*. https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/national-international/why_taylor_swift_s_good_girl_image_sells/1855949/

Scott, A.L., & Kronick, R. (2006). Closing the educational achievement gap between blacks and whites: Nobody wants to be black. ERIC, U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED502795.pdf

Sharpe, C.E. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press.

Shaw, S.J. (1996). *What a woman ought to be and to do: Black professional women workers during the Jim Crow era*. University of Chicago Press.

Shields, R. (1991). Places on the margin: Alternative geographies of modernity. Routledge.

Silva, J.M. (2013). *Coming up short: Working-class adulthood in an age of uncertainty*. Oxford University Press.

Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class and gender*. Sage.

Skeggs, B. (2005). The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation. *Sociology (Oxford), 39*(5), 965–982.

Skeggs, B., Thumim, N., & Wood, H. (2008). Oh goodness, I am watching reality TV. *European journal of cultural studies, 11*(1), 5–24.

Smart, B. (1983). On discipline and social regulation: A review of Foucault's genealogical analysis. In D. Garland & P. Young (Eds.), *The power to punish.* (pp. 62-83). Heinemann Educational Books.

Smith, M.R. (2017). Beyoncé: Hip hop feminism and the embodiment of black femininity. In S. Hawkins (Ed.), *The Routledge research companion to popular music and gender*. (pp. 229- 241). Taylor & Francis Group.

Smith, S.M. (1999). *American archives: Gender, race and class in visual culture*. Princeton University Press.

Smith, W. (2002). *Consumption and the making of respectability, 1600-1800*. Routledge.

Sobande, F. (2020). Woke-washing: "Intersectional" femvertising and branding "woke" bravery. *European Journal of Marketing, 54*(11), 2723–2745.

Solinger, R. (2002). Beggars and choosers: Motherhood is not a class privilege in America. *Labor history, 43*(4), 411–418.

Spice Girls. (1997). *Girl Power*. Carlton Books.

Springer, K. (2007). Divas, evil black bitches, and bitter black women: African American women in postfeminist and Post-Civil-Rights popular culture. In Y. Tasker & D. Negra (Eds.), *Interrogating postfeminism.* (pp. 249-276). Duke University Press.

Stafford, B.M. (1991). *Body criticism: Imaging the unseen in enlightenment art and science*. MIT Press.

Star Magazine [Cover]. (2013, March 18). *65-Lb Weight Gain*. https://starmagazine.com/2013/03/11/star-cover-gallery/

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (2nd ed.). Sage.

Swift, T. (2006). *Taylor Swift* [Album]. Big Machine Records.

Swift, T. (2008). *Fearless* [Album]. Big Machine Records.

Swift, T. (2010). *Speak Now* [Album]. Big Machine Records.

Swift, T. (2012). *Red* [Album]. Big Machine Records.

Swift, T. (2014). *1989* [Album]. Big Machine Records.

Swift, T. (@taylorswift). (2015, March 29). *Living proof you can be an iHeart Music Awards artist of the year and also a super embarrassing person.* [Photo]. Instagram.

Swift, T [@taylorswift]. (2015, July 21). *I've done nothing but love & support you. It's unlike you to pit women against each other. Maybe one of the men took your slot* [Tweet]. Twitter.

Swift, T. (@taylorswift). (2015, July 28). *Being the girl sitting alone in the café, drinking a latté*. [Photo]. Instagram.

Swift, T. (2015, October 21). *My mom named me Taylor because she thought that I would probably end up in corporate business – my parents are both finance people – and she didn't want any kind of executive, boss, manager to see if I was a girl or boy if they got my resume*. [Tumblr]. https://taylorswiftdeclassified.tumblr.com/post/131634525905/my-mom-named-me-taylor-because-she-thought-that-i

Swift, T. (2017). *Reputation* [Album]. Big Machine Records.

Swift, T. (@taylorswift). (2018, October 8). *I'm writing this post about the upcoming midterm elections on November 6th, in which I'll be voting in the state of Tennessee…* [Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BopoXpYnCes/

Switzer, J., Wittink, M., Karsch, B., & Barg, F. (2006). Pull yourself up by your bootstraps: A response to depression in older adults. *Qualitative Health Research, 16*(9), 1207–1216.

Tapscott, D. (1998). *Growing up digital: The rise of the net generation*. McGraw-Hill.

Tapscott, D. (2009). *Growing up digital: How the net generation is changing your world*. McGraw-Hill.

Tasker, Y., & Negra, D. (2007). *Interrogating postfeminism: Gender and the politics of popular Culture*. Duke University Press.

Taylor, A. (2016). *Celebrity and the feminist blockbuster*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Taylor, K. (2019). Kim Kardashian revealed in a lawsuit that she demands up to half a million dollars for a single Instagram post and other details about how much she charges for endorsement deals. *Business Insider*. https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-kim-kardashian-charges-for-instagram-endorsement-deals-2019-5

Tennent, E., & Jackson, S. (2017). "Exciting" and "borderline offensive": Bloggers, binaries, and celebrity feminism. *Feminist Media Studies, 19*(2), 225–238.

Thrift, S. (2007). Beyond bootylicious: Race, (post)feminism and sexual subjectification with Destiny's Child. In. P. Spence Rudden (Ed.), *Singing for themselves: Essays on women in popular music*. (pp. 105-126). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Timonen, V., & Conlon, C. (2015). Beyond Mannheim: Conceptualising how people 'talk' and 'do' generations in contemporary society. *Advances in life course research, 24*, 1–9.

Tinsley, U.N. (2018). *Beyoncé in formation*. University of Texas Press.

TMZ. (2017, October 24). Kardashians re-sign with E! network for $150 MILLION. https://www.tmz.com/2017/10/24/kardashians-resign-e-network-150-million-dollars-contract/

Toland, K., & Mueller, B. (2003). *Advertising and societies: Global issues*. Peter Lang.

Torpey, E. (2018). Measuring the value of education. Career Outlook, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/education-pays.htm?view_full

Trier-Bieniek, A. (2016). *The Beyoncé effect: Essays on sexuality, race and feminism*. McFarland & Company.

Trust, G. (2009, October 29). Chart beat Thursday: Taylor Swift, Tim McGraw linked again. *Billboard.* https://www.billboard.com/index.php/articles/business/chart-beat/266889/chart-beat-thursday-taylor-swift-tim-mcgraw-linked-again

Turner, G. (2010). *Ordinary people and the media: The demotic turn*. Sage.

Turner, G. (2016). *Re-inventing the media.* Routledge.

Twenge, J.M. (2006). *Generation me*. Free Press.

Twenge, J.M. (2014). *Generation me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled—and more miserable than ever before* (2nd ed.), Atria Books.

Twenge, J.M., Campbell, W.K., & Gentile, B. (2012). Generational increases in agentic self-evaluations among American college students, 1966–2009. *Self and Identity, 11*(4), 409–427.

Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolting subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. Zed Books.

United States Census Bureau. (2015, June 25). Millennials outnumber baby boomers and are far more diverse, Census Bureau reports. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html

US News. (2021). *Power. U.S. news and world report*. https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/power-rankings

Van Dam, A. (2020, May 27). Millennials are the unluckiest generation in U.S. history. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/27/millennial-recession-covid/

Vevo. (2009, November 24). *Destiny's child – Independent women, Pt. 1*[Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lPQZni7I18

Vevo. (2011, May 18). *Beyoncé – Run the world* (Girls) [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBmMU_iwe6U

Vevo. (2015, May 17). *Bad blood ft. Kendrick Lamar* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcIy9NiNbmo

Walby, S. (2009). *Globalization and inequalities: Complexity and contested modernities*. Sage.

Walby, S., Armstrong, J., & Strid, S. (2012). Intersectionality: Multiple inequalities in social theory. *Sociology (Oxford), 46*(2), 224–240.

Walker, J. (2005). *Mirrors and shadows: The digital aestheticisation of oneself*. The Proceedings of Digital Arts and Culture, IT University, Copenhagen, 184–190.

Walkerdine, V. (2003). Reclassifying upward mobility: Femininity and the neo-liberal subject. *Gender and Education, 15*, 237–248.

Waters, M.C. (2011). *Coming of age in America: The transition to adulthood in the twenty-first century.* University of California Press.

Weber, M. (1949). *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. The Free Press.

Webster, C. (2008). Marginalised white ethnicity, race and crime. *Theoretical Criminology, 12*(3), 293–312.

Weidhase, N. (2015). 'Beyoncé Feminism' and the contestation of the black feminist body. *Celebrity Studies, 6*(1), 128–131.

Wesołowski, A.D. (2020). Beyond celebrity history: Towards the consolidation of fame studies. *Celebrity Studies, 11*(2), 189–204.

Whittington, E.Y., & Jordan, M. (2014). 'Bey Feminism' vs. Black Feminism: A critical conversation on word-of-mouth advertisement of *Beyoncé's Visual Album*. In A.Y. Goldman, V.S. Ford, A.A. Harris & N.R. Howard (Eds.), *Black women and popular culture: The conversation continues.* (pp. 155-174). Lexington Books.

Whittington Cooper, E. (2016). "Sex(uality), marriage, motherhood and 'Bey Feminism,'" In A. Trier-Bieniek (Ed.), *The Beyoncé effect: Essays on sexuality, race and feminism.* (pp. 203 - 214). McFarland & Company.

Wicke, J. (1994). Celebrity feminism: Materialist feminism and the culture of celebrity. *South Atlantic Quarterly, 93*(4), 751–778.

Wiegman, R. (1995). *American anatomies: Theorizing race and gender*. Duke University Press.

Wilkinson, I. (2013, July 12). Pregnant Kim Kardashian is being fat-shamed, and it needs to stop. *DailyBeast.* https://www.thedailybeast.com/pregnant-kim-kardashian-is-being-fat-shamed-and-it-needs-to-stop

Williams, M. L. (2020). Social media's commodified, transgender ambassador: Caitlyn Jenner, celebrity activism, and social media. *Celebrity Studies,* 1–19.

Williams, R. (2011). Eat, pray, love: Producing the female neoliberal spiritual subject. *The Journal of Popular Culture, 47*(3), 613–633.

Williamson, M. (2010). Female celebrities and the media: The gendered denigration of the 'ordinary' celebrity. *Celebrity Studies, 1*(1), 118–120.

Wilson, Lana. (Director). (2020). *Miss Americana: Taylor Swift* [Video]. Netflix.

Winch, A. (2013). *Girlfriends and postfeminist sisterhood*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Winfrey Harris, T. (2015, May 23). Precious mettle: The myth of the strong black woman. *HuffPost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/precious-mettle-the-myth-_n_5378653

Winograd, M., & Hais, M.D. (2011). *Millennial momentum: How a new generation is remaking America*. Rutgers University Press.

Winter, J. (2018, September 12). The politics of Beyoncé's pregnancy: Re-articulating Lemonade's narrative agency through the public construction of black motherhood. *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*. https://maifeminism.com/the-politics-of-beyonces-pregnancy-re-articulating-lemonades-narrative-agency-through-the-public-construction-of-black-motherhood/

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (Introducing qualitative methods). Sage Publications.

Wolcott, V.W. (2001). *Remaking respectability: African American women in interwar Detroit*. The University of North Carolina Press.

Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund. (2014). Single parenthood in the United States. Legal Momentum. https://www.legalmomentum.org/sites/default/files/reports/SingleParentSnapshot2014.pdf

Wooffitt, R. (2005). *Conversation analysis and discourse analysis: A comparative and critical introduction*. Sage.

Wyatt, J. (2008). Patricia Hill Collins's black sexual politics and the genealogy of the strong black woman. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality, 9*(1), 52–67.

Wyn, J.G. (2005). Youth in the media: Adult stereotypes of young people. In A. Williams & C. Thurlow (Eds.), *Talking adolescence: Perspectives on communication in the teenage years.* (pp. 32-34). Peter Lang.

Young, R. (1981). Introduction to Foucault's 'The order of discourse'. In R. Young (Ed.), *Untying the text: A post-structural anthology*. (pp. 48-49). Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Intersectionality and feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *13*(3), 193–209.

Zeisler, A. (2016). *We were feminists once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl – the buying and selling of a political movement*. Public Affairs.