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Kardashian complicity: Performing post-feminist beauty

Keywords

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Abstract

This article explores complicity by way of beauty, post-feminist neo-liberalism and the Kardashian-Jenner family. I begin by contextualizing complicity and outlining my approach to beauty. I assert that dismissals of the family as vulgar stem from sexist and femmephobic interpretations of their hypersexual, hyperfeminine gender performances, and the genre they are most famous for: reality television. Alongside this, I point to the neo-liberal post-feminist discourses utilized by the family in their presentation of beauty work. The Kardashian-Jenners should be approached from a feminist perspective, with appropriate nuance and reflexivity. Acknowledgement of complicity (theirs and mine) provides the space to do this.

The notion of complicity I advance in this article is one of engaging in beauty practices that appear to reinforce patriarchy while in fact suggesting a more complex interpretation. Using complicity as a feminist theoretical tool encourages an approach that looks at an issue from a situated position, from a range of perspectives (Monteverde 2017). I aim to show that the Kardashians can be considered complicit in a decades-old beauty system that has been vehemently criticized by feminists, and also

that this beauty system is more complicated than it is sometimes presented to be. Beauty should be discussed in relation to discourses around it – in this case, post-feminist neo-liberal ones – and not just as a set of practices. The Kardashian-Jenners present themselves as being worthy of being looked at. To regard that statement as being complicitous with patriarchy due to its objectification of women negates the ways that different groups look at women like the Kardashian-Jenners.

Furthermore, by focusing on beauty, which is perceived to be a feminine pursuit, I am complicit in, and contributing to, the societal norm of scrutinizing and policing femininity more than masculinity. Practices relating to masculinity are rarely dissected and politically deconstructed to such an extent. Hypermasculine men also spend significant amounts of time and money on their physical appearance, and profit from this (in the case of bodybuilders, male models and personal trainers), and yet they are not subject to this feminist analysis. By focusing on women who engage in traditionally and consciously feminine beauty practices, I am complicit in upholding the sexist view that women who pose naked or undergo plastic surgery are operating under false consciousness. Rather than looking at the Kardashians' interactions with beauty as inherently oppressive or superficial, I would suggest that we regard them as reinforcing a neo-liberal logic.

Outlining complicity

The move from feminist discourses of essentialism to feminist discourses of intersectionality opens up space for a feminist interest in complicity. Whilst this move does not mean that all contemporary feminists have decolonized their minds (hooks 2000: 46), it does mean that contemporary feminisms are not viewed by feminists as occupying binary gender subject positions. Theories of intersectionality and kyriarchy (Crenshaw 1989; Schüssler Fiorenza 1992) acknowledge the interaction of multiple identity positions that lead to varied experiences of power and powerlessness according to class, gender, religion, disability and so on. One can be both oppressed and oppressor.

Identity position, political outlook and personal behaviour do not always go hand in hand, and this leads to the possibility of complicity (Monteverde 2017). Following on from this, those whose identity position does align with their political outlook (a female feminist, for example, who is a feminist because of her understanding of how gender affects her life) can also be complicit in causing harm to other women. Feminist histories have shown that inhabiting an identity position does not neatly translate to never being oppressive to less privileged others, and so discourses on complicity should not only be aimed at women 'over there' but also to cases of feminist complicity. Feminist discussions of complicity should be couched in a contextual, respectful and intersectional framework (Monteverde 2017), where practices and agents are considered from a range of perspectives.

In this context, I am interested in complicity as a way of looking at, or as a way of interpreting and responding to practices within a particular political context. For my purposes, complicity is participation

in something that can be seen as negative or oppressive for people outside or within the identity group of the person in question. My intention then is not to encourage a construction of 'some' women as always complicit because of their interactions with certain fixed practices, but to think about the ways in which we affect others, and to consider what that might mean discursively and politically.

Feminist scholarship has recognized that many women freely choose practices that have been seen previously as patriarchal (sex work, personal adornment), and my approach attempts to acknowledge this reality whilst also maintaining a critique of the contemporary discourses surrounding beauty. The messages conveyed by the Kardashian-Jenners through their beauty work make them complicit with a beauty regime in a variety of scenarios that can be both oppressive and not. The argument that I propose, in the context of feminist approaches to beauty and my own interest in complicity, is that interactions with beauty are not necessarily evidence of patriarchal victimhood.

Feminisms, beauty and complicity

There are numerous feminist theories of beauty. Here, I present a short exposition but am not able to give space to every feminist intervention on beauty. In doing so, I create a narrative of feminist approaches, and potentially a hierarchy of views.

Many second-wave feminists saw beauty standards, and subsequently beauty practices, as oppressive to women. Famously, a group of feminists protested the 1968 Miss America Pageant and threw items they saw as oppressive (bras, girdles, curlers, high-heels) into a 'freedom trash can', birthing the 'bra-burning' moniker that continues to be misapplied today. Radical second-wave feminists saw beauty as inseparable from an overarching complex of oppression in which restrictive gender roles, the capitalist beauty industry, objectification and the feeling that women were compelled to adhere to an unattainable physical standard, were interlinked. For Andrea Dworkin, women's freedom is directly correlated with their relationship to their own body; if women are seen as never physically good enough, they are limited psychologically, intellectually and creatively. She says, 'Not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement' (Dworkin 1974: 113). Likewise, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Germaine Greer laments that 'the more clothes women are allowed to take off, the more hair they must take off' (Greer 1970: 28).

Many contemporary radical feminists maintain this critique of beauty practices (and also of objectification and the beauty industry), despite many other feminists not seeing it as a pressing issue, or the *most* pressing issue. Sheila Jeffreys's book, *Beauty and Misogyny* (2014), argues that western beauty practices should be classified as 'harmful cultural practices' alongside female circumcision under UN law. Using visceral language, Jeffreys refers to the 'brutality' of beauty practices, and argues that 'the breaking of skin, spilling of blood and rearrangement or amputation of body

parts' (Jeffreys 2014: 1) is worse now than when the second-wave feminist critique of beauty culture began. This radical feminist critique of beauty practices is linked to the public image of feminism as being unequivocally opposed to, or in contrast to, beauty practices. Radical feminists, then, tend to accept that many women engage in beauty practices, and see this as an understandable method of survival in a patriarchal culture, but refuse to see these practices as feminist or empowering (Hanisch 2003; Jeffreys 2014).

Decades after second-wave feminists originated their critique of beauty practices, Naomi Wolf (1991) argued that expectations of an idealized female beauty have intensified, as women have gained increased legal rights and access to the public sphere. Wolf argues that these expectations psychologically damage women, who then suffer from self-hatred, physical obsession, terror of ageing and a dread of lost control due to the proliferation of millions of images of the idealized woman. Markedly, *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf 1991) does not refer to different standards of beauty based on race, class or sexual orientation. In *The Black Beauty Myth* (2002), Sirena J. Riley outlines black women's experiences with imposed cultural beauty standards, and in doing so displaces the white gaze. She disrupts the notion that black women aspire to look like white women, and refers to the standards imposed on women of colour by their own communities, as well as by racist and colourist hierarchies of beauty.

Julia Serano in *Whipping Girl* (2007) argues that femininity is denigrated regardless of whether it is performed by ciswomen, transwomen or men. Serano argues that human characteristics are categorized by gender, and that this system is used to 'undermine people who are feminine' (Serano 2014). She critiques the negative cultural connotations attached to feminine presentation, rather than feminine presentation itself. Extending this to beauty practices, judgements arise because of *perceptions* of make-up use, rather than the practice itself. Judith Butler, in the introduction to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, says she wrote the book partly as a critique of tendencies in feminism to adhere to particular gender hierarchies. Almost twenty years before Serano defended femininity in *Whipping Girl*, Butler stated that certain gendered expressions are seen as 'false or derivative, and others, true and original' (Butler 1999: viii).

In agreement with Serano, Ulrika Dahl argues that femininity should not be theorized in relation to the male gaze, or as something imposed, superficial and secondary to masculinity (Dahl 2012: 61). She points out that femininity should not just be considered in terms of surface, as relating to white, respectable, middle-class womanhood, or as solely to do with oppression. These queer theorists do not wish to uphold the gender binary, but rather express that all behaviours that are categorized as gendered can be taken up by anyone. For them, femininity should not only be about ciswomen, and should not only be understood in contrast to a binary masculinism.

Since this article figures complicity as a way of looking, I find it most pragmatic to both consider practices as problematic (because of the industry and the narratives around beauty) and to wish to

avoid constructing women who engage with and enjoy beauty practices as patriarchal dupes. I support various feminist critiques of beauty culture, and yet think beauty practices can tie into subversion of gender binaries, and reclamation of aspects of those binaries. Because individual beauty practices do not have inherent meaning, carrying out a particular practice does not make someone complicit in upholding the problematic aspects of the beauty system. Wearing make-up can be seen as conforming to traditional notions of femininity, which could be because of a belief in gender binaries (conscious, subconscious or unconscious), or in resistance to the dismissal of femininity. Make-up worn in resistance to the dismissal of femininity does not necessarily reflect that person's belief in innate femininity, or that they desire a continuation of a gender system predicated on labelling styles and behaviours as masculine or feminine. In short, people engage in beauty practices for numerous layered reasons.

This article does not condemn beauty practices in and of themselves. However, it critiques the post-feminist neo-liberal justification of beauty practices that encourages women to constantly fashion themselves into imposed ideals as a means of overall self-improvement. This rationality draws upon a culturally situated female beauty ideal that is fuelled by the capitalist needs of various industries, including advertising, fast fashion retail, women's magazines publishing industry, the beauty industry and the cosmetic surgery industry. Whilst I am not the first to undertake this critique, I attempt here to simultaneously view the Kardashians' beauty work as potentially feminist and post feminist (though these terms are too dualistic).

Post-feminism and neo-liberalism

In *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2008), Angela McRobbie describes post-feminism as an environment in which 'elements of feminism have been taken into account' (McRobbie 2008: 1) but are simultaneously seen as irrelevant and a thing of the past. In *Interrogating Postfeminism* (2007), Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra stress that post-feminism 'works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer' (Tasker and Negra 2007: 2) and 'perpetuates woman as pinup' (2007: 3), both of which can be seen in the Kardashian brand. Significantly, Tasker and Negra say that post-feminism has 'offered new rationales for guilt-free consumerism', has 'substantially' re-energized beauty culture and has led to 'an aggressive mainstreaming of elaborate and expensive beauty treatments to the middle class' (2007: 3).

Interrogating Postfeminism was published in 2007, and the introduction to the book states that feminism is 'unspeakable within contemporary popular culture' (2007: 3). Ten years later, shoppers can buy a sweatshirt with 'Feminist' emblazoned across it in American high street chain Forever 21, and see Beyoncé dance in front of huge neon letters spelling out the word 'Feminist'. In a 2015 article, McRobbie acknowledges that the current cultural landscape is much more embracing of

feminism (McRobbie 2015: 3), but she also points to ‘a heightened form of self-regulation’, particularly for young women (2015: 9). In the 2016 edition of *Diffractions*, Rosalind Gill gives ten reasons why post-feminism is still salient, despite the current popularity of more visible feminisms. She states that ‘[n]ew cultural trends do not simply displace older or existing ones. A momentarily visible resurgence of interest in feminism should not lead us to the false conclusion that anti-feminist or post-feminist ideas no longer exist’ (Gill 2016: 2).

Kim Kardashian is asked frequently whether she identifies as a feminist and replies ambiguously, often stating that she does not like labels (Johnson 2016). Her embrace of certain post-feminist characteristics (sexual empowerment, identity through consumption, perpetual youth) and her simultaneous disavowal of feminism – with the suggestion that feminism is too extreme – is distinctly post-feminist, despite the current popularity of feminism across celebrity culture.

Gill describes post-feminism as ‘a patterned yet contradictory sensibility connected to other dominant formations such as neo-liberalism’ (Gill 2016: 1–2), and indeed neo-liberalism is highly significant to the Kardashian approach to success. Neo-liberalism is a ‘mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social’ (Brown 2005: 37).

It is often associated with a variety of economic concepts, though Wendy Brown stresses that neo-liberalism does not just describe economic policies, but also extends and disseminates market values to other areas of life (2005: 40). Describing this, she says that the political sphere, and other facets of contemporary life, are ‘submitted to an economic rationality’ (2005: 40) and that political discourse is framed in entrepreneurial terms (42). As well as the economic and political effects of neo-liberal governmentality, neo-liberalism extends classical liberalism’s focus on the individual, and applies market logic to notions of the self. The individual is figured as ‘rational’ and ‘calculating’, and judged by their abilities in self-care (42). For this reason, concepts such as individualism, self-as-project and personal responsibility are stressed in neo-liberal discourses. Many contemporary feminisms undertake a strong critique of neo-liberalism, seeing its focus on individualism and responsibility as antithetical to collective and politicized anti-capitalist feminisms (Rottenberg 2013).

The Kardashians, celebrity and femmephobia

Robert Kardashian, the now deceased patriarch of the Kardashian clan, was the great-grandchild of Armenian immigrants who arrived in the United States after fleeing the Armenian genocide. Robert became a lawyer and ultimately a wealthy business man, frequently socializing with celebrities and the elite of Los Angeles, where he got married and raised his family. Robert Kardashian became infamous when he renewed his legal licence in order to defend his friend and previous business

1. Here I refer to the complicity of three members of the family, and am using the word in a slightly different sense for each of them, and in a way that's different from the rest of this article. I have mentioned this complicity to demonstrate the way these family members are understood by the general public. The family have come to prominence amongst various discourses of complicity, and this contributes to their reputation as untrustworthy, cunning, or blameworthy.

partner O. J. Simpson, who was accused of murdering his wife Nicole Brown Simpson (who was close friends with Kris Jenner, then ex-wife of Robert). Robert Kardashian rose to notoriety within a discourse of complicity,¹ and various members of his family have been implicated in discourses of complicity throughout their careers. Most notably, Kim Kardashian is considered to be complicit with profiting from her sex tape – potentially by releasing it herself – and Kris Jenner is considered complicit in profiting from her children, starting with Kim's sex tape.

The first season of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (KUWTK) in 2007 (E! Entertainment, 2007–), had Kim at the forefront (capitalizing on her tabloid traction at the time), and the first episode was centred on her Tyra Banks interview that discussed her sex tape. The rest of the family became famous from the flagship reality show, and from subsequent spin-offs, products and endorsements, all overseen by matriarch Kris Jenner. This continued steadily, and Season 12 (2016) focuses on all members of the family, as well as their partners, children, friends and employees. Whereas Kim was the first famous sibling, each of the family members is now marketable and branded in their own right. This is exemplified in their separate lifestyle apps, which capitalize on their individual aesthetics and interests. Postrel's 'aesthetic pluralism' applies here, where there is not 'a single standard of beauty' but 'increased claims of pleasure and self-expression' (Negra and Tasker 2007: 7). For boho fashion, health tips and interior design, fans can download Kourtney's app; for make-up tutorials and tips on organic dog food, they can download Kylie's.

Now, the 'blended family' consists of matriarch and manager Kris Jenner – referred to as the momager – who is the mother of Kourtney, Kim, Khloé and Robert Jr (with ex-husband Robert Kardashian). Kris's second ex-partner is Caitlyn Jenner, gold Olympic athlete and parent to Kylie and Kendall. Eldest daughter Kourtney is separated from her long-term partner Scott Disick, who fathered her three children – Mason, Penelope and Reign. Kourtney gave birth on *KUWTK* twice and has appeared in every season as well as in several spin-offs. Kim, the most famous Kardashian, got married on *KUWTK* and was divorced 72 days later. She is now married to rapper Kanye West, and is mother to North and Saint. She has also been in every season of the flagship show, as well as in the spin-offs. Khloé is the third Kardashian daughter and is separated from her husband Lamar Odom, to whom she was married on *KUWTK* and starred with in their own spin-off about married life. Robert Jr is the only Kardashian son and has recently reappeared in *KUWTK* after a prolonged absence due to mental illness. He is now engaged to, and expecting a baby with, model Blac Chyna, who also has a child with youngest sibling Kylie's current boyfriend, rapper Tyga. Rob and Chyna feature in their own eponymous spin-off series. The youngest two siblings, Kylie and Kendall Jenner, were 10 and 12 years old when the first season of *KUWTK* aired, and are quickly catching up with their older siblings when it comes to fame and net worth. Kendall has modelled for many high fashion houses (including Chanel, Givenchy, Balmain and Marc Jacobs), and has been on the cover of *Vogue* multiple times. Kylie has a burgeoning make-up empire – Kylie Cosmetics – which regularly

sells out in minutes, and she has drawn intense media interest as a result of her lip enhancement and changing body shape. It is worth noting the tangled web of familial connections here, which lends itself to both binge-watching and occasional viewing in the same way soap operas traditionally do.

In terms of contemporary feminism, the sisters embody various contradictions and conflicts. They are overtly sexual and hyperfeminine, monetize their appearance and lifestyle in numerous ways, undergo intimate family moments on camera, and are excessive and materialistic. Simultaneously, the Kardashian-Jenners are financially and culturally powerful women who exude strength, and while this may not be politically feminist, it could be seen as symbolically or representationally feminist. That is to say, being rich and business-savvy does not make the siblings ideologically in tune with feminist politics, but the mere existence and presence of the family may be symbolically influential or empowering for some groups (I say this with reference to their hypersexual, hyperfeminine presentation).

Physical appearance is a significant aspect of post-feminist femininities (Gill and Scharff 2011), and post-feminist neo-liberalism interacts with consumerist discourses so that consumption becomes a method for creating and disciplining the self (Evans and Riley 2014). The Kardashian-Jenners present themselves as hyperfeminine, and this is commodified in their numerous endorsement deals, Instagram pictures, make-up tutorials and magazine spreads. Through their endorsement of beauty-related products they make money from encouraging bodily self-discipline in others. Whereas this commodification is undeniably entrepreneurial – a central tenet of capitalist individualism – it also perpetuates the neo-liberal assumption that the self itself can be commodified and monetized.

It is of course highly significant that the sisters embody hegemonic ideals of femininity, and also crucial that they themselves have contributed to the hegemonic ideal of femininity for other women. The siblings' (Kim, Kourtney, Khloé, Kylie) endorsement of Waist Gang waist trainers (thick latex corsets designed to compress the waist, 'detoxify' and lessen food intake) encourages the body shape they have popularized, and the consumption and discipline associated with it. By promoting this product, they sustain a consumerist beauty myth that is intimately tied up with industries that profit from women's self-doubt. Through this endorsement, the sisters are complicit in perpetuating culturally imposed ideals of female beauty, even if they have also slightly changed the aesthetic of those ideals.

Rather than simply being recipients of the male gaze, the Kardashian-Jenner sisters elicit the gaze of anyone who will look. They are the living, breathing embodiments of post-feminist sensibility – 'knowing, active and desiring sexual subjects', rather than passive objects (Gill 2003). They are beautiful, trade primarily on this beauty under the family brand, and are in control of these representations as producers of their TV shows and decision makers in their branded merchandise,

2. This follows from Rosalind Gill's use of the term. Kim's selfie book, and particularly the front cover, is an excellent example of self-subjectification. She is making herself the subject, which is reiterated by the presence of her arms in the picture.

lifestyle products and social media. This self-subjectification² is epitomized by Kim's selfie book, made entirely of selfies taken over several decades. The book includes a collection of naked pictures that Kim had not intended to share, but decided to include after the pictures were leaked online; Kim incorporates unforeseen exposure and re-releases it for her own profit (something she may also have done in the past with her sex tape).

Kim's selfie book, entitled *Selfish* (2015), does not submit to traditional forms of the gaze. In her excellent analysis of the book, Lauren O'Neill (2015) talks about how the cover of *Selfish* is a selfie that shows Kim's arms positioned to reveal that she is taking the photo. This reiterates her part in constructing the images and the text itself. *Selfish* could be dismissed as a vain woman capitalizing on her beauty (and the title of the collection is a nod to this), but it is a collection of images taken by a woman of her own face and body; it is a collection of self-portraits in an innovative form, in an unusual medium, and many of the pictures were taken decades before selfies were commonplace. O'Neill positions the book as a distinctly feminized, and indeed feminist, intervention into the patriarchal western canon (O'Neill 2015). For O'Neill, Kim's selfies are acts of self-love, and her 'joy' at her own body is radical in a culture that encourages bodily fixation but disparages vanity. Kim and the other family members present themselves as being worthy of being looked at, and so viewing this as solely complicitous constrains the ways we look at women like Kim, and texts like *Selfish*. It is relevant then to consider who reads the Kardashians, and whose reading is heard. In other words, the Kardashian-Jenners are frequently disparaged (they have been insulted by Jason Statham, Jonah Hill, Billy Connolly, Charlie Sheen, Jon Hamm, Sinead O'Connor and Rebel Wilson, among others) on the basis of their hypersexual and hyperfeminine presentation. But to position them as complicit with patriarchal constructions of womanhood belittles the groups that consume Kardashian media. Devaluing the Kardashians on the basis of their gender presentation also devalues women who present themselves in a similar fashion – who are themselves often disparaged and undervalued based on the way they dress, or on their interactions with beauty culture.

The reading of the Kardashians that gets most media space, is that of a perplexed and perturbed masculine voice; the family come to stand for a whole host of alleged cultural sins. TV critic Vinnie Mancuso describes *KUWTK* as 'an abomination to the English language' and declares that watching one episode gave him 'an infectious disease' (Mancuso 2015). Journalist Piers Morgan made sure to reference Kim's age and status as a mother when he warned her of 'becoming an ageing parody' after she posted a nude selfie on Twitter (Morgan 2016). This ultimately obscures the legions of fans who thoroughly enjoy engaging with the Kardashian-Jenner empire for a variety of reasons, and contributes to the dismissal of cultural products coded as feminine. As mentioned above, the Kardashian family are dismissed because of their physical hyperfemininity, and also because of their reality TV credentials, hypervisibility, supposed vanity and ability to harness and maintain their renown by non-respectable means, all of which are coded as feminine.

The Kardashians' hyperfemininity is positioned as threatening to men, particularly in Internet memes about the situation of the male members of the family. It is often suggested that the women emasculate the men – a narrative that has transphobically been applied to Caitlyn's transition. One meme reads, 'The Kardashians turned Scott into an alcoholic, Lamar into a crackhead and Bruce into a woman. I can't wait to see what happens to Kanye!!' (Meme Generator 2016). An online list entitled '12 men burned by the Kardashian Curse' lists Reggie Bush, Kris Humphries and Tyga as 'victims' of the siblings (Vann 2015). The 2 November 2015 edition of *Star* magazine features Kim, Khloé, Kourtney and Kris dressed in black with the headline 'Black widows: How the Kardashians destroyed their men' (Northern and Shell Media Publications, 2015). The sisters are somehow endowed with the power to ruin careers, and to cause mental illness and addiction. Season 12, Episode 6 of *KUWTK* addresses this narrative directly, showing Kourtney's ex-partner Scott (who has a long history of substance abuse) as he sought out a psychic to uncover whether he had the 'Kardashian Curse'. The use of the word 'curse' is not only alliterative, but connotes a coven of witches, spurning the men who have wronged them. The sisters' sexuality, glamour and hyperfemininity are spun into an image of them as cannibalistic spiders, pairing with men just to eat them alive.

Reality TV is coded as feminine because it is considered frivolous and – paradoxically – artificial (in this context I refer to a range of 'reality'-based programming, from *The X Factor* to *Big Brother* to *Made in Chelsea*, but there are of course considerable differences at play across the genre). Brenda Weber states that 'the tensions between high and low [...] are always already gendered', explaining, '[g]reat art is largely considered "great" not because of its privilege but because of its presumed "intrinsic worthiness", which allows aesthetics to fly under the banner of gender-neutrality' (Weber 2014: 14).

Cultural products considered worthy of critical attention are often created by or feature men (particularly white, cisgendered, straight men), and so by extension, works created by and featuring women are either pigeonholed as just for women (chick lit, rom-coms, soap operas) or considered less culturally important. Weber says that reality TV has a subordinate role in 'a clearly articulated hierarchy of aesthetics that has been both established and maintained through centuries of tradition grounded in the codes of domination and privilege' (2014: 16). A favourite tabloid narrative that model Kendall wants to leave the family show and is embarrassed by her family, exemplifies the divide between the world of high fashion and the perceived shame of being associated with reality TV.

Notably, Kardashian-Jenner beauty is largely enhanced, purchased or worked upon, as opposed to 'natural' – though 'natural' beauty performances are just as constructed. The sisters are rarely seen without full hair and make-up, often wear hair extensions and fake tan, and dress in carefully curated high fashion looks. Within the family itself, there is a hierarchy of respectability based on certain members' beauty presentation. Kendall is frequently considered more respectable or 'normal'

3. I have referred to this as a classed and raced aesthetic because the siblings inhabit an aesthetic that is *already* raced and classed. This doesn't excuse their appropriation, but seeks to reiterate that these styles are already seen through a prism of class and race.

because of her high fashion career and more 'natural' appearance; she is also the most 'white' sister, both in terms of skin colour and perceived ethnicity. Kendall does not wear hair extensions, has a more high fashion aesthetic, and is fairly low-key and sporty on *KUWTK*. Kendall's professional interaction with highbrow designers and catwalk fashion is more highly regarded than Kylie's more classed and raced aesthetic³ and branding (Kylie and Khloé both appropriate styles that are associated with black culture, including cornrows, grills, large hoop earrings and long pointed nails). Similarly, Kourtney, with her somewhat pared-down aesthetic and domestic storylines, does not attract as much sensationalist media coverage based on appearance as Kim and Kylie. Kim and Kylie are the most popular family members on social media, and the most notorious of the sisters; this is related directly to their perceived sexuality and their visibly enhanced beauty.

Case study: Lip service

Season 10, Episode 9 of *KUWTK* is entitled 'Lip Service' and deals with Kylie's lip-fillers. I have chosen to analyse this episode because it focuses explicitly on beauty work and presents it as directly connected to popularity. The episode is filled with images of and allusions to the body, media, technology and taste. The narrative arc of the episode is that Kylie has 'insecurities' and has not admitted publicly to her lip procedure, and that her sisters will help her come clean, or 'be honest' about it, so that she eventually feels comfortable, has self-esteem and is able to be 'authentic'. Throughout the episode, Kylie's lips are directly linked to her increase in popularity and attractiveness. This storyline works by itself, but is enhanced by the fact that viewers, because of their interaction with her social media, and with magazines and celebrity news, will know that in 'real life' Kylie has become much more popular. In the show, bodily self-improvement is presented as the direct cause of Kylie's increased celebrity. Neo-liberal discourses of self-improvement, self-management and doing things for yourself, are at work in this episode.

The family frequently espouse the belief that hard work and not 'being lazy' will lead to a better body, career and outlook. In an interview with *Cosmopolitan*, Kim says:

If I don't feel confident about my body, I'm not going to sit at home and feel sorry for myself and not do something about it. It's all about taking action and not being lazy. So you do the work, whether it's fitness or whatever.

(Usmar 2012)

In reference to her brother's ongoing mental illness, in Season 9, Episode 14, Kim says, 'All right, you complain, you don't like it, get up and do something about it', and in her book, Khloé says, 'You are responsible for your own happiness' (Kardashian 2015: 117), and 'Believe in yourself and the

dreams will come true' (2015: 130). This sentiment is prominent across the Kardashian brand. The discourse of autonomy that the family propagates mythologizes the independent self but disguises the extent to which its expression is dependent on personal wealth or being born into a particular social class or ethnic group.

The episode opens with Scott (Kourtney's ex-long-term partner, and father to her three children) and Kim sitting in a restaurant taking a selfie. They refer to tabloid rumours about them and speculate about when middle-age begins. Within 30 seconds, the themes of image, age, body anxiety, technology and media have been introduced. In this scene, and throughout the episode, the family show each other images on their phones from social media and gossip websites. This reiterates the visibility of the family, the mediated nature of their personal lives and the centrality of images in their lives – specifically, reflexive images that depict a constructed self. The family members are consumed even by each other. Kim asks Scott if he thinks people are prettier 'these days'. Scott says that they are, and refers to better access to cosmetic procedures and practices. The conversation goes as follows:

Scott: You can go pimp your ride anywhere in town, walk in, ten minutes later, you're prettier.

Kim: Yesssss.

[...]

Scott: Imagine before fake boobs.

Kim: Yesssss. When did fake boobs start?

Scott: I don't know but thank God, knock on wood.

Kim: Yeah.

Scott: Saggy old boobs hanging to the ground, no thanks, I'll pass, keep it moving ladies.

Kim: Yesssss, Yesssss.

(‘Lip Service’ 2015)

The sentiment expressed in this interaction is precisely what second-wave feminists railed against when they developed critiques of sexist beauty culture. In this example, fake breasts are the norm, and in contrast, unenhanced breasts are considered disgusting and ‘saggy’. The setting of this scene in a restaurant, as well as the light-hearted tone of the cold open (which serves as a vignette), functions to present Kim's and Scott's opinions as commonplace and casual, and introduces the discourse and mindset that permeate the rest of the episode. Cosmetic surgery is introduced as a modern technology that facilitates an already existing and incontrovertible desire for a normative female body.

After the cold open and opening credits, there is a scene of Khloé, Kendall and Kim visiting a cosmetic dermatologist so that Khloé can undergo laser treatment for her stretchmarks and cellulite. Kim greets the doctor with a hug when he arrives, and Kendall and Kim eat cake and drink tea from

a trolley brought in for them. It transpires that Kim does not need anything done, and is just there to observe. The sisters' conversation about the procedure could be one about shopping or going to a restaurant. Kim asks, 'What are you guys getting first?' and then explains she cannot have anything done because she has just had a spray tan. Khloé asks, 'So you're just here to enjoy the ride?', which Kim affirms. This normalization of cosmetic surgery is reaffirmed by cutaway confessional shots where the sisters justify getting treatments because they are always in the public eye. Dance music plays over the last few shots of this scene, presenting laser surgery as fun, young and incidental. The sisters are presented as 'vital, youthful, and playful' – Negra and Tasker's (2007: 9) description of the 'post-feminist heroine' – as comedy is also injected into the scene several times; Khloé can be heard shouting 'stings like a mother!' and Kim jokes about the size of Khloé's backside.

A later scene shows Kim, Khloé and Kendall eating lunch and commenting on Kylie's lips. The phrase 'they changed her life' is repeated multiple times by the sisters. Kim looks at Googled 'before and after' images of Kylie on her phone, which sustains the themes of screen, media and visibility in this episode (and throughout the series). This peer-surveillance (as well as self-surveillance) has been highlighted by Gill as a facet of post-feminism (Gill 2016: 4) and is ongoing throughout the reality series. Kim and Khloé specifically pinpoint Kylie's fame, coolness and desirability to one body part: 'The lips, they changed her life'. Kylie's coming of age, or womanhood, is directly linked with physical changes (sexualized, hyperfeminine, enhanced changes), which are directly connected to her increased celebrity. Beauty is presented through the makeover as 'both therapeutic and transformative' (Negra and Tasker 2007: 10), creating an outcome that is 'simultaneously exploitative, sentimental, and compelling' (2007: 10). Kendall interrupts her older sisters, voicing her opinion that Kylie has 'gone too far'. This begins Kendall's positioning as the voice of reason, or the dissenting sister, in relation to cosmetic surgery and bodily improvement. This also reinforces the theme of *appropriate* body modification; the sisters do not endorse any or all bodily change, but just that which is appropriate in achieving a particular marketable aesthetic.

In cutaway confessionals, the sisters habitually refer to 'insecurities' when talking about their physical appearances, and position their decision to undergo cosmetic work as 'natural'. Khloé says, 'When you're photographed all the time, it's natural to have insecurities or want to change certain things about yourself'. This presentation of body work as 'natural' portrays it as expected, and infers that personality or self-esteem changes stem from physical enhancement. When the sisters talk about 'insecurities' they are always pinned down to the individual. Kim says, 'We all have insecurities', and Kylie says, 'It's an insecurity of mine' (about her lips). Insecurities are seen as imposed by outside forces, but as belonging to, and the responsibility of, the individual.

The sisters present themselves as victims of the media gaze throughout, despite their particular celebrity depending upon exposure and visibility (epitomized by their numerous reality TV shows, but also by their lifestyle apps and heavy use of social media). Shots of phone screens, flashing

cameras, red carpets and paparazzi in the episode emphasize how much the Kardashians are viewed and consumed as image products, even by each other. In a 2015 interview with *Interview* magazine, Kylie reveals the psychological effects that growing up in the public eye have had on her:

I wake up every morning at, like, seven or eight because I think that there's a bad story about me, and I have to check. My worst fear is waking up and finding something bad about me on the internet.

(Wallace 2015)

In the episode, Kylie says, 'Everyone always picks us apart', 'People are so quick to judge me on everything' and 'We have all eyes on us all the time'. This latter statement both describes the predicament the family is in – that they are followed by paparazzi constantly and have their images and actions dissected by the entertainment media – and presumably their desired state, as constant buzz translates into steady profit and media opportunities. This predicament encapsulates what is paradoxical about complicity: in terms of exposure, and pressure to be always physically perfect, the family both suffers from *and* benefits from being the intense focus of media attention.

The sisters are presented as simultaneously relying upon the media and being victims of its imposed beauty standards. At the same time, they are perpetrators of the same beauty standards narratives that they are victims of. The sisters insinuate that the media causes them to do body work, not because of their consumption of beauty images (the more common narrative), but because they are the subject of those images. There is no mention of their complicity in this system, that they promote the idea that hegemonic female attractiveness is linked to personal happiness and success. There is no suggestion of resistance, subversion or defiance, but just unquestioning adherence to the norm, even if they are part of creating that norm.

The lack of language regarding defiance or subversion in *KUWTK* is notable because part of the appeal of the Kardashians is their ability to expand the bounds of normativity to encompass what would previously have been regarded as excessive or transgressive. They have subverted a norm into another norm in which they are the epitome of the new norm, and yet have to keep living up to, and pushing the boundaries of this norm. Elizabeth Wissinger (2015) suggests that where the beauty myth used to uphold a 'perfect' goal for women to attain, in post-feminist neo-liberalism, the goal is the process of change itself – women are expected to always be in a state of self-disciplined transformation. The Kardashians, with their numerous faces, styles and phases, perfectly embody this heralding of endless makeovers.

As well as seeing bodily enhancement as 'natural', Khloé also presents the desire to be seen and viewed as 'natural'. She tells Kylie that it's unhealthy and not good for her to avoid 'covers of magazines or TV shows'. Kylie is expected to fulfil the role of sexy young celebrity and her decision

to have fillers is seen as almost inevitable if her small lips were a barrier to her performing for the camera with confidence. Gill writes that ‘confidence culture’ calls into being a female subject that is

[h]eld back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism, but by their own lack of confidence – a lack that is presented as being entirely an individual and personal matter, unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces.

(Gill 2016: 3)

Kylie is expected to conceive of her body in terms of ownership – to see her body and image as saleable property that she should shrewdly capitalize on.

In a scene with Kim, Kylie and Kendall where Kim tries to advise her youngest sister on body work, she starts by complimenting Kylie’s appearance and telling her to ‘bank a couple selfies’. The use of the word bank, and her suggestion that Kylie capture her current attractiveness to post later, demonstrates the link between the sisters’ physical appearance and income. Kylie’s appearance is celebrated because of the possibility of sharing and benefitting financially from it – indeed, her extremely popular make-up range does just that. She is encouraged by her older sister to capture her beauty in order to market herself; beauty itself is not the goal, but the marketization of beauty.

In the conversation between Kim, Kendall and Kylie, there is a persistent discourse of appropriate femininity. Kim encourages Kylie to do whatever she wants with her appearance, but reminds her, ‘I don’t want you to get like carried away’. Kendall tries multiple times to tell her sisters that they are beautiful already and do not need to undergo beauty treatments, frustratedly reminding Kim that she is one of the most beautiful women in the world. Kim asserts, ‘No, I think if something makes you insecure, and you’ve been feeling that way forever, who doesn’t want to look amazing? You only have one life’. For Kim, the desire for beauty, at whatever cost, is inevitable and obvious. Reinforcing the boundaries of enhanced beauty, she says, ‘Do what makes you happy – to an extent’, ‘There’s nothing to be ashamed of, it’s just handling it the right way’ and ‘Just make sure you keep everything subtle, and don’t go overboard’. Through numerous qualifiers, we see Kim advocating a neo-liberal management of self here, where the individual must recognize the appropriate physical goal, and make informed decisions to reach this goal.

It is relevant that Kendall is the voice of reason in the episode, and also the sister with an alternate career path. Admittedly, Kendall’s job as a high fashion model is also beauty and glamour work, but her relative independence from the family brand – working for Estée Lauder, Chanel, Givenchy and other fashion houses, as well as for Kardashian products – gives her the space to be able to criticize her sisters’ bodily obsession. If Kendall’s main source of income were under the family brand, she would perhaps also wish to enhance her body in line with the Kim/Kylie/Khloé

aesthetic. She is able to critique what she sees as their excessive body work because she is a tall, thin, conventionally beautiful and literally modelesque woman.

Other scenes and storylines in this episode reaffirm the theme of taste and appropriate aesthetic for the family, and foreground the importance of a neo-liberal fashioning and branding of everyday life and the self. One subplot involves Kourtney working as Scott's interior designer, and reiterates the importance of appropriate taste in the service of financial reward. Scott aims to renovate, redecorate and sell properties for a profit, and Kourtney is hired because of her 'good eye'. She is fired by the end of the episode because of her inability to stay within budget, thus reiterating the importance of transformation within boundaries of 'taste', which are partly set by what will be profitable. The final scene of the episode is Kylie on a cover shoot for *Teen Vogue*, showing her transformation in confidence over the course of the episode. This serves as a thematic bookend alongside the opening shot of Kim and Scott discussing breast enhancement.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have critiqued the Kardashian-Jenners as figures complicit in promoting post-feminist neo-liberal discourses about success and female bodily appearance. At the same time my argument has remained cognisant of the sexist assumptions made about them based on their own bodily appearance. In attempting to disrupt the idea that the siblings are complicit with patriarchy through their self-subjectification, I have outlined feminist approaches to beauty that show that hyperfemininity and hypersexuality are disparaged both in and outside of feminism. Interactions with beauty culture are not necessarily evidence of patriarchal victimhood, and the siblings face femme-phobic accusations that they are more grotesque, superficial and artificial than other celebrities, and that their skills and abilities are less work and less impressive than those of others working in their industry. Reactions like this are frequently rooted in disapproval of the feminized arena of reality TV, and in response to the hyperfeminine and often hypersexualized physical appearances of the sisters.

Whilst this article enters into a pre-existing critique of the post-feminist neo-liberal rationalizations that exist around beauty culture, I have undertaken it with an awareness of how the Kardashians are seen and treated by the general public and mainstream media. I consider them complicit in certain aspects of beauty culture, but also affected negatively by aspects of this same culture. They rely upon the media for income, whilst also being subject to its bodily surveillance and hegemonic beauty standards. Furthermore, rather than simply attempting to defend a super-wealthy celebrity family, I am using the Kardashians here partly as a stand-in for those who enjoy them – for those who identify with their gender performance, or who enjoy gendered modes of culture that are seen as not worthwhile. The Kardashian-Jenners are a fitting case study for exploring complicity precisely because they embody these paradoxes.

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