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THE BUSINESS OF THE GIRL: CELEBRITY AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF GIRLHOOD IN EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MEDIA CULTURE

by

Jessica Johnston

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

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at

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May 2020

ABSTRACT

THE BUSINESS OF THE GIRL: CELEBRITY AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF GIRLHOOD IN EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MEDIA CULTURE

by
Jessica Johnston

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020
Under the Supervision of Professor Tami Williams

The achieving "can-do" girl, who thrives in her personal, academic, and aspirational endeavors, emerged in response to self-help crisis literature of the 1990s urging mothers to manage their daughters' low self-esteem. However, even as media industries have adopted the successful girl subject in popular film, television, and digital marketing campaigns, public conversations of tween and teenage girls still identify rising levels of anxiety and self-doubt that diminish girls' confidence well into adulthood. Responding to what some critics call the "confidence gap," girl culture of the twenty-first century has organized itself around the affordances of social media and digital celebrity in the creation of a professionalized girl self-brand. This project addresses the media discourses of confidence and anxiety that shape expectations of girlhood achievement and examines the use of celebrity as a tool of professionalization in the reproduction of race and class hierarchies under neoliberal capitalism.

This project explores four modes of cultural production that demonstrate what I call "the professional lifestyling of the self" that invoke the practice of celebrity and branding in the construction of the professional girl subjectivity: lifestyle media featuring mothers managing their daughters' entertainment careers; girl prodigies and performers competing on reality talent shows; girl influencers building their business on YouTube and Instagram; and girl activists negotiating humanitarian agendas in networked microcelebrity spaces. Critical to each mode is

how celebrity reinforces confidence, authenticity, and relatability in the creation of a professionalized girl subject who acts as a point of stabilization during uncertain economic times. The chapters survey the progression of girlhood in her professionalization, from her initial appointment as daughter carrying on the mother's postfeminist legacy, to agent of social change navigating the pressures of promoting her cause in a commodity culture. Along the way, the girl learns to brand personal obstacles, insecurities, and anxieties as part of her authentic journey to professional achievement. I argue that this procession, as it operates within the surveillance framework of media convergence, reveals that attaining confidence is a commercial endeavor rather than a feminist one that promises social and economic independence while maintaining structural inequalities.

This dissertation seeks to understand digital celebrity not just as "a pedagogical tool in the discursive production" of the girl, as P. David Marshall has argued, but as a professional aid in the construction of the gendered, racialized, and classed girl who can prosper in the shifting labor economy of the early twenty-first century. Girlhood relies on the technologies of branding and promotion to reimagine, rather than close, the confidence gap by assigning cultural value to traits like low self-worth that were previously blamed for holding girls back. This project ultimately interrogates how the commercial industries conceptualize the girl as a business whose confidence and anxiety are managed and whose work is crucial to the regulation of a capitalist society.

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To my parents,

who have invested so much

love and support in me over the years

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INTRODUCTION

The Professional Lifestyling of Girlhood

In season five of Netflix's anthology series *Black Mirror* (2016-present), a familiar scene in contemporary teen culture opens up: a fourteen-year-old girl eating lunch by herself in the school cafeteria. Despite being alone, the character appears content with her earbuds in while watching a music video on her mobile device. As pop music fills the diegetic space, the mobile screen reveals a young woman in a white spandex costume and violet wig singing and dancing against a backdrop of bright pinks and sparkles. "Hey, yeah, whoa-ho, I'm on a roll / Ridin' so high, achieving my goals / I'm stoked on ambition and verve / I'm gonna get what I deserve," the pop singer croons as the teen girl nods her head along to the beat.

As the episode "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too" unfolds, audiences learn that the central character Rachel is shy and new to town. She is also dealing with the death of her mother and is completely obsessed with the confidence-laden language of superstar Ashley O (played by Miley Cyrus). On her fifteenth birthday, Rachel receives an Ashley Too doll, an AI figurine programmed to simulate Ashley O's personality that encourages Rachel to audition for her school's talent show. However, when the doll malfunctions and begins to express the singer's "true" inner thoughts, Rachel and her sister Jack discover that Ashley O has been put into a drug-induced coma. The perpetrator: Ashley O's manipulative aunt, a woman who has managed the singer's career and has forced her to present a confident and bubbly persona against her will. After Rachel and Jack rescue Ashley O and uncover her aunt's secret plot, Ashley O rebrands herself as an alternative rock musician who can finally be her authentic self.

While "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too" examines the dark repercussions of technology present in other *Black Mirror* episodes, it also taps into some of the anxieties and hopes that have

informed twenty-first century media discourses and representations of girlhood. In particular, the episode speaks to the complexities of girls' professional achievements in the digital age and how celebrity is used in the creation and management of a confident, authentic, and successful public persona. To be successful in Ashley O's world, girls must be ambitious, independent, feminine, and positive; their willingness to be made visible to consumer audiences reinforces this image's truth, or so it seems. In Rosalind Gill's influential article "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," these traits comprise the contradictory nature of postfeminism, a cultural perception that "constructs an articulation or suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideas" that is then "effected entirely through a grammar of individualism" (162). In short, postfeminism presumes gender equality, freedom, and choice despite the existence of patriarchal and other structural limitations. As *Black Mirror* demonstrates, Ashley O embodies young female empowerment all the while she is imprisoned by the professional demands of her aunt. It is this tension that continues to exist in contemporary girls' media culture, which places high importance on the presentation of confidence and authenticity in professional spaces even when these two qualities often conflict.

While authenticity suggests the absence of external management and commercial influence, its location in a surveillance media culture illustrates how it is carefully constructed and enforced through consistent branding strategies. By surveillance media culture, I refer to media like reality television and social network platforms that follow and track the everyday lives of people and promote self-reflexive behavior. Moreover, surveillance media encourage and normalize external pressures on the individual's public/private performance. Media scholars like Graeme Turner have observed how surveillance helps construct the artifice in reality programming, where authenticity is "generated through the prosecution and/or resolution of a

dialogue between the constructed 'reality' of a programme and that of a viewer's own life experience" (42-43). Social media at first seems like a further breakdown of this construction, allowing the user an unfiltered approach to convey who they "really" are to the public. Yet as P. David Marshall asserts, celebrity culture in the convergence age "articulates a way of thinking about individuality and producing the individual self through the public world" that relies on the digital accoutrement of profiles, images, videos, and messages presented across social networks ("The Promotion and Presentation of the Self" 46).

Following Marshall, I argue that the performance of girlhood in these mediated spaces strongly relies on the language and practice of celebrity through methods of branding and promotion that advocate independent self-expression and the professional construction of authenticity. In doing so, girls take advantage of the "mobility, power, and privilege" Susan Hopkins asserts that celebrity texts teach young female audiences to value (184). This practice, which I call "the professional lifestyling of the self," demonstrates how personal qualities like confidence and authenticity have become markers of professional achievement, and to a greater extent, signifiers of taste and class in the digital age. In the context of girlhood in the early twenty-first century, this professionalization process employs confidence and authenticity to encourage girls to continue the legacy of female empowerment through an entrepreneurial feminist lifestyle that champions worker productivity and the reproduction of social hierarchies.

Although the desire to "do what you love" and follow "passionate work" has been more generally applied to feminized popular culture of the twenty-first century, the appearance of this discourse in contemporary girls' media representation requires further exploration.[1] What does it mean when young celebrities like 21-year-old Kylie Jenner are named *Forbes'* Youngest Self-

[1] For more on the passionate work discourse, see McRobbie, *Be Creative* and Duffy, *(Not) Doing What You Love*.

Made Billionaire? What expectations are created about girls' achievements when televised talent competitions and talk shows celebrate prodigy singers, dancers, and chefs? How do girls negotiate authenticity in the advertising of corporate brands on their personal social networks? In what ways do girls "sell" social movements like gun control and climate change action across mediated spaces? As tween, teen, and young adult girls become more active participants in the maintenance of capitalist society, how their media representations promote a professional lifestyle is important to understanding how hierarchies of class and race are reproduced through girls in the name of female empowerment.

This dissertation explores the entanglement of confidence and authenticity in the professional lifestyling of girlhood and how these discourses materialize in surveillance media texts. The project focuses on four modes of cultural production that rely on celebrity as a tool in the professionalization of the girl: lifestyle media featuring mothers managing their daughters' entertainment careers; girl prodigies and performers competing on reality talent shows; girl influencers building their business on YouTube and Instagram; and girl activists negotiating humanitarian agendas in networked microcelebrity spaces. This approach allows me to examine girlhood as a process of "becoming" where girls are conceptualized as "constantly moving rather than as discrete, autonomous entities" (Coleman 1). From her initial appointment as daughter carrying on the mother's postfeminist legacy, to agent of social change navigating the pressures of promoting her cause in a commodity culture, the girl becomes a business in early twenty-first century media culture. The practice of branding and self-promotion that celebrity invokes grounds this becoming in an entrepreneurial-oriented language, binding girlhood's value to upward social and economic mobility. By exploring the various ways girls are professionalized, I

show how girlhood is critical to the maintenance of hegemonic structures in mainstream feminist cultural production of the digital age.

Confidence: From Gap to Cult

In Western discourses of girlhood achievement, confidence has often been perceived as being in short supply, leading to the creation of a "gap" where girls fail to meet their fullest potential. In a 2018 article published in *The Atlantic*, Claire Shipman, Katty Kay, and Jillellyn Riley described how girls in the 2010s are becoming less confident during puberty due to parents and teachers awarding their perfectionistic and risk-averse behavior. Conducting a broad survey with more than 1,300 girls from the ages of 8 to 18 and their parents, Shipman, Kay, and Riley resolved that girls need to feel more comfortable with taking risks in order to succeed as female professionals in a changing social and technological world. To "close the confidence gap," they argued, is essential "because the long-term effects of these dynamics hurt not only girls, but the women they become, many of whom, within a few years of entering the workforce, experience another confidence drop, and a drop in aspirations."

The article pulled research from Kay and Shipman's 2014 *New York Times* bestseller *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know*, as well as their 2018 activity guide for girls, *The Confidence Code for Girls: Taking Risks, Messing Up, and Becoming Your Amazingly Imperfect, Totally Powerful Self*. These books, like other self-help texts, address the strong need for girls to realize their future potential and push past their inner negative chatter if they want to realize their dreams. TED Talk seminars from speakers like Caroline Paul and Reshma Saujani have also warned of the consequences that girls will face (lack of opportunities, low quality of life) if they do not take personal risks to make these dreams

happen. Further addressing this achievement gender gap, nonprofit organizations have attempted to involve girls more in the STEM fields and invite them to leadership camps to nurture self-empowerment and confidence in fields typically dominated by men. As these programs and messages convey, girls just need to resolve their insecurities about their social positioning in the world by not being afraid to try new things and viewing failure as part of the learning process.

Often present (although not always directly stated) in the confidence rhetoric of these motivational speakers and writers is the concern that girls' low self-esteem will have a dramatic impact on the social reproduction of global economic systems. Underlying their calls for confidence, social critics and researchers have revealed that low self-confidence will not only obstruct girls' abilities to find happiness and self-fulfillment but also prevent them from reaching their maximum potential as workers and leaders in an industrialized society.[2] These concerns, while emerging in twenty-first century conversations, are not new developments. In what Rebecca Hains has called "the girl crisis" of the 1990s, the observed unequal treatment of girls in the classroom spurred a panic among parents, academics, and cultural critics that girls were falling behind despite the social advancements made during Women's Liberation in the 1970s (1). One such study in 1990 came from law professor Carol Gilligan who, along with Nona P. Lyons and Trudy J. Hanmer, published the edited collection *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School* documenting various case studies that claimed that girls were at risk of losing their voice in society. In their findings, Gilligan et al. asserted that "as the river of a girl's life flows into the sea of Western culture, she

[2] Reports on female leadership, as conducted by the Center for American Progress, assessed that while 49 percent of women comprised the U.S. college-educated workforce in 2017, women were viewed as lagging behind in leadership positions in major companies and industries. As the study states, "Women have outnumbered men on college campuses since 1988. They have earned at least one-third of law degrees since 1980. Yet they have not moved up to positions of prominence and power in America at anywhere near the rate that should have followed" (Warner and Corley 5)

is in danger of drowning or disappearing" (4). In an increasingly globalized economy, the authors conveyed, girls would need to find their footing or risk losing power.

However, as other social commentators at the time pointed out, Gilligan did not provide sufficient data to justify this alarming statement. Some, including controversial feminist writer Christina Hoff Sommers, claimed that the girl crisis was overblown and that boys were the ones being victimized as evident of their lower grades and college attendance.[3] Still, the notion that American adolescent girls were in trouble deeply resonated with women's groups, like the politically influential American Association of University Women (AAUW). In 1991, AAUW published a report titled *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* that revealed how classrooms were not privileging girls' success, thus leading to a loss of girls' self-confidence during adolescence and restricted aspirations for the future. In 1994, a barrage of published works followed, including Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Myra and David Sadker's *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*, and Peggy Orenstein's *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap*. These books, and the discussions around them, became significant signposts for building the discourse around girls' loss of self-confidence and how adults and guardians could help them reclaim it.

As self-help literature for the girl crisis targeted concerned parents, the commercial media and goods industries offered a more hopeful sentiment in the way of girl power products and entertainment meant to instill girls with messages of empowerment and confidence. These two different approaches to the girl crisis created competing cultural discourses that scholar Marnina Gonick calls "Girl Power" and "Reviving Ophelia," with "the former representing the idealized form of the self-determining individual and the latter personifying an anxiety about those who

[3] See Sommers' "The War Against Boys" article published in the May 2000 issue of *The Atlantic*.

are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this way" (2). While cultural institutions focused on the girl as the promising future for a new gender equal world, concern from the self-help marketplace maintained that the girl might not meet her fullest potential and thus disrupt the social and economic order with her poor life choices.

Girls' studies scholarship discussing these girl crisis discourses note how neoliberal policies and postfeminist messaging shaped some of these pressures on girls to rediscover their confidence and ambition. Gonick traces the development of these discourses from shifting ideas of femininity and subjectivity in the 1950s, where cultural critics like those of the Frankfurt School often associated mass culture and passive consumerism with girls and the feminine. This viewpoint would continue in the following decades as economic and social transformations began to privilege service work and consumption over manufacturing labor and production and as women gained greater reproductive independence and access to the workforce in Westernized societies. The introduction of neoliberal government programs in the early 1980s further disassembled the postwar welfare state while advancing free-market economics, leading to high levels of youth unemployment, cuts to social programs and education, and the privatization of public services. At the same time, a more globalized society and marketplace offered the appearance of equal opportunity and access to wealth. Surrounded by these promises, girls encountered the neoliberal discourse of "anyone can succeed if they work hard enough" as well as the message that women especially could now build their independence through their careers. This message further enforced the belief that any successes or failures girls might experience during their development would be their responsibility due to greater gender equality in the professional world.

The suggestion that girls might be lacking the confidence needed to succeed in this new opportunistic society opened the door for marketing and global initiatives to qualify the need for successful girls in a consumer-dependent economy. As Gonick relays, the Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia discourses of the 1990s helped produce the "neoliberal girl subject" that would function as a project to be "shaped by the individual rather than within a social collectivity" in order to fulfill the girl's economic imperative for the twenty-first century (18). The neoliberal girl subject would embody the rhetoric of neoliberal policies dictating that people—without the help of government or social aid—could make their own success. This girl would also invoke a postfeminist sensibility as the independent and "high achieving girl," which Angela McRobbie asserts represented the "successful outcome of feminist pedagogy" and embodied "the seeming improvements and changes in the educational system as a whole" ("Top Girls?" 728).

By the 2000s, the neoliberal girl subject would become the focus of what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls "girl empowerment organizations" (or GEOs) that attempted to relate girls' self-esteem to the prosperity of global societies. According to Banet-Weiser, U.S.-based GEOs materialized when the Nike Foundation, in partnership with the United Nations and the World Health Organization, launched Girl Effect in 2008 to help end global poverty by promoting the belief that girls with opportunities are able to bring economic fortune to their countries. These initiatives furthered the notion that girls need to be successful not just for themselves but for the good of the nation and the global community. Through a "market for self-esteem," Banet-Weiser contends that "GEOs and their emphasis on building individual feminine leadership skills, self-confidence and healthy self-esteem tap into contemporary neoliberal politics" ("Confidence You Can Carry!" 183). In this framework, girls' confidence becomes a valuable entity as it is understood through the logic of commodity culture. Rather than instilling girls with confidence

for their own sake, girls' confidence is seen as a necessary product in the feminized service sector that has organized global capitalist industries in the early twenty-first century.

Where the girl crisis suggested a gap in girls' confidence, the market for self-esteem assigned economic value to girls and their potential for success. The discourse then seemed to relay that girls must always be in crisis (whether or not they actually are) in order to sustain the market; in other words, the responsibility to build themselves up falls within their abilities to consume and invest in products and messages that encourage self-empowerment. This gendered address has informed what Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad call the "cult(ure) of confidence." Organized by multiple techniques, knowledges, and affective discourses, the cult of confidence establishes "women's lack of confidence as the fundamental obstacle to women's success, achievement and happiness, and in promoting the acquisition or development of self-confidence as its ultimate solution" ("The Confidence Cult(ure)" 326). Related to the self-help movement and happiness industry, the cult of confidence invokes therapeutic and feminist language to beckon women and girls to makeover their lives so that they feel motivated and self-assured to encounter personal and institutional problems. Love Your Body discourses of the beauty industry, as well as the neoliberal culture of "lean in" and "girlboss" organizations, illustrate how commercial industries employ positive psychology to beckon female subjects to feel better about themselves and their capabilities in the working world.[4] However, as Gill and Orgad point out, these consumer and professional endeavors allow the confidence cult to refashion feminism "into a neoliberal feminism that is complicit with rather than critical of patriarchal capitalism" (341).

[4] Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* and Sophia Amoruso's 2014 autobiography *#Girlboss* are often considered influential works in young professional women's careers. The call to "lean in" or be your own "girlboss" refers to the leadership strategies women must adopt if they wish to rise to the top of an organization.

According to the logic of the confidence cult, the imperative to be confident must never be completely fulfilled in order to continue its circulation in a consumer society where girls are seen as active participants. This in part has led to the belief that girls are perpetually in crisis, and even more, are in crisis because they have not done enough to combat external pressures—pressures that result from settings like family, school, and peer circles that girls are expected to take part in for their social development. To dismantle the institutions and technologies that have created inhospitable environments for girls would mean disrupting a neoliberal feminist culture that commodifies individual choice and empowerment viewed as crucial not just to girls but to reproducing the productivity of the capitalist worker.

Developing the Girl Worker

Between the confidence gap and the confidence cult, the professional lifestyling of girlhood emerges. In these discourses, confidence is perceived as an authentic identity for girls and women to reclaim, even if it does not accurately represent who they are. Confidence is a key signifier of the girl's potential success. Growing this attribute through professional development and performative modes of identity-making in media spaces conveys status and importance to public audiences. As these confidence discourses have persisted, their representation in early twenty-first century media culture provide girls with examples of how to attain success through self-promotion and regulation. These examples rely on celebrity as a "pedagogical tool and aid" in the "discourse of the self" in what Marshall calls the "era of presentational culture," where individuals online emulate the performative and promotional strategies observed in celebrity culture ("The Promotion and Presentation of the Self" 36). Girls respond to these strategies, Kim Allen reveals, when the "celebrity entrepreneur" becomes an influential neoliberal construction

for working class girls seeking upward social mobility when more traditional paths seem impossible (160). Celebrity then, serves as a useful place to conceive how media technologies "professionalize" girls and assign value to their aspirations and achievements.

The pressure placed on girls to work hard and succeed has been widely covered in histories and analyses of girl culture. Anita Harris and Michele Paule provide important frameworks from which the professional lifestyling of girlhood emerges. In her 2003 book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century,* Harris argued that the flexibility and self-invention characteristics made possible through neoliberal policies and feminist strides have positioned girls as the ideal subjects/images to look up to in risky economic times. The cultural invocation imposed on girls to express and even embody confidence and ambition has formed what Harris has called the "can-do girl." The can-do girl is defined as a symbolic figure who delays motherhood until she establishes her career and then treats "it as both an essentially feminine moment of fulfillment and a consumer lifestyle experience that enhances an image of success" (25). While these expectations have been fundamental to the regulation of twenty-first century femininity, Harris asserted that young girls are more managed by the "potential for failure" that could disrupt the expected trajectory of not only their personal future as adults but the future of a capitalist society (34). The "at-risk girl," as a result, illustrates what happens when girls are "rendered vulnerable by their circumstances," such as "living in poverty, in unstable homes, in communities known for violence, drugs, and crime," and thus contribute to the social and economic ruin of a nation (25). Under the scrutiny of celebrity culture, Sarah Projansky asserts that can-do girls are made "fabulous" through their "achievements, athletic abilities, intelligence, and self-confidence" while at-risk girls are turned into "scandals" that are carefully followed by the paparazzi (5-6). How public girlhoods then navigate the spotlight, whether as

high-profile celebrities or internet users engaged in mediated conversations, suggests a coordination of professional attributes and connections that make the girl's visibility to the public appealing and consumer friendly.

Michele Paule builds on this can-do/at-risk dichotomy approximately fifteen years later by examining gendered discourses of girlhood achievement and their deployment in media texts. In what Paule calls the "hard-working girl discourse," contemporary media "[p]roduce compliance and reinforce gendered and classed school behaviours, but also carry associated risks of loss of femininity and social prestige" (98). In this discourse, the girl *makes* her success, as opposed to having it come naturally to her, and she demonstrates the ability to obey social codes and institutions. Yet in doing so, this narrative "normalises middle-class identities, practices and values" where "some girls claim to work harder than they do in order to manage the competing pressures of gendered and achieving identities" (134). On the other end, the "girls hang back" discourse illustrates how girls who feel unprepared to make serious decisions about their future circumvent these pressures by reluctantly engaging "in processes of choosing" or refusing "aspirational subjectivities" (137). These girls are seen to depend on authoritative institutions to support and guide them in their life choices, allowing their identities as successful girls to be determined by their compliance and cooperation. At the same time, they are expected to impress their superiors with their individuality. The tension between achievement and authenticity in these discourses thus reveals the importance of class in creating the illusion of success. To appear confident and authentic not only aligns the girl with an achieving subjectivity but also affiliates her with a professionalized social status in her future role.

Professionalization is understood by the way it adheres to neoliberal constructions of work that in turn reinforce racial and social class hierarchies. In digital spaces, this process

negotiates the private self in the public performance through self-promotion and audience engagement, creating the illusion of independent choice and upward mobility despite the obstacles this context still imposes. According to Melissa Gregg, professionalism as an online performance "generates forms of pleasure and accomplishment" in its productivity and rewards that then create further justification for conducting this labor at any hour of the day (5-6). Even more, performing the professional allows individuals to connect themselves to an aspirational class identity without fully experiencing the benefits these power structures provide. As Nicholas Blomley articulates, professionalization indicates "a formal, recognized status" along with a "middle-class standing" that "relies upon and presupposes distinction" (224). Not only is distinction internalized and responsible for organizing the performance of the self, it also requires recognition and respect from others. The professionalization of girlhood, I assert, is how media recognize certain girls as reputable based on their ability to appeal to hegemonic race and class politics. Moreover, girls who can leverage their image in a surveillance media environment, organized by the logics of branding and fame, showcase their value to an entrepreneurial-oriented economy that typically focuses on adults.

The appearance and behavior of professionalism as it pertains to girlhood relies heavily on the enforcement of racial and class codes that operate via processes of individualization. As the professionalized girl identity is represented across surveillance media cultures, professional codes of conduct reinforce what Jessica Ringrose calls the "successful girls discourse." In this discourse, girls who attain educational success go on to find success at university as well as in their careers, thus signifying equality and progress for a prospering nation (472). The professionalism of the girl is determined by this connective framework, where the good work she performs at a young age will seemingly predict the good work she will achieve later in life. Yet

what this narrative leaves out is how this succession is determined by race and class, excluding girls who do not and cannot conform to hegemonic expectations of professionalism. As Shauna Pomerantz shows in her ethnography of a Canadian high school in the 2000s, the symbolic value of how girls dress did not matter in comparison to "how one was positioned by others as a certain 'kind' of (raced, classed, schooled) girl" (154). Simply dressing the part of a respectable, high-achieving girl would not take a girl very far if social limitations and a lack of access to resources and knowledge were also a part of her experience. Despite this evidence, the discourse of girls' achievement is deeply embedded in neoliberal logics that expects professional behavior and appearance to be a task that the individual can remedy on their own.

Prior to her appearance in contemporary media culture, the professionalized girl was organized through public services and programs intended to help girls safely bridge the private home and the public sphere from which they were previously excluded. As Jessica Taft relays, organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and Girls Incorporated worked with girls and young women as early as the 1860s to protect them from the "perils of the street" when recreational practices and employment in factories raised concerns of sexual encounters and other public dangers (14). Maintaining a code of respectability in public life influenced girl guides and citizenship-training organizations like the Girl Scouts of America in the early 1900s, where "self-sufficiency and achievement" were taught alongside "traditional femininity" (15). Often, these professional tenets meant conforming to a Westernized view of girlhood and nation. As Jennifer Helgrin discusses in *American Girls and Global Responsibility*, guide texts were used to reinforce white imperialist standards of discipline and hygiene for Indian girls in an attempt to "emancipate them from the supposed backward customs of their own cultures" (8). When the commercial marketplace expanded during the Cold War, girl guides

took the form of magazines providing lessons to teen girls for how to be good citizens and international diplomats while also responding to fashion and beauty advice. While boys were encouraged to privilege toughness and self-reliance in the post-war period, girls were tasked with being ambassadors of peace and guardians of traditional feminine values in this changing world.

These gendered roles began to shift with Women's Liberation in the 1960s and 70s as social discourse addressed girls as future professionals in a more gender progressive and competitive society. Self-help books for parents like Rita Stafford Dunn and Kenneth Dunn's 1977 *How to Raise Independent and Professionally Successful Daughters* emphasized the impact girls would have in the new labor economy of the late twentieth century as career opportunities became more available to them. In school environments, girls and their families took advantage of extracurricular activities and sports programs as both parents now worked outside the home and college admissions processes became more selective. Hilary Friedman explains how the "professionalization of child participation" accelerated in the 1980s, leading to a "growth of hypercompetition" over the following three decades (26). Furthermore, competition was motivated by "parents' demand for credentials for their children, which they [saw] as a necessary and often sufficient condition for entry into the upper-middle class and the 'good life' that accompanies it" (3). While social mobility was a desirable factor for girls' participation in competitive activities, families of mostly white girls already in the upper-middle-class strategically ensured that their daughters participated in certain after-school programs. These programs would supposedly give them a leg up in college admissions and "help maintain their family's class position by entering what are traditionally hegemonically male worlds" (122). While discourses of professionalization and female empowerment encouraged young girls to

attain success, these programs mostly served to protect already attained social class status and distinction.

Technologies of Professionalization

The urgency in which families and social institutions have pressed girls to participate in professional development groups and activities provides the backdrop for the girl crisis and confidence discourses that have controlled public perceptions of girlhood achievement into the twenty-first century. It is here where I extend this conversation to consider the influence surveillance media cultures have had on discourses of girlhood professionalization, and in turn, how specific media operate as "technologies of professionalization" in the presentation of the achieving girl. Following Teresa De Lauretis' "technologies of gender," where "the construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation," I look at reality TV and digital media as technologies of professionalization that invoke the practice of celebrity and branding to construct girlhood as a professional identity (9). As they simulate self-governing practices and participation, reality TV and digital media produce an achieving girlhood that responds to the anxieties and hopes of the confidence gap. In doing so, these mediums contribute to a successful girl discourse that aligns hard work with authenticity, creating a culture of productivity that champions young female empowerment as it also maintains racial and classed barriers to professional achievement.

Reality TV's relationship to professionalization is based in its function as a tool of citizenship instruction. According to Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, reality TV operates as a "cultural technology" designed through "regulation, policy, and programs" that "nurture citizenship and civil society" as "an instrument for education, improving, and shaping subjects"

(14). While reality TV does not accurately reflect real life back to audiences, it does present a constructed reality where viewers live vicariously through manufactured obstacles and challenges participants undergo. Ouellette and Hays employ Foucault's concept of governmentality to explain how the production of reality TV enforces methods of self-help and self-actualization, in turn "[s]howing us how to conduct and 'empower' ourselves as enterprising citizens" (2). Participants are portrayed as taking responsibility for their problems through specific steps that will supposedly lead to a more prosperous life. This process persists in other formats like reality competition shows, where contenders are either awarded or eliminated if they do not abide by the rules of the program, reinforcing a code of conduct that people who want to be successful should follow. While girls in reality TV programming have been used as cautionary tales (MTV's *16 and Pregnant* [2009-2014]) and exploited for their sexualized charm (TLC's *Toddlers & Tiaras* [2009-2016]), they have also demonstrated an aptitude for entertaining audiences with a range of talents and performances on shows like NBC's *Little Big Shots* (2016-present). Instead of just being nail-biting train wrecks for audiences to watch, reality TV has also framed girls as inspiring subjects whose authenticity comes as naturally to them as does their exceptional abilities. Girlhood on reality TV not only teaches audiences what girls *should not do* but also instills the idea that girls have equal access to the tools and instincts to make their professional dreams a reality.

As reality TV engages with the presentation of citizenship and professionalization, its convergence with social media has produced strategic guides for creating and managing a public persona. Mark Andrejevic argues that because audience members are active participants in shaping the structure and outcome of reality programming, they "focus attention on the apparatus of celebrity production rather than the intrinsic qualities of the star" (5). As social media became

more refined in the 2010s, viewers could closely observe the various social network accounts of reality stars and witness the practices of promotion and branding that go into producing an authentic-looking image and lifestyle. Jane O'Connor and John Mercer explain that the rise of reality TV and social media have inundated twenty-first century youth with the idea that they do not have to just watch celebrities but can actually *become* them "via self-promotion and fan base-building" (12). Because these practices have also been folded into modern day job seeking and professional development on social network sites like LinkedIn and Twitter, girls who engage in celebrity strategies online ally themselves with a professional lifestyle. At the same time, as Heather Mendick et al. argue, the focus on building a personal brand that expresses the authentic self "can conflict with the neoliberal imperative to demonstrate one's flexibility and adaptability to the needs of different employers and working environments (especially within a highly precarious and competitive labour market" (155). This tension is exemplified in the way contemporary girls' media respond to the confidence gap discourse that beckons girls to embrace their true selves while emphasizing the imperative to take risks and be ambitious in their goals. Girls' professionalization depends on their achievements, but it also depends on how they express authenticity in a surveillance media culture that is organized around their entrepreneurial endeavors.

The services, activities, and media that instill ideas of confidence, ambition, and responsible work ethics in young girls have largely functioned to protect a capitalist society that preserves industrialized work practices and the white upper-class family. As Morgan Genevieve Blue shows in her analysis of Disney Channel girl celebrities, "girls' participation in business as investors, as media producers, and as paid consultants and spokespeople may have perpetuated individualist, patriarchal, capitalist systems and discourse" (*Girlhood on Disney Channel* 162).

Identifying the confidence gap as a potential obstruction to these systems while couching it as a problem for feminism to address works to justify the necessity of professionalized girlhood for future gender equality. The professional identity prescribed for young girls in past pedagogical texts is further reproduced in the surveillance culture of early twenty-first century media, where the individual is shown to employ neoliberal strategies of self-branding that commodify private life. The construction of authentic expression in these representations is often framed as meritocratic and egalitarian, suggesting that people in the digital age have greater access to the means and resources to produce their own success. Yet as past media scholars have pointed out, digital media production tends to mask the privileges and inequalities that limit idealized aspirations of achievement. The promise of dream fulfillment feeds into what Richard Dyer calls the "success myth" of the star system, which values ordinariness, rewards talent and specialness, ensures democratic access to fame, and affirms hard work and professionalism for stardom (*Stars*, 156). This becomes a significant issue to consider as representations of successful girls in reality programming and digital media production promote professionalism as the way to attain self-worth, social respect, and economic independence. How then does the confidence gap become a success myth for girls in the early twenty-first century?

Organization of Chapters

This dissertation investigates the above question through four chapters organized according to different developmental stages of the girl that reflect how her professionalization in media culture transforms her into a symbolic business for the early millennium. The first two chapters focus on girlhood in reality and lifestyle television programming in order to establish how girls are managed and made to perform as confident, authentic, and entrepreneurial subjects

that further a feminist legacy of young female achievement. The final two chapters center on social media and commercial media production, exploring how girls become business decision-makers and activists that negotiate confidence and authenticity in an increasingly digitized global society. The project ultimately investigates how the professional lifestyling of girlhood relies on celebrity as an aid in the public performance of the self, framing confidence and authenticity as tools in the creation of a successful achieving girl in the digital age.

The first chapter, "Mother Knows Best: Managing the Future Girl in Lifestyle Media," turns to the figure that is arguably most influential in the creation and construction of the girl in her initial years: the mother. I begin with the 2019 Varsity Blues college admissions scandal to show how celebrity culture and its fixation on the celebrity mother manager is useful in conceptualizing the class anxieties that have fueled public concerns over girls' future professional achievements. In addition to investigating Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin, the celebrity mothers at the center of the scandal, I also analyze the business and media productions of Kris Jenner and Yolanda Hadid. As the "momager" figure sells a management lifestyle to mothers seeking ways to train and empower their daughters in the entertainment industry, girlhood becomes a capitalist project that promises social mobility for women. How girls begin to perform achievement and authenticity takes center stage in the second chapter, "Girls' Got Talent: Achievement and Authenticity in the Reality Talent Show." In particular, I look at *MasterChef Junior* (2013-present), *America's Got Talent* (2006-present), and *Little Big Shots* to explore how cultural anxieties of girlhood are taken into account and framed as narrative tension in the celebrity journeys of talented girls on reality programming. Significantly, reality TV frames the insecurities seen in girls' performances as authentic professional development that will lead to confident and accomplished young women who are also celebrity commodities.

The third chapter, "The Digital Girl Economy: Influencers, Slackers, and the Branding of Relatability," considers the role of the digital gig economy (popularized by companies like Uber and Airbnb) in teen girls' entrepreneurial endeavors on social media, focusing on influencer culture on Instagram and YouTube. As girls negotiate with brands in the promotion of sponsored content on their profiles, they also navigate the expectations of perfection and professionalism through the adoption of a "slacker" persona their audiences find relatable. This slacker persona downplays hard work and rewards the appearance of laziness. Yet in doing so, it reinscribes whiteness as the ideal identity for this unpolished presentation. The fourth and final chapter, "Girls for Future: Networked Celebrity Activism and the Politics of Empowerment," investigates several girl activists who have achieved fame in the 2010s, including Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, Jazz Jennings, Emma González, and Marley Dias. In their various media presentations, celebrity becomes a professionalizing tool that makes girl activists and the social causes they represent seem more respectable, distinguished, and commodifiable. At the same time, media coverage of these girl activists relies on comforting images and words to manage radical ideas for mainstream audiences. However, as some girl activists demonstrate, the mobilization of anger in affective digital expressions has potential to shift ideas around the impact girls and their causes stimulate. The professionalization of girlhood, as framed by celebrity culture and political and capitalist interests, both contributes to the maintenance of exploitative systems of labor and sheds light on changing definitions of girlhood achievement as the century progresses.

Girls in twenty-first century media offer important opportunities to learn about how femininity and youth, as signifiers of confidence and ambition in a popular feminist landscape, have become valuable assets in a society increasingly organized around the branding of

authenticity and achievement. Because girls are not as weighed down by financial responsibilities and precarious labor environments as their adult counterparts, they retain the hope that a globalized society requires to move forward. At the same time, girls become harbingers of anxiety when they are perceived as not achieving enough or struggling to find their self-confidence. The confidence gap discourse is more pertinent in the digital age as it converges with the twenty-first century's social ills, from the 2008 recession and right-wing political regimes, to the mobilization of activist movements online responding to gender, race, and class injustices. Girls certainly need confidence as they grow and mature during risky times, yet what happens when that confidence is professionalized and commodified and so excludes the varied experiences of girls that might make a confident subjectivity necessarily complicated? If the girl is a business, her confidence is the stock that needs further attention if society wants to see a return on its investment.

CHAPTER ONE

Mother Knows Best: Managing the Future Girl in Lifestyle Media

On March 12, 2019, news broke that federal prosecutors were charging dozens of high-profile parents for allegedly conspiring to use bribery and other forms of fraud to sway college admissions officers into accepting their children into elite universities across the United States. Among the long list of parents accused in what has been called "Operation Varsity Blues," two celebrity mothers received top bill in the headlines: Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin. Being two of the more famous names tied to the scandal, Huffman and Loughlin also seemed singled out for their public image as popular maternal figures on *Desperate Housewives* and *Full House*, respectively, as well as for how their crimes might affect their young daughters who would be following in their celebrity footsteps. According to a *Variety* report, Loughlin's 19-year-old daughter Olivia Jade Giannulli lost brand deals with Lulus and Sephora on her Instagram account after it was revealed that her mother paid a $500,000 bribe to have Olivia Jade admitted to the University of Southern California (Spangler). Public discourse attempted to make sense of why these celebrity moms, more so than the other parents accused, would take such risks. Left-leaning U.S. politicians like Elizabeth Warren looked to the scandal as "just one more example of how the rich and powerful know how to take care of their own" (Katersky et al.). While collegiate nepotism seemed the obvious, if not dispiriting, fact of the case, cultural critics pointed to the extreme pressures placed on mothers, especially those in the media spotlight, to maintain an image of success replicated through the high achievements of their offspring.

Feminist scholars, such as Andrea O'Reilly and Adrienne Rich, have long examined the formation and experiences of motherhood under Western socioeconomic institutions that set high expectations for how to be a mother in contemporary society. In critical studies of popular

culture, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels highlight how these expectations have converged with notions of postfeminism in the 2000s and 2010s to illustrate what they call "new momism," that is, "a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach" (4-5). Since the advent of social media and community digital platforms, twenty-first century mothers have shared the anxieties of not always living up to the ideals espoused in their media portrayals. Celebrity moms have also contributed to these discussions of not-so-perfect motherhood as part of their authentic lifestyle brands. Felicity Huffman, as a *New York Times* article indicated, managed a "mommy blog" (that has since been taken down) detailing "the importance of honesty, confronting fears and reading books like *The Blessing of a B Minus*, which cautions against micromanaging the lives of children" (Buckley and Popescu). Yet as Huffman, Loughlin, and the other parents embroiled in the college admissions scandal demonstrate, the pressure to maintain their public legacies and ruling class image through their children overrode their alleged commitment to social integrity. Especially for the mothers and their daughters, this cultural anxiety harbors a distinct gendered, racialized, and classed angle, one that draws on popular postfeminist narratives of empowerment, achievement, and survival in a patriarchal capitalist society.

The relationship between mother and daughter is significant for the ways heteronormative femininity is discursively maintained across generational lines, but it is also noteworthy for how conceptualizations of professionalized female achievement are privileged in these cultural discourses. In her book *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects*, Stephanie Lawler describes how mothers pass on practices of managing the successful feminine self to their daughters. She explains that the mother's "obligation to nurture an autonomous self

within the daughter places them under an obligation to ensure their daughter's 'achievement' in the face of social inequalities. As a result, the daughter's failure to 'achieve' can be blamed, not on a social system which militates against her 'achievement,' but on her mother" (99). While it comes as no surprise that mothers are often blamed for the shortcomings of their children, the mother's responsibility for the daughter's success is particularly rife with tension in a postfeminist context, where systemic gendered inequalities that might hold girls back are presumed to be resolved. As Anita Harris argues, the achievements of twenty-first century "future girls" have been made possible by past, as well as present, victories progressing women's rights in the public sphere. As a result of "the feminist push to dismantle the barriers keeping women out of education and employment," Harris asserts that there is now "a broader socioeconomic need for young women to take up places in the new economy" (*Future Girl* 7). The next generation of women seemingly have more choices and more materials in which to develop and maintain an independent and empowered self in a neoliberal capitalist society that values self-responsibility and entrepreneurialism. With the multitude of opportunities available to young women to succeed, the possibility of failure on any account could signal a deeply troubling problem with the individual and her upbringing. It could also signal a profound inadequacy on the part of the mother and her (in)ability to maintain continuity across elite familial and feminist lines.

The mother's concern over the daughter's potential failure, however, holds different meanings for women of diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. While Huffman's and Loughlin's crimes contribute to a discursive anxiety over the loss of social prestige (or at least the desire to maintain or gain more), low-income mothers who falsified their children's home address so that they could attend better school districts highlight another side to this discourse,

that of living within oppressive institutions and racist zoning laws. For instance, Kelley Williams-Bolar, a 48-year-old single African American mother and high school teacher's aide, was indicted and sentenced in 2011 to ten days in jail and three years of probation. She was also given a $70,000 fine for using her father's home address so that her daughters could attend school in an affluent and mostly white school district (Pflum). In an interview with *The Today Show* shortly after the college admissions scandal broke, Williams-Bolar explained that her illegal actions had good intentions: "I wanted them to have a good start in life. I wanted to send them to one of the best schools." Such conversations happening around Operation Varsity Blues attempt to rationalize its reckoning through a discourse that purports mothers just want a "better" life for their daughters. Yet what stories like Williams-Bolar's highlight is how "better" is often constructed as white and economically privileged. While this media discourse attempts to frame Huffman's and Loughlin's bad deeds as well-intentioned, it also reveals the social significance elite whiteness has in securing advantageous futures for one's female offspring.

The inclusion of Williams-Bolar in the discussion creates an important distinction for how the actions of ordinary mothers are valued and judged differently than the actions of their celebrity counterparts. Yet it also reveals how intrinsic girlhood achievement is to perceptions of female social mobility, where recognition of a high-status education and access to a professionally beneficial network can mean further attainment of wealth, independence, and a reputable social positioning for both mother and daughter. These perceptions, as researchers Kim Allen at al. discover, are strongly replicated in mediated narratives of celebrity mothers as they engage with struggles related to austerity, maternity, family, and femininity. Using Angela McRobbie's notion of "visual media governmentality," Allen at al. argue that representations of celebrity mothers played out in popular culture "[p]rop up ideas about which ways of doing

motherhood are valued (or not) within the current conjecture" (3). In other words, mediated celebrity enables "the collective consumption and surveillance of the maternal body" (5). What this process means for the professional lifestyling of girlhood, and how mediated motherhood attempts to manage this endeavor, is something that this chapter seeks to examine.

In the following sections, I analyze how mediated representations of celebrity mothers inform the cultural discourse of anxiety that engages and invites twenty-first century girls to succeed and reinforce the ruling class and perceptions of professional achievement under capitalist systems. While other social and political institutions expect girls to flourish in their future personal and professional lives, the figure of the celebrity mother more acutely observes and manages how the girl navigates social pressures and business opportunities across shifting media platforms. Not only does this management consider the impacts on the family unit but also the advances the mother has made as a postfeminist figure who independently resolves her daughters' educational and professional futures.

In this way, the role of the mother functions as a mode of surveillance that is deeply connected to where the professionalized girl comes from. Working with Rachel E. Dubrofsky's formulation of surveillance as a culture, I consider how lifestyle media branding in places like reality TV and social media authenticate the necessity of the mother in the construction of successful girlhood as a valuable gendered, racialized, and classed commodity. Focusing on what I call the "momager living brand," I assert that celebrity culture and its fixation on the celebrity mother manager is useful in conceptualizing the class anxieties inherent in the valorization of girlhood achievement as directed by postfeminist neoliberal initiatives. By exploring the discursive functions of certain celebrity mothers, who seem willing to do anything to see their

daughters succeed, girlhood becomes both a hopeful feminist project and an anxious capitalist pawn that can lead to either prosperity or insecurity in a white patriarchal economy.

Raising the Girl Under Neoliberal Capitalism

The pressures placed on mothers to see their daughters preserve or elevate their social status through personal and professional achievements has roots in the capitalist formation of the Western family. In her influential genealogy of girlhood, Catherine Driscoll claims that daughterhood situates the girl in a future role that focuses on what the girl will one day do as a woman. This framing, she claims, is a function of patriarchal capitalism that depends on the heteronormative family to produce and maintain the cycle of reproductive and domestic labor. Drawing on Marxist theory, Driscoll asserts that "in relation to the Mother as a necessary component of capitalism, and necessary asset of the patriarchal capitalist family unit, girls may be seen to represent the exchange, flow and movement of property" (108). This idea manifests in the ways girls have been associated with consumption and commodification, acts that groom them to desire and accept their place as women.

Gayle Rubin, writing in her landmark "The Traffic in Women" essay, reinforces this observation, arguing that women are a crucial "reserve labor force for capitalism" and that they "serve the ends of capitalist consumerism in their roles as administrators of family consumption and so forth" (160). The reproduction of labor in a capitalist economy depends on women's ability to perform housework, conceive and raise children, and make purchasing decisions that will sustain the (mostly) male workforce. However, according to Rubin, women are not granted access to this capital they help generate. Instead, they are expected to maintain the sex/gender system by instilling their daughters with the same sense of compliancy and responsibility to the

nuclear family by way of consumerism and self-management. While feminist scholars like Mary Celeste Kearney have challenged girlhood's alleged passivity in consumption habits, the marketplace's identification of mothers making purchasing decisions for the family household crystallizes the future consumer role girls are expected to inherit (*Girls Make Media* 4). In this way, the mother becomes a necessary first step in the construction of the girl in a capitalist system.

Considered the primary female role model in a girl's life, the mother provides the template for how the girl should act and behave in the formation of a feminine self-image managed through the demands of a patriarchal capitalist society. Much of this practice, while enforced by heteronormative cultural codes, relies on the mother's own initiative to guide and advise her daughter while encouraging her to act independently (Lawler 99).The global reception of neoliberal politics in the late twentieth century brought this renewed focus and responsibility to the individual in the private sector, allowing what Rosalind Gill has identified as a "postfeminist sensibility" to take hold in contemporary feminine media culture through an emphasis on choice, empowerment, sexuality, and consumerism (149). Feminism's public entanglement with neoliberal capitalism, as Nancy Fraser and Catherine Rottenberg describe, opened the doors for second-wave feminism to engage marketplace logics and more actively enter mainstream politics. However, in doing so, popular modes of feminism became "framed in extremely individualistic terms" and downplayed the actions of "social and collective justice" (Rottenberg 419). This turn towards a postfeminist rationality, whereby the social and economic inequalities of all women seemed readily resolved by the empowerment of mostly white middle-class women, assigned more responsibility to the mother training her daughter. As Angela McRobbie points out, the "new maternal-familialism" that emerged from postfeminist discourse

became the cultural dispositif instructing mothers to manage the family's finances and maintain unity and harmony among its members ("The New 'Mediated' Maternalism" 142). Mothers were thus expected to shoulder the heavy responsibility of ensuring the family's happiness and functioning in society, particularly as it would reflect on their own value in maintaining the family's class status.

When social discourse began to examine the deleterious effects of girls' low self-esteem on their future happiness and careers in the girl crisis of the 1990s, mothers were framed as both scapegoats and much needed guides. Self-help literature marketed to mothers relied on what Berit Åström calls "a narrative of fear" to jolt mothers into devoting all their time and attention to the care of their daughters (119). At the same time that middle-class white mothers were called on to help in this crisis, teen mothers and mothers of color were blamed by politicians for the social and economic problems plaguing Western nations (Zaslow 25). As such, the girl crisis can be viewed as a social panic resulting from racist and classist ideas of what girlhood achievement should look like and how it should be valued.

This tasking of mothers to uplift young girls coincided with a number of important discourses at the turn of the twenty-first century. First, girl power emerged as a popular culture phenomenon in the late 1990s, forming its own media consumer market that spoke to both mothers and daughters. While girlhood scholars like Rebecca Hains and Emilie Zaslow identify the riot grrrl punk movement in the early 90s as sowing the seeds for a powerful feminist subculture, the aggressiveness of its message and political scene was feared to not be palatable to parents of young girls. The arrival of British pop group the Spice Girls instead solidified girl power for a mainstream audience, making this movement comfortably feminine and inviting to not only girls but their mothers as well. By framing girl power as "encompassing both strength

and independence *and* normative femininity," the marketplace appealed to mothers seeking ways to bolster their daughters' confidence (Hains 48). Furthermore, Zaslow adds, guilt-marketing experts in the toy industry relied on the girl crisis to sell their consumer products. Nonsexist toys marketed under the banner of girl power "were said to empower girls to break out of traditional positions and 'save them' from becoming victims of the crisis" (Zaslow 23). Consumer language appealing to mothers' fears for their daughters allowed the girl crisis to move from social conversation to profitable commodity.

The second discourse to converge with the girl crisis appeared in the cultural obsession with motherhood that played out in early 2000s media culture. Referred to as new momism, advertising and media programming asked mothers to engage with feminist notions of choosing to become a mother as well as antifeminist stances dictating selflessness and obsessive dedication to the child-rearing process. Bringing the same gusto to motherhood as to her career, new momism required the mother to apply a heightened level of attention to the project of childhood to demonstrate her abilities as a woman and enforcer of the middle-class nuclear family.

Intrinsic to this mediated motherhood lifestyle was the encouragement of surveillant behaviors the mother would enact for herself and for the network of mothers in which she belonged. Douglas and Michaels pointedly emphasize that new momism fostered an environment in which "everyone watches us, we watch ourselves and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves" (6). Angela C. Henderson et al. elaborate on this surveillance of modern motherhood by invoking Michel Foucault's theory of twentieth century punishment that diminished the need for social institutions to enforce control over human behavior. Henderson et al. indicate that mothers similarly do not need an active and present force to monitor their

actions; rather, "mothers surveil one another through interpersonal communication and observation, ranging anywhere from conversations about children's appropriate developmental milestone to a covert, silent monitoring of other moms' disciplining behavior in public places" (231). This almost passive form of community and self-surveillance contributes to the ambiguity of new momism's burdensome forces in that the act of surveillance is ever-present and continuous without accentuating the damaging effects it can have. Rather than identifying surveillance as a specific tool, like a camera phone or nanny cam that physically calls attention to its recording capabilities, modern motherhood conjures up a surveillance culture in which women and other mothers elusively and seamlessly normalize and enforce the acts of judgments that keep them striving to perfect an impossible-to-perfect social role.

As motherhood continues to be a lifestyle project constantly in need of managing and improving, girlhood remains in a stage of danger that requires attention from the political status quo. Following the self-help trend of the 1990s, literature of the early twenty-first century continued to target how mothers could manage the stress crushing their daughters. Such books, like Lisa Damour's *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood* (2016) and Rachel Simmons' *Enough As She Is: How to Help Girls Move Beyond Impossible Standards of Success to Live Happy, Healthy, and Fulfilling Lives* (2018), focused particularly on how mothers could help their daughters navigate intensified educational and social pressures in an increasingly digitized environment fixated on the illusion of perfection. While these guides are also preoccupied with closing the "confidence gap" supposedly keeping girls down, they deviate slightly in their approach by promoting authenticity and acceptance of girls' imperfections. This angle on the girl crisis at first seems refreshing and different; however, as corporate culture has coopted this language, these therapeutic methods get reconceptualized as

necessary for productivity rather than for self-preservation. This discursive shift from empowerment via confidence-building to empowerment via self-acceptance have the same goals in mind: help mothers help daughters become active functioning participants in a cycle of work founded on capitalist exploitation of human resources. As the next section explores, mediated representations of motherhood play a strong role in making the professionalization of the daughter seem empowering, progressive, and crucial to her success. In doing so, motherhood helps shape girlhood achievement in a way that is conducive to the functions of neoliberal capitalism and maintains hierarchical class systems.

Mother and Daughter, Inc.

In the first season of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* in 2007, the role of the mother manager is introduced to audiences as a special asset to the entrepreneurial young woman in the second episode "Managing Mom." The matriarch of the family, Kris Jenner, arranges for oldest daughter Kim to participate in a celebrity cat walk fashion show in downtown Hollywood.[5] As the family arrives at the venue, Kim begins to question the organization of the event when it appears that the planners have no sense of direction for its participants or who they allowed in as celebrities. "I can't believe my mom booked me for this. This is the worst show ever," Kim says as plus-size models and women wearing thongs strut the stage. The Kardashian family manage to sneak away before the show ends, but not before calling out Kris for booking the gig. Feeling distrustful of her mom, Kim begins shopping around for a "real" manager who can handle the stressful demands of her growing career. However, when Kris finds out that Kim is threatening to replace her, she records Kim's phone number on her answering machine message and checks

[5] Because several of the celebrity families I discuss in this chapter share the same last name, I will refer to them by their first names.

out at a spa for the afternoon. Bombarded with phone calls and not able to reach her mom, Kim comes around and apologizes to a tearful Kris. “It’s very serious to me, how I handle your business and how I handle the business of the whole family,” Kris says. “All I need you to realize is that I do have your best interests at heart.”

The professionalization of the mother-daughter relationship, while not new, rose in popularity when Kris Jenner and many more celebrity mothers began sharing the ways they manage their children’s careers in entertainment with the public. Often referred to by the portmanteau “momager,” these professional mother managers attempt to consolidate new momism’s call to have both a family and a career into a single branded lifestyle identity. Drawing on the popular imaginary of the working-class stage mother (an archetype often viewed negatively for using children to escape economic insecurity and to bolster one’s own career), the momager utilizes professional networks and her own business savvy to maintain and promote her child’s brand to industry producers hiring in the creative sectors.[6] While the momager does not always escape critique for “[g]aining new wealth and celebrity status ‘off of their daughters’ backs,’” as Shelley Cobb raises, she does resonate powerfully for ordinary mothers eager to equate the hard work of parenting to the hard work of being a professional (4). In this way, the momager functions as a “rebranding” of the overbearing stereotype, turning the mother instead into someone who is successful and at times admirable, despite her demanding nature.

Popular writing on the momager from cultural critics has observed the complex double nature of this figure who “embodies cultural trends toward personal branding and hyper-involved parenting so neatly that it can be hard to see it for what it is” (Romanoff). Such characterizations highlight how the professionalization of motherhood, and therefore the professionalization of the

[6] The stage mother has often been memorialized in the stage and film musical *Gypsy*, where Rose Hovick relies on her daughter Gypsy Rose Lee’s sexuality for upward class mobility.

child, have become so commonplace that the precarity and anxieties of self-branding are crystallized as natural parts of the job. Similarly, I claim that the professionalization of motherhood blurs the boundaries between the mother's role as parent and manager of her child. While this process can take place online, where the mother is seen managing her offspring's social media presence for parental protection as well as for branding purposes, it also functions across media platforms and industries that instill in mothers the idea that they must be doing more than they already are to help their children succeed.

Looking to lifestyle media representations of motherhood, moms are presented with a plethora of choices and products to use as they guide and manage their children's careers. Maureen Ryan defines lifestyle media as books, television, magazines, and websites that "frame tasks that have historically fallen to women—housekeeping, home design, entertaining, beauty, child care, and food preparation, among other repetitive practices of personal and domestic betterment—as richly rewarding pursuits and sites of inspiration on aesthetic and emotional levels" (2-3). The individuals facilitating the promotion of specific lifestyles meant to enrich the person are what Celia Lury calls "living brands" (77). Laurie Ouellette expands on this concept in looking at reality TV, explaining living brands as "the branding of all dimensions of social life, from institutions to expertise to education to relationships" that offer guidance and advice for "everyday living, shopping and self-fashioning" through the "intimacy of television" (42-43). Following this logic, I propose the momager as a type of living brand featured prominently on reality TV that promotes and commodifies an entrepreneurial lifestyle for mothers seeking to manage their children's careers, often in entertainment. In particular, the momager holds significant implications for the study of girlhood achievement as it beckons audiences to view motherhood as crucial to the betterment of future girls in a capitalist society. Through the

professionalization of motherhood as managers in a media landscape, girls are professionalized as commodities whose worth is measured by how well they achieve reputable roles and financial wealth in the public sphere.

Arguably the face of the momager living brand, Kris Jenner embodies the drive and opportunism that have established what a successful momager should look like. In her 2011 autobiography *Kris Jenner…And All Things Kardashian*, the momager relays how she was left completely broke after her divorce from first husband Robert Kardashian (93). Vowing to never be in that position again, Kris began managing the individual careers of her children and second spouse and former Olympic decathlete, Caitlyn Jenner, before launching the family's own reality TV show in 2007. Earning the title "momager," Kris attempted to trademark the term in 2015 so she could use it to promote consumer products related to the Kardashian brand (Bowerman). In creating a market for momager-related products, Kris Jenner sells a particular elite identity and lifestyle to the momager-wannabe. For instance, on Mother's Day 2018 and 2019, youngest daughter Kylie Jenner introduced special kits of her mother's "momager-inspired" beauty collection for her makeup company, Kylie Cosmetics (Figure 1). Priced at $49 USD through

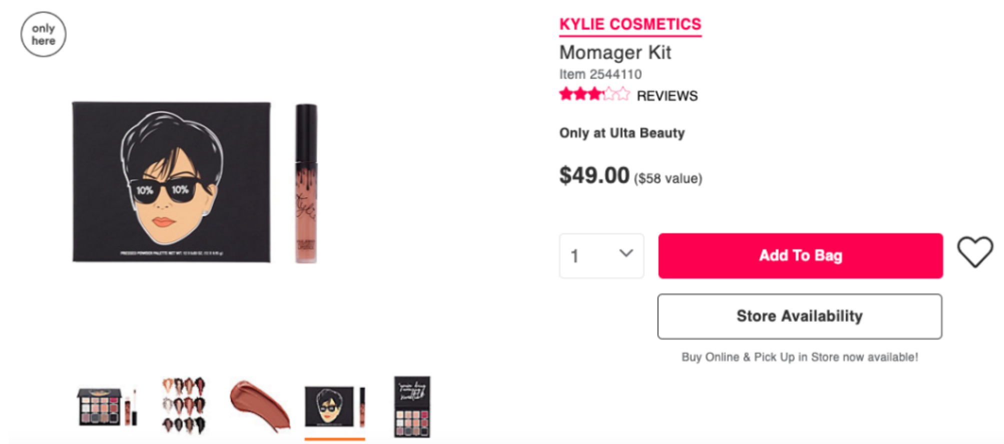

Figure 1: Kylie Cosmetics' Momager Kit Palette Sold at Ulta.com

Ulta Beauty's online store, the Momager Kit includes a Todd Kraines Velvet Liquid Lipstick and the limited-edition Kris Kollection Pressed Powder Eyeshadow Palette. Gracing the packaging is Kris Jenner in black sunglasses and the phrase "You're doing amazing sweetie!!" in reference to a *KUWTK* episode where Kris "managed" daughter Kim during a photoshoot. Printed on each lens of Kris' sunglasses is "10%," alluding to the fee she takes from her children's business pursuits. The promotional packaging of the momager makeup kit, while aimed at fans of the show who will recognize these references and key details, presents a hyper-feminine, upper-class, business savvy picture of what a momager is. Understanding *KUWTK* as a cultural landmark, women who do not fit this idea are beckoned to measure their aspirations against this image of glossy success.

The lifestyling of motherhood through celebrity women and the tips and merchandise they sell has been particularly influential in the normalization of feminine class aspirations. As Jorie Lagerwey notes in her work on celebrity motherhood, "performances of motherhood that can cultivate fans or followers across media platforms and transform those fans into active consumers not just of media…but also of branded consumer products, are the most visible and celebrated forms of maternity" (8). At the same time, these most privileged representations do not fully explore the social precarity of women's work and the cultural anxieties of transcending class barriers. In particular, the income gap between women and men, as well as the housework gender gap requiring career women to shoulder most of the domestic labor, produces insecure living conditions for mothers seeking a steady income. Being able to assemble a paying career out of motherhood, as Kris Jenner did, makes sense when other job prospects seem unstable, unavailable, or just impossible to balance with the all-consuming demands of housework.

Even as the mother resorts to being backstage manager for her child, there exists public disdain for women who seem to be using their children to further their own careers and acquire wealth and status. Shelley Cobb asserts that momagers like Dina Lohan and Lynn Spears, framed in media discourse as lacking middle-class decorum, tend to "invoke cultural anxieties about the superficial link between capitalist individualism and 'family values,' as well as troubling the cultural assumption that the privilege of whiteness necessitates success at both" (10). By "family values," Cobb not only refers to the normative nuclear family but the racial and class legacies that have solidified, protected, and privileged certain kinships. Prominent families like the Kennedys or the Hiltons have secured political or social prestige through the reinforcement of inherited wealth and the maintenance of an influential public image. This protection of status and labor translates to media discourse, as Alison Harvey uncovers in her analysis of the mobile celebrity game *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*. However, as Harvey shows, the economics and ludic features of interactive media make "visible the labor underlying celebrity and its spreading practices of self-branding, intimacy work, and hypervisibility in the attentional economy, making it impossible to ignore the intensity of women's work therein" (654). Similarly, the marketing of the momager as a postfeminist living brand who has built her success through personal grit and entrepreneurial strategies highlights how other women could engage this labor without the required social pedigree. As the momager enacts an individualist and public-facing approach to managing her children and building the family business, she threatens traditional modes of acquiring status. Even more, the visibility of her labor troubles the boundaries of the white ruling class that obscure pathways for social mobility.

For example, the media attention surrounding June Shannon, also known as Mama June, and her daughter, reality pageant show star Honey Boo Boo, illustrate some of the class anxieties

inherent in the momager living brand. Shannon came to prominence when she brought her six-year-old daughter Alana "Honey Boo Boo" Thompson onto TLC's reality junior pageant show *Toddlers & Tiaras* in 2011. Emerging from a white working-class background, media sites branded June and Alana as "white trash" looking to extend their 15-minutes of fame. At the same time, audience fascination with the mother and daughter led to the creation of their own TLC series, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which ran from 2012 to 2014. The show followed the antics of Shannon, Thompson, and the rest of their family in Georgia in what critics called a "green light to laugh at rednecks and fat people" (Goodman). Concerns were also raised that TLC was exploiting Thompson and that Shannon was simply living off of her daughter's newfound fame and fortune. In 2014, the network canceled the show after discovering Shannon's then boyfriend was convicted of sexually abusing one of her underage daughters.

While Thompson's fame dimmed (with the exception of an appearance on *Dancing with the Stars: Juniors* in 2018), Shannon's grew brighter when the network We TV launched her reality show *Mama June: From Not to Hot* in February 2017. As the focus shifted to Shannon and her 300-pound weight loss journey, questions emerged about the momager clinging to the spotlight not just for attention but for the new wealth and class position she now had thanks to her daughter. However, as cultural critic Joanna Arcieri argues, Shannon never abandoned her redneck identity and that the purpose of *From Not to Hot* was to give "audiences permission to ignore June's failings as a woman and parent, for the sake of entertainment." Even so, Shannon made a point in interviews to show that she was being a good mom by encouraging her daughters to eat healthier and not dissuading them from plastic surgery "if it would make them confident" (King). The rebranding of Mama June thus reveals how good parenting and the promise that the

momager's work still benefits the child is vital to the public image, even as it troubles popular perceptions of race and class.

Living brands like Mama June and Kris Jenner feed into a larger matrix of motherhood and parenting media that attempt to commodify and sell this entrepreneurial-ized lifestyle and its values to ordinary mothers from a variety of backgrounds. In fact, while researching and writing this chapter, I received several pamphlets in the mail for online support systems for new mothers and savings codes for baby products—despite not being a mother or planning to become one anytime soon. Apart from the uncomfortable data mining that can take place, motherhood media provide mothers with ways to make achievement a normal part of their children's vocabulary. Mommy blogs and momager support websites, like *The Momager Lifestyle*, provide tips, resources, and community forums where moms can learn and strategize how to get their kids into the best dance studios or casting calls. Independent businesses on Etsy.com also draw mothers in with momager merchandise that include wine glasses, baby hoodies, Mother's Day cards, baseball hats, and coffee mugs embossed with phrases like "Momager of the Year," "Domestic CEO," and "Call My Momager."

Reality television programs, for better or worse, provide aspirational examples for mothers of talented kids. Lifetime's *Dance Moms* (2011-Present), a series following Abby Lee Miller's dance studio for young girls, illustrates how some momagers were able to find career success for their daughters, like professional dancer Maddie Ziegler and teen pop star JoJo Siwa. The same network also released *The Mother/Daughter Experiment: Celebrity Edition* in 2015, a limited reality series featuring celebrity therapist Dr. Debbie Magids helping former reality stars reconcile broken relationships with their controlling momagers. The resources, merchandise, and entertainment programs that contribute to the momager being a living brand reinforce and

normalize the professionalization process for mothers. Yet it also positions motherhood as personally responsible for the development and success of young people, feeding into the cultural imperative to create a "better life" for one's offspring through social mobility. The momager becomes a tangible role women can adopt through the consumption and curation of mediatized content; however, in doing so, child-rearing becomes a capitalist project measured by the labor the mother invests in the family's economic output.

In the following sections, I examine how the use of surveillance in reality TV authenticates the necessity of the mother in the professional lifestyling of the girl as a valuable commodity. I focus on the celebrity media reporting of several mother-daughter relationships as well as the reality TV programs in which they appear: Kylie and Kris Jenner in E!'s *Life of Kylie* (2017), an extension of the Kardashian reality franchise, and Yolanda Hadid and her modeling competition *Making a Model* (2018) for teen girls and their mothers on Lifetime. While both of these programs are marginal texts with only one season so far, I assert that they offer useful insight to the construction and management of the professionalized girl under media surveillance. In foregrounding the mother as manager of girlhood, I argue that these reality TV programs illuminate a dominant discourse that valorizes girls' achievements based on their ability to preserve the financial and social capital of the normative and often white patriarchal family.

"My Little CEO": Kris Jenner and *Life of Kylie*

In June 2017, a promo video for then 19-year-old Kylie Jenner's reality docu-series, *Life of Kylie*, was released on YouTube. The teaser documented Kylie's daily life performing for paparazzi, fashion photographers, and social media followers as her voiceover conceded that she

feels constant pressure to present as a celebrity even though this identity does not capture her true self. Scenes of Kylie as a smiling tween girl are juxtaposed with updated images of the teen star in full contoured makeup having fun with friends at photoshoots, racing around in expensive cars and private jets, and staring pensively at her phone screen as she snaps a selfie. Set to an electronic pop soundtrack, *Life of Kylie* asserted that fans will get to know the "real Kylie" through her friendships, charity, and desire to be a "normal teen girl."

Viewers familiar with *KUWTK* and its extensive media presence across television, the news, and social media will recognize Kylie as the youngest daughter of the famous blended family. Born in 1997 to Kris and Caitlyn Jenner, Kylie has spent most of her young life in front of reality TV cameras. Obtaining her own spin-off show somewhat removed from the shadow of her family, Kylie's reality persona promised to shed the Snapchat filters and share the raw, insecure side to growing up famous. It is Kylie's anxiety that is of most interest to this chapter, particularly as it squirms under the surveillance of reality TV, digital celebrity, and her momager's supervision. As Kylie has grown her multi-million dollar cosmetics company, a career passion she claims in *Life of Kylie* as the only reason she "keeps up" with the celebrity lifestyle, she must navigate what it means to achieve on behalf of herself as well as her family. Kris Jenner, who serves as chief financial officer for Kylie Cosmetics, is represented as an ever-present force in Kylie's life who contributes to some of her achievement anxiety. Yet instead of framing Kris as the "bad momager" pressuring her daughter into a life she does not want, *Life of Kylie* explores their relationship as a site of struggle where girlhood achievement is made possible by negotiating business and pleasure under the surveillant forces of new momism.

Leading up to the premiere of her show, Kylie Jenner's anxiety was a well-discussed topic in public displays of the young star. In an interview with *Complex* magazine in 2016, Kylie

confessed that she felt overwhelmed by her family's fame and the attention she garnered going out in public. "If I tried to go to the movies or something, I would stop breathing in the middle and just cry," she said. "I'm surprised there aren't videos of me out there. I felt super trapped, like everybody was watching me" (Sanchez). In the same year, an episode of *KUWTK* showed Kylie venting her exhaustion with the celebrity life. Speaking with her sisters and mom, Kylie explains, "I just feel like I've been dealing with anxiety for so long. Some people are born for this life and some people aren't. I just know I'm not supposed to be famous." When *Life of Kylie* debuted on E! a year later, scenes of the star going to therapy for the first time allowed audiences to see Kylie try to make sense of her life growing up on reality TV and the self-image anxiety she experienced that ultimately led to her getting lip fillers. At the same time, reviews of the show derided its lack of self-reflexivity, with headlines claiming that the *Life of Kylie* instead provided a look "inside the charmed life of an anxious, paranoid rich girl" (Zimmerman). Other sites questioned the authenticity of Kylie's anxiety, wondering, as *Vanity Fair* did, if Kris Jenner "held an emergency session earlier this year to brainstorm ways to amp up the 'relatability' of the Kylie brand" (Duboff).

Whether or not Kylie's anxiety is as extreme as her celebrity presentation claims, its association with her momager reveals how much of the decision-making behind Kylie's representation and career is intertwined with the Kardashian family. Since 2007, the Kardashian family has constructed a commercial media conglomerate extending to multiple areas of entertainment and consumerism, including television, fashion, cosmetics, music, digital gaming apps, diet products, perfume, and jewelry, to name a few. Accompanying these business ventures is the emotionality tied to the family's celebrity presentation on their reality show and various spin-offs. Instead of assuming the faceless authority often attributed to CEOs of major

companies, the Kardashians appear personable to the public as well as to each other, despite the multiple conflicts that frequently arise between family members, friends, and associates on the show and on the covers of celebrity gossip magazines. In their analysis of the Kardashian family business, Maria Pramaggiore and Diane Negra draw on Arlie Hochschild's social theories of emotional labor and capitalism to illustrate how the Kardashians rely on a "vision of corporate belonging" through their communal family (89). By appearing like any other American family with ups and downs, the Kardashians are able to market authenticity and togetherness to audiences despite their bourgeois capitalist existence. Pramaggiore and Negra assert that *KUWTK* "has helped to brand the blended Kardashian family as a productive neoliberal economic unit, a hardworking yet 'royal' family of Reality TV that emblematizes nepotistic and oligarchic industry structures consistent with those developing more generally across the economy" (91). Even so, no matter how much audiences might view the Kardashians as contributing to one another's wealth, the family always asserts that they individually found success without the help of any famous relative.

Downplaying the nepotism of celebrity family life thus becomes essential to the sustainability of Kylie's brand of professionalized girlhood. For instance, in early 2019, American business magazine *Forbes* granted Kylie the distinction of "world's youngest self-made billionaire" when her cosmetics company reached a $1 billion estimate. This headline instantly drew ire from critics who pointed out that the success of Kylie Cosmetics was thanks to her influential celebrity family. In an interview with *Forbes*, Kylie reasoned that it was social media and hard work that got her to where she is. "It's the power of social media," she said. "I had such a strong reach before I was able to start anything" (Robehmed). The term "self-made" is important to highlight when discussing how class, race, and ability intersect with notions of

girlhood achievement. Self-made connotes personal responsibility, success without the aid of people, resources, or institutions. In short, self-made forms one of the core tenets of neoliberalism, and by extension, postfeminist culture. With all the pride and merit that comes with being self-made, the term works to diminish and exclude other avenues towards achievement that might need to rely on the protections of the welfare state for a more equitable chance at success. For young women, self-made can be a particularly empowering term to adopt as it suggests independence and free will from the patriarchy, qualities that elicit respect in the entrepreneurial arena of late capitalism. Kylie Jenner's embrace of being the youngest self-made billionaire aligns perfectly with her postfeminist brand of achievement, yet it does so in a way that strives to distance herself from her family. Despite critics pointing out that the Kardashians played a large part in her billionaire status, Kylie has attempted to dismiss this notion, instead relying on the narrative that it was her social media and marketing expertise, not nepotism, that amplified her economic value.

Kylie's attempt to pursue her achievements without pressure from her family or the celebrity world gets negotiated in different ways on *Life of Kylie*. Although Kylie claims she desires greater privacy, citing the experience of growing up on camera since she was nine, the show refutes this possibility as it subjects her to the same level of surveillance as her celebrity family. It is under this heightened media surveillance that Kylie and her achievements are most visibly tethered to her family, particularly as her momager appears frequently to monitor Kylie's entourage and her business operations. For Kylie to be visible, there needs to be recognition of how her story fits in with her other famous family members. However, it is by association with her family that Kylie's media representation seems to conjure up the most anxiety.

Part of the visibility and surveillance of Kylie Jenner is wrapped up in the reality show's reliance on a social media aesthetic in its production and design. Social media, supposedly, is where Kylie can best control her image and privacy, and the show's incorporation of these elements works to send the message that Kylie is able to be her true self on her own reality TV program. In the first episode, "Nineteen Pt. 1," Kylie emphasizes that "in order to stay relevant for the public, I have to be on Instagram, and I have to be on Snapchat, just keeping people entertained." Short videos of Kylie posing with friends in a car, playing with her dog, and popping bubbles in a Snapchat filter fill the transitionary space between scenes in the show. As these videos capture seemingly insignificant moments of Kylie's daily life, they relay the subtleties of emotional labor the young star claims she must perform. A Snapchat of Kylie using a filter that distorts her face into a frown shows her saying "I'm sad" before cutting to a scene of her dancing with friend Jordyn Woods at a photoshoot (Figure 2). The juxtaposition of these Snapchat sequences with Kylie's personal monologues on the reality show create a narrative around the use of artifice and how certain modes of media production work to mask Kylie's

Figure 2: Snapchat Filter Aesthetic in *Life of Kylie* Transitions

authentic self. While digital media scholars like Alice Marwick and danah boyd demonstrate how the age of celebrity production on social media claims to offer a more intimate and more truthful look at the life of celebrity, *Life of Kylie* frames social media as a façade to Kylie's real self (140). This becomes the ironic conceit of Kylie's show: by declaring social media as the false project of who Kylie is, *Life of Kylie* is able to privilege the constructed framework of reality TV as the more authentic illustration of its young star.

Kylie's discomfort with the surveillance of social media and celebrity life opens the door to other ways the reality show represents her anxiety. Significantly, her momager Kris Jenner brings a foreboding presence whenever the show directs attention to Kylie's company or focuses on the various members of her entourage who find Kris intimidating. When asked by a producer off-screen what it is like to have Kris around, Kylie's executive assistant Victoria mimes zipping her mouth, implying that everyone must be on their best behavior when the momager is on set. Yet *Life of Kylie* does not need to solely rely on its cast's frozen terror of Kris to convey how influential she is to Kylie's celebrity operation. Rather, the show captures how Kris permeates the technological space that Kylie already finds so demanding. On a number of occasions, Kylie has conversations with her mom over FaceTime or speaker phone in the car, allowing Kris to take up visible if not audible space whenever Kylie is trying to make decisions about travel or the state of her business. At another point, Kylie layers a Snapchat filter onto a video of Kris, transforming her face into a glamorous witch with a spider crawling on her cheek. The surveillance presence of Kris Jenner throughout Kylie's various digital channels speaks to the process of normalization Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill describe when looking at self-monitoring beauty apps that provide self-enhancing filters, virtual makeovers, and digital beauty advisors through a person's mobile device. They argue that these apps can contribute to the

"intimatization" of images and practices of feminine upkeep, taking beauty practices and making them familiar and everyday through a smartphone that can be taken anywhere (25). Similarly, Kris' access to Kylie anytime and anywhere works to imbue her maternal surveillance into the ordinary fabric of Kylie's life. In doing so, *Life of Kylie* asserts that Kris' watchful presence is a regular and instrumental part of Kylie's personal world and career.

Plot points focusing on the management of Kylie Cosmetics provide a closer look into how Kylie negotiates her momager's surveillance and her anxiety to achieve in a way that maintains the family's celebrity brand. The third episode, "Boss," introduces viewers to Kylie's life as the CEO of her own company, a role she claims has given her confidence despite her usual anxious state of mind. Yet as the episode unfolds, *Life of Kylie* illustrates how its star still struggles to hold on to that confidence when external doubt and conflict threaten to unravel her self-esteem. Unsurprisingly, Kris Jenner presents one of the more complicated forces Kylie must deal with as her momager strives to both empower and restrain her daughter. As Kris spends time around Kylie's home, she notices that Kylie does not have a professional hold over her entourage of assistants. At one point, Kris pulls Kylie aside to warn her that there are people who will want to take advantage of her celebrity and that she needs to set boundaries. Kylie initially dismisses her mother, telling viewers, "My mom has been worried about who I surround myself with my entire life." When the scene returns to mother and daughter, Kris justifies her concern: "I worry because you're so young….Remember, you are a CEO, Kylie. You are in charge." Despite attempting to control her own privacy, Kylie is seen as unable to control the surveillance of others who might try to use and abuse her fame because of the naivete her young age suggests. At times, her mother might seem unnecessarily overprotective. But when framed as a business

concern as opposed to a personal one, Kris' advice to Kylie appears rational and proactive in this entrepreneurial space.

The generational conflict that persists between Kylie and Kris not only serves reality TV's desires for manufactured drama; it works to establish Kylie's brand as a self-made entrepreneur who makes her own choices and rebels against her celebrity roots. During a conversation with her best friend Jordyn in "Nineteen Pt. 2," Kylie laments that she does not like being famous. "I just don't know who I'm doing it for," Kylie says. "I see Kendall [Jenner] and Bella [Hadid] and Hailey [Baldwin], and they just put their outfits together. They're made for this…that's not me. I don't want my picture taken." Kylie's confession that she isn't "made" for celebrity life, unlike her sisters and peers, and that she enjoys the moments where she feels like a teen girl, intensifies the invocation to achieve on behalf of others. While this refusal does not necessarily mean Kylie resists other outlets for personal and professional achievement, it does reveal the show's attempt to market Kylie in a different light than her other family members who seemingly crave the spotlight. Kylie is presented as wanting to be able to achieve her dreams on her own terms—not because her family or the media expect her to.

Despite the show's effort to capture Kylie as a renegade Kardashian, the fact that Kris Jenner accompanies Kylie to business meetings and trips suggests that the momager is still seen as an intrinsic piece to her youngest daughter's success. Kylie as the future of the Kardashian brand stands out the most during conversations with her mother. On a trip to Peru to visit a charity in "Peru Pt. 1," Kris expresses worries that her daughter is moving at a fast pace. Kylie explains that she has so much responsibility and that she is often overwhelmed by her desire to be both a teenager and a CEO. As Kris asserts that Kylie must feel like she has everything figured out, Kylie interjects, saying that she "wants to make mistakes" so she can learn and grow

from them. As mother and daughter observe each other, Kris finally collects her thoughts and says, "You are the perfect spokesperson for your generation because you are such a great role model." While Kylie's statement could signal danger for the Kardashian brand, Kris is shown not only accepting Kylie's outlook on life but formulating it as potential material that can extend the Kardashian influence to a younger generation—one that increasingly seems to value authenticity and self-acceptance. As Kris says at one point in the show, "I'm so proud of you, my little CEO." Despite Kylie's so-called self-made billionaire status, her work still belongs within the perimeters of her momager's control. In order to keep up with the wildcard that is Kylie, Kris must be able to spin her mistakes in such a way that protects and preserves the family's social capital.

As *Life of Kylie* demonstrates, the momager is a vital piece to the daughter's professional lifestyling as an entrepreneurial, postfeminist agent, even as the daughter attempts to divorce her brand from her mother's influence and expectations. Particularly in a culture where being self-made is an empowering label to possess, it is advantageous for the privileged celebrity girl to appear that she has found success without the aid of connections and resources her family may have. While surveillance media can provide testimony to the girl's authentic journey towards achievement, it also further tethers the girl to her affluent family, making it difficult for audiences to accept the girl's self-made narrative. As the girl's relationship to her family becomes a part of her brand, the mother also benefits from the visibility and attention the girl invites.

This process has become a cycle for the Kardashian daughters as they now have children of their own. Around the time *Life of Kylie* premiered, rumors circulated that Kylie Jenner was pregnant with rapper boyfriend Travis Scott's child. The news remained just that—rumors—for

months as Kylie disappeared from social media, leaving her family to awkwardly dance around the topic when asked about the youngest Kardashian on talk shows. Finally, in early 2018, Kylie posted a video to YouTube titled "To Our Daughter" announcing the birth of Stormi Webster. According to YouTube, the video collected 80 million views and became the biggest trending YouTube video of 2018 (Alexander). As Kylie was able to maintain her "anti-celebrity" brand in refusing to document her pregnancy on social media, the decision to publish her daughter's first moments in a public video speak to the importance of the girl for the mother's career under new momism. Although it might be premature to label Kylie a momager, press reports declaring that the young mother has trademarked her daughter's name to use for future commercial projects suggests Kylie is already following in her mother's business-minded footsteps (Gardner). As the momager becomes an important, and necessary, lifestyle identity in the formation and maintenance of girlhood achievement in the early twenty-first century, the act of raising a daughter turns into a potentially lucrative trade in need of regulation.

Momager-in-Training: Yolanda Hadid and *Making a Model*

If Kris Jenner pioneered the acceptance of the momager in the contemporary media lexicon, former Dutch model Yolanda Hadid helped fine-tune the practice into something that requires careful training and monitoring. In early 2018, Lifetime released an eight-part reality TV series, *Making a Model with Yolanda Hadid*, featuring six teenage girls and their mothers competing for a modeling contract with Hadid and international modeling agency IMG Models. As a mother to three young, successful models (Gigi, Bella, and Anwar Hadid), the program gave Hadid the chance to espouse some of her parenting advice to would-be momagers trying to wrestle their daughters into the industry.

In an interview with *W Magazine*, Hadid explains the inspiration behind *Making a Model* and the importance of the mother-daughter relationship:

> […] I was asked to come in for a meeting with Lifetime, and they pitched me this idea of a modeling show. I just loved the women in the boardroom, because they were really open to making it more about the mother-daughter relationship. It was really important to me to make it about one of the real important things in life because obviously, you know, Tyra Banks kind of owns the modeling show, and I didn't feel that I wanted to or could compete with that. So it all evolved from there, and ended up being perfect timing for me, because it made me move to New York and be closer to my girls. (Eckardt)

Central to the premise of the reality show is the framing of Hadid as a caring, protective, and knowledgeable mother who knows how to navigate the fashion world with the daughters' best interests in mind. Different from Tyra Banks, who launched the long-time successful *America's Next Top Model* franchise in the 2000s, Hadid seeks to bring her motherhood experience into the professional realm. In a way, *Making a Model* becomes an extension of the modeling momager brand Hadid has been developing as her daughters have taken the spotlight. In doing so, the show creates the feeling of an authentic coaching template that aspirational mothers might refer to when managing the careers of their own children. However, as I argue, the reality competition format of the program, along with its weekly challenges and cash rewards, measures the outcome and success of momager training by how much profit and prestige is generated. In other words, mothers will know they are good mothers if their daughters are able to attain professional success by winning the competition.

Prior to *Making a Model*, Yolanda Hadid's appearances on seasons three through six of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (2010-Present) introduced viewers to the parenting priorities that would become the cornerstone of her image as a supermodel momager. On a number of occasions, Gigi, Bella, and Anwar, the children Hadid has with ex-husband and real estate developer Mohamed Hadid, would show up at the oceanside estate their mother shared with then husband David Foster. While the other celebrity housewives also had families and young children to raise, *RHoBH* often presented Hadid as the more rational, level-headed mother who preferred to avoid the drama that frequently took over the lives of the other women. Scenes depicting Hadid cooking meals for her children further set her apart as a mother who did not need to rely on the help of kitchen staff to feed her family. "I feel that, if you're not raising your kids, you shouldn't have any kids," Hadid says at one point. The practicality of Hadid's parenting approach also extends to the way she provides advice to her children's emerging careers. While cooking dinner, a teenage Gigi laments how much she misses playing volleyball. Hadid reminds her daughter that volleyball is a "masculine sport" that builds muscle, unlike modeling, and that if she wishes to pursue modeling as a career, she needs to maintain a lithe feminine figure. "She's got to start building her career," Hadid says. "And sometimes that means giving up things that we love to do."

Hadid's vision for Gigi's success carries across several more *RHoBH* episodes as she accompanies her daughter on magazine photoshoots. Hadid is often shown praising Gigi's natural talent ("She was bred for this!") and reminding her daughter that she can have a "cheat day" after dieting for a grueling photoshoot. The fact that Gigi attains success by booking gigs with top modeling agencies and brands further confirms Hadid's effective parenting. The show also manages to balance Hadid's "tough love" approach through the ex-supermodel's personal

health struggles. In 2012, Hadid was diagnosed with Lyme disease, and *RHoBH* documented her visits to doctors as well as surgical procedures that incapacitated the star. Following these scenes, Hadid's desire to see her children succeed in their careers seems to come from wanting the best and healthiest lives for them, rather than ensuring that her modeling legacy will continue. This framing is particularly important to consider when looking at celebrity women who try to downplay their affluence and power in order to seem ordinary and authentic. As Erin Meyers in her analysis of authenticity and celebrity notes, "the blurring of the private/public distinction that occurs in celebrity media is essential for the maintenance of their star power" (892). The fact that Yolanda Hadid has an Instagram account for her home refrigerator is telling of the star's attempts to seem open and personable, despite the obvious display of wealth through organic produce and rows of Fiji water that fill her high-end glass fridge. The more Hadid's celebrity image blends her private life with her public one, the more her role as momager expert seems accessible in the self-help media market.

In interviews and television appearances leading up to *Making a Model*'s debut, Yolanda Hadid is characterized as a "supermodel mama bear" who has succeeded in protecting her children from the harsh realities of the industry while giving them room to grow as mature individuals (Eckardt). At the Front Row Fashion Awards in 2017, Hadid received the "Mother of the Year" award and talked about how she decided to not let her children model before they turned 18. "I didn't want anybody judging them on what they looked like," she explained in an interview with *Elle*. "I wanted them to feel and be the authentic human beings that they are, and I think that created a lot of strength for them" (Blyth). Hadid's awareness of the fashion industry's toxic image-obsessed culture, and her efforts to shield her children from it until they reached adulthood, interestingly afford her respect in the surveillance culture of new momism. The star

manages to strike what seems the perfect balance of strict and aloof in her momager style: she is active in her children's careers and only sets boundaries or rules when she feels they may benefit them. On raising two daughters, Hadid specifies that she wanted Gigi and Bella to focus on developing a strong sense of self rather than perfecting their external beauty: "I always said to them, listen, there are thousands of girls that are much more beautiful than you girls, but you have an extraordinary character, and you're going to have to set yourself apart by being a role model…" (Blyth). In giving such advice, Hadid frames self-awareness and authenticity as not only a valuable virtue but a career advantage, something that emerges prominently in *Making a Model*.

Throughout the reality competition's eight weeks, Hadid imparts her wisdom to the mothers on how best to guide their daughters through social media branding, catwalks, industry interviews and parties, photoshoots, and television commercial productions. At the heart of *Making a Model* is Hadid's philosophy that mothers are intrinsic to the success of the girl. In the first episode, "Meet the Models and Moms," Hadid is shown browsing the modeling profiles of the teen girls with her creative staff in a New York City studio. The competition, she describes, is a "boot camp" that will give the girls the "tools to survive" in the modeling industry. When Hadid's creative director commends her for bringing the mothers into the competition, she reasons that because the girls are so young, they will not be living in a normal "model house," as viewers might have seen on *America's Next Top Model*. "At the end of the day, the mother is the foundation of the well-being of the child," Hadid states. "And it is our duty as a mom to take them, guide them, and allow them to fly on their own." Because the "mother element" might seem unusual to viewers of reality competition shows, *Making a Model* justifies this dynamic as necessary to protecting the teen girls while crystallizing Hadid's role as a caring expert who

understands how important supportive motherhood is to their daughters' success. At the same time, Hadid's presence on the show—and, arguably, her reputation outside of it—suggests that the surveillance and celebrity cultivated in reality TV offers an advantage (or at least an opportunity) for getting ahead in one's career. By coming onto *Making a Model*, the mothers of the competing teen girls are therefore taking the proper steps to ensure that their daughters can gain an upper edge in the modeling world.

As the show introduces the teen girls and their mothers, Hadid immediately documents the challenges certain momagers might pose to their young daughters. In doing so, *Making a Model* establishes its host as the dominant force of surveillance who observes how the other mothers may hold back their daughters, as well as how the girls will need to power through potential setbacks in order to succeed. The first mother-daughter team is Lilyan (age 15) and her mom, Kat, two blonde Oklahoma residents who see Lilyan's confident "badass" attitude as leading the competition. At one point, Kat mentions, "I'm a good person, but I'm also a mama

Figure 3: A Promo Image for *Making a Model with Yolanda Hadid*

bear. Mess with my kid and you're gonna get it." The second competitor is Athena (age 13), a mixed-race teen girl from Portland, Oregon following in her mother Diana's modeling footsteps. While Hadid commends Athena for her versatility in print and commercial modeling, she notes that Diana seems to be controlling every aspect of Athena's career. Next is Breanna (age 13), a Filipina American girl from Los Angeles, and her overeager mother, Jessica, who Yolanda believes needs to step back from the spotlight and let Breanna shine. Mikayla (age 16), an African American girl from Chicago, and her mother, Karen, are the most inexperienced of the competitors; however, Hadid observes that Mikayla and Karen are the most in sync with each other's personalities and goals. Last is Makenzie (age 14), a brown-haired white teen with social anxiety from Indiana, and her mom, Teresa, who Hadid views as overprotective and prone to pampering Makenzie. Later in episode four, *Making a Model* brings in a sixth girl, Carrington (age 16), and mother, Lisa, from Tennessee to shake up the already competitive playing field.

The structure of *Making a Model* sees the girls competing in different challenges each week—from working the catwalk to taking fashion quizzes to interviewing at top fashion companies—and being awarded with cash prizes. As the show challenges each girl to become a well-rounded modeling candidate, it invokes what Elizabeth Wissinger refers to as "glamour labor." Wissinger defines glamour labor as "the work to achieve the overall image touted by fashion modeling as a means to the good life" (3). As Hadid calls on the girls to perfect their poses and strengthen their knowledge of the industry, she also invites the mothers to accept their daughters' imperfections and failures. "None of our daughters are perfect, so early on start embracing their imperfections," Hadid says in the first episode before adding, "Your girl could be a Gigi or a Bella." What seems like contrasting advice is actually the program's attempt to negotiate popular discourses of girlhood anxiety and stress within the bloodthirsty terrain of the

reality competition show. To accommodate the potential insecurities of the girl competitors, Hadid expects the mothers to create the nurturing and accepting environment that can reinforce the girl's confidence. Yet the show's incentive is not so much that the mothers can learn how to be better supportive moms, but how they can transform their daughters into celebrity superpowers like the Hadid family.

Finding success in this process, like most reality television programs, relies on authentic performances of the self. Often, the privilege of authenticity is granted to mostly white participants. On *Making a Model*, this construction gets challenged in a few different ways, most notably by the valuing and commodification of racial and ethnic difference. In the episode "Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow," the show reveals that Lilyan is part Native American on her father's side, prompting Hadid to encourage the teen to get rid of her dyed blonde hair and light color contact lenses. "That's not how God intended you to be," Hadid says to Lilyan. In order to help Lilyan embrace a more authentic self-image, Hadid has the girls go to a salon to update their looks. However, Lilyan loathes the idea of dying her hair back to her natural brown roots, and as a result, her confidence and winning streak begin to unravel. Eventually, Lilyan decides that she "isn't going to change herself for $5,000," and she and her mom get a lightening shampoo to fix her hair. Despite "taking back control" of her appearance, Lilyan continues to struggle in the competition. Hadid pointedly notes, "By stripping away her walls, I'm starting to see her insecurities." By choosing to not play by Hadid's rules, Lilyan appears to create further obstacles towards winning the one thing she claims she wants. This plot point is further reinforced by her mom Kat's attempts to make Lilyan proud of her Native American heritage and to "shake it off sister" so she can continue to compete. In order for Lilyan to achieve a modeling contract, and acquire more wealth and status, she must embrace an ethnic identity being valued for its

authentic expression of cultural difference in a fashion industry attempting to appear more inclusive.

In an adjacent plot, the consistent success of Mikayla and her mom Karen triggers suspicion among the other mothers and daughters who believe Hadid has favorites to win the competition. As Lilyan complains at one point, “Athena and Mikayla…they don’t work as hard as I do.” As two of the only dark-skinned girls on the show, Athena’s and Mikayla’s achievements are perceived as both authentic and contrived. While the show insists that the two girls continuously win because of their talent and grit, the other mothers as well as some of the teen contestants raise the possibility that Yolanda may have a certain girl in mind when she thinks about who is deserving to win. Though the show never explicitly entertains the conversation that Athena and Mikayla have been singled out for their racial and ethnic differences, the suspicion of favoritism evokes negative discourses of affirmative action. Because of the lack of racial representation in the commercial fashion industries, girls like Athena and Mikayla provide cultural flavoring to an otherwise bland line-up of models. The fact that these two girls continue to win even after the moms bring their concerns to Hadid creates further distrust in the “system” of *Making a Model*. Lamenting how her daughter Lilyan works hard and sees no results, Kat states, “I’m tired of being in the Karen and Mikayla show. You pull the boot straps up, you pull the boot straps up, you pull the boot straps up…I mean, I feel like they’re up to her freakin’ head at this point.” Brought up in a culture that dictates success by how hard one works, *Making a Model* reinforces this discourse while also revealing the uncertainty of its truth. Certainly, some girls who work hard will see their efforts rewarded, but not all girls who work hard will. Still, the show leans heavily into the bootstrap myth, in turn creating an anxious environment in which girls must work harder to increase their chances of winning.

Managing anxiety in the girl thus becomes another aspect for momagers to monitor in order to help their girls overcome personal obstacles to achieve. *Making a Model* best explores this through Makenzie, who reveals early on that she has social anxiety and dyslexia, the former of which seems to contribute to the teen's reticence in modeling in front of an audience and interacting with the other girls in the house. Hadid picks up on this and suspects it may be a detriment to the teen's flourishing, so she invites daughter Bella to talk to Makenzie about anxiety. Makenzie's conversation with Bella seems to put her at ease, making her feel that if a famous model like Bella can work through her nerves to walk the runway, then so can she. This effort to temper Makenzie's social anxiety speaks to a culture in which efficient self-care is desired and, in many ways, expected of young people living in a competitive professional environment. *Making a Model* assumes this position, not just in Hadid's attempt to "solve" the problem of Makenzie's self-confidence, but also in how the other competitors treat Makenzie. For instance, Lilyan often refers to Makenzie as a "victim" who "claims to have a disability" for attention. The show thus frames Makenzie's social anxiety as a problem—but a problem that can be overcome with the right resources and support. Accepting that Makenzie's social anxiety might make her unfit for the modeling world is not an answer the show immediately accepts, despite pushing the narrative that the girls must be comfortable with their imperfections.

This discourse continues in the episode "And Action!" during a Charlotte Tilbury makeup commercial shoot when Makenzie struggles to recite her lines. As her mom Teresa tries to reassure her daughter that she will be fine, footage of Hadid interrupts the scene to explain that Teresa's coddling is not helping Makenzie grow into a professional. Indeed, Makenzie continues to botch her lines to the point that Hadid needs to step in to give her a pep talk. Hadid's insertion into the space of the scene, as well as through adjacent personal interviews, allow her to control

the narrative of the "problem girl." Hadid observes that "as a mom" she has empathy but as a "business woman" she wants Makenzie to push through her anxiety because she's selling a lipstick product that is "all about confidence." Makenzie's anxiety and insecurity become things that need management, not just for her, but for the fashion industry she supposedly represents. Hadid's efforts to instill Makenzie with confidence to finish the job operates as an example of the "good momager" as opposed to the pampering "bad momager" Teresa represents. Yet when Makenzie insists that it's not insecurity but her disability that holds her back, Hadid remarks, "You have issues, but you can push through it." Instead of the industry bending to accommodate Makenzie, the young teen is asked to bend to accommodate the demands of fashion if she wants to win.

The mama bear brand, as *Making a Model* explicates, relies on the postfeminist and neoliberal logics of new momism. In other words, it presumes that the social anxieties that afflict girls can easily be resolved through a mother's "professional-level skills" that position her as therapist, teacher, mentor, and business manager (Douglas and Michaels 6). Furthermore, the mother must be intimately attendant to her child's needs without veering into the admonished territory of the helicopter parent. What makes the mama bear brand distinct, though, is how it justifies the surveillance of protective parenting practices through an aggressive yet comforting image of motherhood. The mama bear identifies the child's vulnerabilities before fearlessly defending them against the opposition. Yet in doing so, this living brand suggests that mothers are primarily responsible for their daughters' success as they seek to advocate for their skills and knowledge in a professional environment. The momager promotes an intensive form of mothering, yet it also relies on the daughter's continued dependence in order to make visible the labor of the mother. The professionalization of this relationship ensures that one cannot succeed

without the other. Particularly in celebrity media culture, *Making a Model* and similar momager content demonstrate the codependent bond that must exist if both the mother and the daughter intend to thrive in an attention economy.

Conclusion: Girls as Generational Torchbearers

In the aftermath of the college admissions scandal, headlines fixated on the effects of the case on some of the children involved. Lori Loughlin's daughter and beauty vlogger, Olivia Jade, arguably received the most attention, with one *Vanity Fair* headline calling her "The Perfect Face of the College Admissions Scandal." The teen internet star, who reportedly has 2 million YouTube followers and 1.4 million Instagram followers, has been described as "a shiny gemstone of a person who seems to, without having to exert any effort, get everything one could want" (Duboff). In her makeup and fashion tutorial videos, Olivia Jade blends relatability with aspiration, speaking casually about her "getting ready" routine as she uses expensive brands like Glossier and Urban Outfitters while eating pizza or hanging out with friends. Sometimes, her mom appears to try out a new styling tool or say hello to her daughter's viewers. Although Olivia Jade has muted the comments on her videos and content as her parents go to trial, increased public interest in who the teen is has accumulated more views, and likely more ad revenue, to her accounts. According to a source for *Us Weekly*, Olivia Jade is hiding from the spotlight and "focusing on how to turn this around so she can be famous for the right reasons again" (Hearon). While the extent to which Olivia Jade's reputation has been ruined by her parents' wrongdoings is difficult to measure in the moment, attempts to rebrand the young star as innocent (she allegedly did not know her parents paid a bribe to get her into USC) and resituate her fame back on her influencer work, rather than on her infamous mother, shows that Olivia Jade's managers

still see promise in her. Lori Loughlin's status might be irreversibly damaged, but her young daughter might still be able to resurface from the mess and bring respect back to the family.

As this chapter highlights, the professional lifestyling of girlhood is crucial to the continuation of the mother's work in elevating and maintaining the class status of the family. Particularly in celebrity culture, this work is reproduced and promoted across a variety of lifestyle media texts and products that attempt to sell the idea that motherhood can be a professional venture that will improve the lives of its family members. The call for women to mediate all aspects of their well-being aligns with the achievement rhetoric that girls of today hear growing up. While the management of emotions, healthy living, and lifestyle choices promises security for the future, it mostly ensures that the white patriarchal family will thrive as it continues to reinforce capitalist practices. As living brands like Kris Jenner and Yolanda Hadid show, the push for girls to achieve also becomes the push to participate in the postfeminist self-management and consumerism of contemporary feminine culture.

While mainstream representations of feminism situate girls as generational torchbearers to continue their foremothers' fight for gender equality and empowerment, the push for girls to achieve in the "right ways" tends to get shrouded in hegemonic frameworks of race, class, and ability. Many of the examples explored in this chapter focus on affluent white and able-bodied celebrities for a reason, since it is this particular group that frequently stand out as examples of professionalism and excellence in parenting. Even when momagers like Kris Jenner receive public hate for their over-involvement in their children's careers, they still manage to turn a profit and garner respect for the way their kids thrive in the spotlight. As such, the achievements of white upper-class children, especially daughters, elicit the most respect as they reinforce the appropriate attitudes and behaviors expected in a capitalist consumer society that demands and

values hard work. At the same time, cultural anxieties over girls not achieving enough, or not achieving in ways that support this system, motivate how various commercial institutions and media platforms must adjust and respond to the confidence gap supposedly plaguing the lives of girls in Western society.

CHAPTER TWO

Girl's Got Talent: Achievement and Authenticity in the Reality Talent Show

During the 12th season finale of NBC's *America's Got Talent* (2006-present), 10-year-old Angelica Hale expressed her excitement about becoming a big sister while performing as a finalist on the reality talent program. In the short sequence before her performance, Hale sits cross-legged on her bed and writes a letter to her baby sister about her experience on *AGT*. "Dear baby Abigail, I am so excited that you're finally here," she says in voiceover as the camera moves towards a picture frame of Hale holding her newborn sister. "I've been through some real ups and downs in my life," she continues, "but one of my most magical experiences ever has been my time on *America's Got Talent*." From Hale's open window, an *AGT* audition sticker floats whimsically into her bedroom. She turns to the stuffed animals on her bed, who echo the judges' praises with animated mouths. As Hale recounts the moment she received the "golden buzzer" (a special distinction each judge gives to one contestant), the music swells and gold confetti falls from the ceiling onto her beaming face. "*AGT* is like every girl's dream," she emphasizes. "I get hair and makeup and some of the best clothes ever." As she looks over her bed, special effects create a shimmering sparkle on her purple sequined sneakers. "It's like being a princess," Hale giggles before she ends the letter and steps onto the brightly lit stage to sing.

The reality talent show, one of many subgenres of reality television, is a popular media platform for ordinary people of all ages and backgrounds to showcase unique abilities, sometimes competitively, for a shot at fame and fortune. It is regularly on these programs where ideas and expectations of girlhood achievement and the kinds of accomplishments that are valued take shape in a surveillance media culture. From wunderkind profiles on daytime talk shows to high-stakes performances on reality competition programs, girls like Angelica Hale are

reminded that "the image of successful, individualized girlhood itself is one of the most profitable products being sold to them and others" (Harris, *Future Girl* 20). Girls' achievements and talents, when put on display for entertainment purposes, operate as key visual signifiers in the cultural reproduction of professionalized girlhood. As Michele Paule raises, girlhood achievement emerges from and is shaped by discourses of self-improvement and authenticity beckoning the girl to both change *and* be her true self on the road to success (134). These conflicting social scripts make girlhood a site of tension, highlighting how young feminine success must twist and bend to the needs of neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities. As media profiles and televised competitions reward these successes with monetary prizes and professional opportunities, the project of girlhood achievement relies on celebrity to validate self-improvement as an authentic part of the girl's professionalization.

While these discourses of achievement and authenticity are intrinsic to studies of girl culture, they are also highly active in the makeup of reality talent and competition television shows. Guy Redden, writing prolifically on the reality talent show, observes how the program format evolved from "moments of performance and their assessment by judges" in the 1950s and 60s to "higher stakes, real job prizes" and "the guarantee of a new life for the single winner" in the 2000s ("Making Over the Talent Show" 135). While talent shows, both on and off television, have always presented awards to its winning contestants, Redden argues that performances in the early twenty-first century "have become embedded in an ever-increasing focus on the contestants' background, dreams, experiences, efforts, and their responses to their unfolding fates in light of their bids to transform themselves" (135). As reality programming and social media have attempted to document the minutia of everyday life, the transformation of the reality show contestant has been expected for the show to seem authentic. At the same time, audiences

have noticed that embracing people's flaws has turned into a highly privileged and valuable part in the entertainment quality of these programs. As Alessandra Stanley observes in an article for *The New York Times*, early seasons of *America's Got Talent* did not always elicit change from its participants, and in fact, supported people and their imperfect acts. Moreover, competition programs like NBC's *The Voice* (2011-present) and Channel 4's *The Great British Baking Show* (2010-present) have ushered in what critics are calling "an era of empathy TV" that opts for encouragement rather than disparagement of contestants when they fail (Garber). While reality talent shows still rely on a transformative narrative arc for its contestants, they also welcome imperfection (that is, under controllable conditions) as a way to engineer authenticity and relatability into the show's competitive makeup.

Situating girls in this reality TV context, the pull to "change yourself" and "be yourself" in a televised competition show similarly aligns with the sentiments of self-improvement and authenticity already invoked in discourses of girlhood achievement. As Sarah Banet-Weiser suggests, authenticity is a cultural brand that adheres to the emotions and anticipations of the consumer (*Authentic*TM 4). Even more, the promise of fame and celebrity these programs summon adds an important dimension to the professionalization of the young girl. Particularly for young women who have been traditionally excluded from certain professions and industries because of their race, class, sexual orientation, or disability, the upward mobility that comes with celebrity can reinforce audience perception of the reality talent show as an opportunistic place for young female success. More importantly, though, the celebrification of girlhood achievement privileges the escape from anonymity and middle-class life that reality programming dictates as necessary for improving one's status quo. It is not enough for audiences to watch the girl achieve; there is also expectation that the girl will leave her unremarkable life behind for a better

and brighter future. As Redden notes, the talent show promotes "discourses of success" that "may be seen to advance a chronic anxiety about remaining ordinary" ("Making Over the Talent Show" 139). Yet even on this path to escape ordinariness, these shows still value "authentic" representations of contestants whose talents and achievements stand in as "a site of optimism, as a source of personal fulfillment" that can be retained in their celebrity profile (Mendick et al. 59). With this in mind, I argue that reality talent and competition programs engage the professional lifestyling of girlhood by framing girls' insecurities, flaws, and disadvantaged backgrounds as authentic professional development on their way to becoming successful. In doing so, reality programming reinforces narratives of upward mobility via celebrity and fame in public expectations of girlhood achievement.

In this chapter, I begin by contextualizing mediated displays of girls' talents and achievements on variety and reality television programs to show how girls are evaluated, praised, and commodified through the lens of celebrity and fame. Specifically, I delineate discourses of confidence and anxiety that frame girlhood achievement in the public sphere and discuss how reality TV's emphasis on authenticity and self-improvement becomes crucial to the lifestyle branding of the professionalized girl. Next, I analyze this framework through young female contestants in three contemporary American talent-based shows: *MasterChef Junior* (Fox, 2013-present), a competitive kid cooking show responding to the anxieties of gender bias and a sexist food industry with celebrity girl power narratives; *America's Got Talent*, an all-talent program where girlhood achievement and fame are fortified through the insecurities, awkwardness—as well as confidence—of its girl competitors; and *Little Big Shots* (NBC, 2016-present), a pint-sized variety show that rejects the anxieties of competition and instead takes pleasure in popular images of talented, fun, and normative femininity. Across these three very different programs, I

seek to make sense of the ways reality talent shows engage public ideas of what girlhood achievement should look like, how it should be performed, and what this says about the professionalization of girlhood in the early twenty-first century. From the politics of the show's production methods, to the selection/elimination process of certain talent acts, and finally, to the curation and celebrification of televised performances, achievement and authenticity become commodifiable endeavors girls are expected to pursue.

Contextualizing the Girl Wonder

On May 12, 2008, Filipino singer Jake Zyrus[7] performed Whitney Houston's "I Have Nothing" on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-2011) in an episode titled "World's Smartest Kids." Winfrey, who discovered 16-year-old Zyrus after his YouTube videos attracted 13 million viewers, was impressed by the teen's story of singing in talent show competitions in the Philippines in order to support his family. "One of the things I love most about Charice is that no matter what obstacles she's faced in her life, she's never given up on her dream of something better," Winfrey commented ("Teen Singing Sensation"). After being dubbed "the most talented girl in the world" on Winfrey's show, Zyrus remained in Hollywood and found success performing for prominent music producer David Foster as well as starring as Sunshine Corazon in the popular television series *Glee* (2009-2015). Despite the young star's major career accomplishments, Zyrus noted in interviews that he struggled to maintain an authentic identity while pleasing fans (Bote). In 2013 he came out as lesbian, and in 2017 the singer announced on Instagram and Twitter that he was a transgender man. Adopting the name Jake Zyrus, the singer

[7] Following the GLAAD Media Reference Guide when writing about the transgender community, I use FTM transgender star Jake Zyrus's self-given name. Past media reports refer to him as Charice Pempengco and with female pronouns.

reportedly lost some fans while gaining others in an attempt to rebuild his career around his new public identity (Runchen). As Zyrus has continued to record music and perform, his accomplishments remain in tension between audiences who support him living and working as his authentic self and public discourse lamenting the loss of "the most talented girl in the world."

The mixed reception of Jake Zyrus' story speaks to some of the broader concerns that inform girlhood achievement in the public sphere. As a child performer, audiences strongly identified Zyrus' voice with the powerful feminine vocals of Celine Dion and Gloria Gaynor, and his long, straight hair became as much a signifier of his femininity as it was his supposed heterosexuality. When Zyrus debuted a shorter haircut and more masculine style of clothing around 2014, fans either accepted his new look or rejected it for the way it did not conform to earlier public memories of Zyrus' traditionally feminine girlhood. Finally, as Zyrus' soprano voice deepened as a result of testosterone treatment, the solo diva career early audiences predicted for the singer drastically changed. Although Zyrus had achieved as a singer and performer, the shifting state of his celebrity girlhood, the conflicted nature of his public reception, and the universal discrimination of LGBTQ identities threatened to erase his talented status. However, celebrity reports describing Zyrus' journey, as well as the release of his memoir *I Am Jake* in early 2019, allowed him to adopt the same sense of authenticity bestowed upon other transgender stars like Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox, and Jazz Jennings. In interviews, Zyrus claimed, "It has really been a journey to get here. Charice was a little girl, a pop star. I feel much better about myself now. I am much more confident" (Runchen). By framing his past girlhood talents and fame as an immature stage on his journey to achievement, Zyrus' celebrity media narrative negotiates his audience's anxieties and hopes around his transgender identity through the politics of authenticity and confidence that make him a more universally accepted star.

While Zyrus presents a very specific and unique tale of girlhood achievement, the televised representations of many talent show girls demonstrate the complex mediation of gender, anxiety, and hope in the development of an achieving celebrity persona. As these girls either perform on talk shows and news reports or audition for reality talent competitions, their skills and achievements are at risk of confirming or failing expectations centered on popular narratives of successful girls. Often, these narratives get negotiated between the discourses of can-do and at-risk that Sarah Projansky argues "produce a moral panic about the girl figure" and "perpetuate the very depictions of girls about which they [audiences] worry" (5). Projansky best illustrates this tension through her study of Venus Williams' teen years playing professional tennis. Media coverage in the late 1990s celebrated the young athlete's racial difference in a predominantly white sport, but it also tended to assign blame to Williams for her "distracting" beaded hairstyle. Although Williams proved to be a very accomplished young tennis player, who developed into an even more successful adult athlete, her perceived aggression in refusing to change her hair proved that her racial difference would only be valued when it conformed to the regulations and decorum of the sport. When the girl is not white, normatively feminine, and upholding hegemonic class standards, her achievement is subject to greater scrutiny over whether or not she is deserving of fame and attention. Thus, while celebrity profiling plays a crucial part in the acceptance and authentication of the achieving girl for mass audiences, it must also adhere to and support the white patriarchal capitalist order.

To further contextualize the celebrification and racialization of girlhood achievement in media culture, I turn to one of the earliest talent competition programs in television: *The Original Amateur Hour*. Hosted by Ted Mack, *The Original Amateur Hour* first ran as an American radio program from 1934 to 1945 before airing on the DuMont Television Network between 1948 and

1954. In addition to its adult performers, some of the contestants were young girls who achieved renown in later years, like actress Ann-Margret, pop singer-songwriter Irene Cara, and soprano Maria Callas. One of the most famous names to emerge from this talent search was R&B artist Gladys Knight, who at age seven won the show contest in 1952. Knight's accomplishment on the show, however, was reportedly a controversial choice. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey's *Master Class* series in 2017, Knight recalled needing to pose for her winning photo and having trouble holding the large trophy ("Gladys Knight"). When producers asked some of the young contestants to assist, their parents, all of whom were white, refused to give permission. Ted Mack was then compelled to step in and help Knight, leading to a famous photo of the smiling white male host balancing the trophy alongside a pint-sized Black girl sitting on an instrument case (Figure 4). As allegorized in media reports thereafter, the photo came to represent the gradual dissolution of racial segregation and the hope for equality as signified through the

Figure 4: Ted Mack awarding the *Original Amateur Hour* trophy to Gladys Knight

auspicious talents of a young girl. At the same time, backlash over Knight's win worked to shed light on audience's racial anxieties regarding what girlhood achievement could promise.

In the decades that followed, the racial and ethnic profiling of talent show girl stars in television revealed how important identity was to the professionalization and star potential of the girl. What the girl looked like and what she represented would have implications for the ways hope and anxiety would be discursively constructed around girlhood achievement. For example, eight-year-old Latin-American Irene Cara, who sang a song entirely in Spanish on *The Original Amateur Hour* in 1967, had already established an audience from appearances on Spanish-language television before auditioning for the American talent show. Her young transcultural career thus demonstrated hope for her success as a versatile female celebrity and performer in the U.S. On the other hand, twelve-year-old Concetta Rosa Maria Franconero was asked to mask her cultural identity in changing her name to Connie Francis. In her autobiography, Francis explains how producers of CBS' *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* (1946-1958) beckoned her to adopt a stage name to allow for easier pronunciation for American audiences.

Particularly for these early talent competitions, race and ethnicity became character features that could either be emphasized or manipulated depending on the star persona and professional promises for future success in the industry. As Kristen Warner observes in her study of industry casting practices, "assumptions and hiring decisions revolving around the best portrayal of these identities are tied up in cultural understandings of what the identities look like and, more important, how the identities can best be represented" (32). As talent show girls came to represent the future professionalization of women's labor (at least in the entertainment industry), their racial and cultural identities were central to the construction of hope and equality embedded in public expectations of girlhood achievement. Even more, the media visibility of the

girl—as well as her absence from the spotlight—would work to reinforce beliefs around the kinds of achievements girls from diverse backgrounds could possibly attain.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, CBS's popular talent show *Star Search* (1984-1995) demonstrated a more multicultural casting process as a number of girls of color, like Shanice, Tracie Spencer, and Countess Vaughn, performed and even went on to win the program's junior vocalist division. While most talent shows up to this time provided some kind of character profile of their contestants for the audience, it was on *Star Search* where celebrity and achievement started to become normalized in the talent girl identity. In an April 1987 broadcast, host Ed McMahon explained how five-year-old semifinalist Alisan Porter supposedly "asked" one of the producers if she could do a personality profile like the "big people." Entertaining this request, the show cut to footage of Porter sitting on the *Star Search* stage with a mic in her hand. "Now that I'm in the semifinals, you want to hear more about me," she announced before stating her birthdate and eagerness to win the competition to chuckling audience members. After facing off with 11-year-old challenger Tracie Spencer, Porter joined McMahon, who then interviewed both girls about their favorite TV show and family life.

As the title of the program suggests, *Star Search* emphasized Hollywood fame as the objective for its talented contestants. The decision to profile Alisan Porter, an occurrence McMahon describes as having never been done, would place junior participants in a professional context geared towards the creation of their celebrity—and with the same sense of respect and earnestness as the adults. Considering that superstar artists like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Beyoncé, Alanis Morissette, and LeAnn Rimes would become some of the most recognizable female talent to get their start on *Star Search*, the celebrification of gifted children predicted the hopeful future success of the girl.

When reality television programming grew at the end of the 1990s, children still did not have a dominant presence in the line-up of people auditioning for talent and competition-based shows. While NBC's short-lived *American Juniors* in 2003 attempted to ride the wave of *American Idol*'s success, it would not be until the 2010s that the junior reality talent show hit its stride. According to Kate Stanhope of *The Hollywood Reporter*, reality competition programs featuring children have become immensely successful, with highly rated American shows like Fox's *MasterChef Junior* and NBC's *Little Big Shots* reaching over 5 and 12 million viewers, respectively, in their first seasons. Other programs have included Lifetime's *Project Runway: Junior* (2015-present), Fox's *So You Think You Can Dance: Next Generation* (2016), Food Network's *Chopped Junior* (2016-present), Lifetime's *Child Genius* (2015-2016), and ABC's *Dancing with the Stars: Juniors* (2018-present). Typically, these junior reality talent competitions are more uplifting than their adult counterparts, relying on softer methods of evaluation and elimination to avoid hurt feelings for its young competitors. While talent is still valued, these shows have become increasingly organized around modes of individuality and authenticity. This may be due to the fact that social media platforms like YouTube give children more opportunities to practice celebrity and share their unique talents with a networked audience. The process of self-branding emerges in these online and reality TV show contexts, determining children's success not only by their achievements but also their ability to captivate audiences with their personality. However, the type of kids who find success in this arena are often the ones who can access the appropriate digital tools, parental support, and industry connections, further skewing the image of young achievement to primarily middle to upper-middle-class children.

This level of exclusion is crucial to keep in mind when looking at girls on reality talent shows in the early twenty-first century, especially when reality TV claims to be democratic and

representative of diverse populations. The authenticity emphasis that is a core part of the competitive style of reality programming notably reinforces the narrative that average everyday girls who "stay true to who they are" will have their talents recognized and validated through the promise of fame. At the same time, the visibility that fame provides requires these images of talent show girls to conform to the hopes and anxieties audiences have when watching them perform. The authenticity and achievements of talent show girls are then measured by their brand potential and how they conform to audience expectations and desires. This professionalization of young girls in media culture works to frame talent as a function of the junior reality star matrix, where celebrity takes on a more skilled quality and removes it from the whimsical impermanence of daydreaming. These reality talent shows, as the next few sections illustrate, not only represent girls who sing and dance (although there are plenty of those acts too); they also include girls who cook meals, design clothing, and program computers. Through these various presentations of girlhood achievement, the talent show makes the pursuit of fame seem like a natural, and even necessary, career move to secure future success.

Competition and the Girl Power Brand in *MasterChef Junior*

In an interview with American teen magazine *Girls' Life* in 2016, teen chef Dara Yu discussed her experience on the cooking competition *MasterChef Junior*, plans for her own a cooking show, and the significance of the red bow that earned her the nickname "Dara the Bow Girl" on her YouTube channel. "I got the bow at a birthday party for Hello Kitty at this little Japanese café," the then 15-year-old explained. "When I was trying out for the show. I thought it would help me stand out so people could get to know me. It's a little crazy, but it's so awesome and it really reflects my out-there personality" (Duff). Yu's bow, a comically large shiny red

ornament that sits atop her head, has become her signature look since she earned the runner-up title on season one of *MasterChef Junior* in 2013. Since then, Yu has gone on to create a cooking web series on YouTube with her step-dad as well as a 14-episode digital show called *In the Kitchen with Dara the Bow Girl* (2018) on the Go90 app produced by DreamWorksTV. When asked about her aspirations for starting her own restaurant, Yu expressed big dreams of developing an Asian fusion coffee shop and lunch spot café. However, she also acknowledged that her plans would have to navigate the inherent gender bias of the professional cooking world. “It’s a very male dominated industry,” she said, “and I think it’s time for girls and women to have a bigger role in the restaurant world. We need some women there to make it a little more fun” (Duff).

Yu’s press interview accomplishes a number of key functions that make up the ways professionalized girlhood is understood as an ongoing feminist project with neoliberal aims. First, Yu’s interview emphasizes her celebrity brand, a quirky persona that emerged on *MasterChef Junior* that has continued to make her a recognizable face in other media spaces. Second, the interview offers details about Yu’s achievements after the show that reveal how her cooking skills and industry connections have helped her solidify her celebrity brand in the world of culinary entertainment. Lastly, readers are informed of Yu’s aspirations for her own shop as well as the social challenges she will need to navigate and overcome. As this tension highlights a very real problem in the professional culinary industry, it also positions Yu as a capable and confident young female chef who will break down these obstructive gender barriers and make cooking “fun.”[8] This perception of confidence in girls and women becomes an important

[8] In the 2010 essay “Why Are There No Great Women Chefs?,” Charlotte Druckman describes how gender bias in workplace culture has contributed to a low number of women cooks and chefs in the culinary industry, leading to a kitchen workplace more conducive to male achievement.

marketing tool to combat the anxieties of sexism in the food industry, something of which manifests more broadly in the many competition cooking programs on Food Network, Cooking Channel, and Bravo. Press reports and scholarship have widely covered the gender, racial, and class biases of adult-oriented programming like *Top Chef* and *Chopped* that hold women, particularly women from marginalized backgrounds, to higher standards when evaluating their work (Harris and Giuffre 18). As more children enter junior versions of these programs, girls are propped up as hopeful champions who must engage this gendered discourse as part of the competition narrative, where the attainment of fame at the end of the journey is proof that girls are succeeding despite ongoing gender, racial, and class discrimination.

The junior cooking competition show has been one of the most popular types of talent searches in the early twenty-first century. This might come as no surprise as marketers have begun to heavily target the Generation Z crowd (roughly born between 1998 and 2008) with kid-centered cuisine magazines, cooking camps, and professional culinary classes (Bulick). On the reality talent show front, kids have had a multitude of opportunities to showcase their prodigious skills in the kitchen in front of a global audience on shows like *Rachael vs. Guy: Kids Cook-Off* (Food Network, 2013), *Kids Baking Championship* (Food Network, 2015), *Chopped Junior* (Food Network, 2015-present), *Man vs. Child: Chef Showdown* (FYI, 2015-2016), *Food Network Star Kids* (Food Network, 2016), and *Kids BBQ Championship* (Food Network, 2016-2017). Yet the one show that has arguably had the most cultural influence has been Fox's *MasterChef Junior*. Part of the larger *MasterChef* franchise, *MasterChef Junior* is a cooking competition show on American television where children ages 8-13 compete for $100,000. Each season, an equal number of girl and boy competitors enter the kitchen and are given solo and group challenges to prove their skills and avoid elimination. The show has aired on Fox since

September 27, 2013 and features British restaurateur Gordon Ramsay and two interchanging professional chefs as judges. Ratings during its tenure reveal that *MasterChef Junior* has been an especially lucrative hit for the network's weekday schedule, drawing in more viewers than the original series (Lynch).

While *MasterChef Junior* does not overtly hail one gender over another through its marketing and branding, it does reside in a public food culture that communication food scholar Rebecca Swenson says privileges white masculinity in positions of power and authority in the professional kitchen (40). As such, the gendering of the culinary arts profession draws attention to the ways reality television programs might privilege aspiring male kid chefs over young female chefs. In fact, critics have noticed the subtleties of *MasterChef Junior*'s gender bias, particularly in the first three seasons where white boys were crowned champions and the three core judges were white men. In 2015, Caroline Framke of *The Atlantic* discerned how the male judges, despite encouraging all the children to do well, tended to praise white boys for "looking the part" or offer sentiments like "I see a lot of myself in you." Echoing Framke's concerns, *Vulture* writer Libby Hill noticed this subconscious bias in the way that *MasterChef Junior* differs from its parent show, focusing less on the transformation of home cooks into star chefs and more on the exceptionalism of (mostly male) child prodigies. Whether or not these boy contestants deserved to win, the fact that male professional chefs like Gordon Ramsay and Joe Bastianich assess and critique these talents reinforces the patriarchal barriers limiting how far girls and women can go, or even be celebrated, in the culinary world.

It was not until season four that *MasterChef Junior* added a female judge to the panel: Momofuko Milk Bar founder and dessert chef Christina Tosi. The inclusion of Tosi, however, seemed less to do with creating gender diversity on the program and more to do with her

experience as a judge on the flagship *MasterChef* show for three seasons. Still, bringing Tosi onto the amateur cooking show added feminine flair to the production that had been missing. Putting her in modest A-line dresses, *MasterChef Junior* positioned Tosi as a normatively professional female role model well-known for her successful restaurant business showcasing pastry and confectionary treats with names like Crack Pie and Cereal Milk (Figure 5). With Gordan Ramsay in the definitive patriarchal showrunner role and Mexican chef Aarón Sánchez as the loveable uncle, Christina Tosi fit comfortably as the mother/sister figure who wavered between nurturing and critical in her evaluation of each kid's dish.

Prior to her debut on *MasterChef Junior*, Tosi became a feminist icon of sorts for audiences who had tired of the "boys club" atmosphere on the show. In an interview with the *New York Post*, Tosi described not realizing the historical significance of being the first female judge on *MasterChef Junior*:

Figure 5: Tosi with contestant Kya Dawn Lau in *MasterChef Junior* Season 4

> In the professional space I'm so headstrong that I don't ever really think of myself as being a female…in a kitchen of males or females. After day one or day two, seeing the females in the competition respond to that sentiment of girl power was really endearing. It's cool to know that just the presence of being a female in that capacity is motivation enough for some people. (Morabito)

Tosi's appeal to audiences suggested that *MasterChef Junior* was making a progressive and restorative choice, supposedly in response to gender bias claims. As well, Tosi's visibility, along with the growing presence of female chefs on other cooking programs in the early 2010s, seemed to satisfyingly disrupt the male-dominated landscape of the food industry that critics had long been lamenting. Yet this characterization of Tosi as a feminist trailblazer would also need to negotiate her maternal portrayal on the kid-centric cooking show, where cooking becomes "a means of performing motherhood by both feeding children and socializing them into culinary competence" (Hollows 186). As the sole female judge, Tosi operates as a professional role model for young girls, giving them the expertise and encouragement needed to enter this male-dominated field. Despite *MasterChef Junior* engaging with narratives of female empowerment, it primarily reinforces professionalized girlhood within the confines of normative femininity.

The professional lifestyling of girlhood during Tosi's first appearance as judge focused on the ways (female) mentorship can embolden the girl contestants to beat the boys. In season four, *MasterChef Junior* featured a strong cast of 12 girls and 12 boys that eventually ended with two nine-year-old white girls competing for first place: Addison Osta Smith from River Forest, Illinois and Avery Kyle from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Throughout the season the judges challenged both girls not just on their culinary expertise and leadership around the kitchen but on their grit and determination to be the first female *MasterChef Junior* winner. At one point, Tosi

is shown approaching Kyle's cooking station, asking her "Is a girl going to win this year's *MasterChef Junior*?" As Kyle confirms that there will be a girl winner, Tosi follows up with, "Which girl?" Without hesitation, Kyle replies "Me!" before high-fiving Tosi. In another episode, the judges select Osta Smith to compete against two of her male co-competitors in a cupcake frosting challenge: each competitor represents one of three judges, who, with giant piping bags over their heads, will be doused in frosting if their kid representative loses. Gordon Ramsay, Osta Smith's judge, asks her, "Please tell me you can beat these two boys." Flicking her hand like the challenge is no problem, Osta Smith replies, "I can beat them." On the sidelines with the other kids, 10-year-old Amaya Baéz shouts, "Girl power!" before the challenge begins.

The portrayal of Osta Smith and Kyle as plucky young girls competing not only to be *MasterChef Junior* champion but to be one of the first girls to win is a pivotal girl power branding moment for the show. As Osta Smith announces in the finale, "This is the battle of the A's…this is the battle of the nine-year-olds…this is the battle of the girls." The sequence shown before each girl's final cook frames them as "fierce competitors" and "big personalities that can only be matched by big flavors." Footage of Osta Smith, who has been "on the leader board since day one," captures her chopping basil, grilling porkchops, and whisking batter as Ramsay warns Tosi that the young girl may be "after her job." Meanwhile, the show paints challenger Kyle as a sassy, pint-sized adversary with Southern charm, cart-wheeling across the grass in between pan-frying chicken and deboning a large fish. Compared to Chicago-area Osta Smith, who has made her backwards baseball cap her signature look, Kyle stands out as the more traditional choice in feminine pigtails, telling the camera, "Smells like church!" and explaining to Ramsay that her choice of halibut was because her "daddy likes it."

The final challenge, where the girls must cook a three-course meal while family and friends cheer them on in the stands above, further distinguishes their personal cooking styles and brands, yet it also conveys the importance of the achieving girl to the *MasterChef Junior* franchise. Osta Smith, who has established herself in the unique niche of baking high-quality Midwest dishes with Asian influences, ends up winning against Kyle's homegrown bayou flair. While the judges assessed the girls' overall cooking accomplishments, part of the goals of *MasterChef Junior* is to recognize the future of the food industry and consider the purpose of each contestant competing on the show. In the application for *MasterChef Junior*, families are asked to describe how winning would impact their child's future dreams, such as becoming a chef, creating a gourmet food truck, or becoming a food writer. Osta Smith's aspirations for owning her own restaurant further demonstrated that awarding her with $100,000 would be a profitable investment in the show's embrace of a girl power sensibility.

Since winning *MasterChef Junior*, the celebrity media profiling of Osta Smith as a hopeful girl power ambassador has further legitimated her professional achievement on the show. In an interview with *People* magazine in 2017, Osta Smith described the impact of being the first female winner:

> All the past winners have been guys. Especially in today's time, when there's a lot of different battles going on for women's rights, I think it's super important to have female role models, and there's so many strong women to look up to in the cooking world. Just because you're a different sex, you can do the same things" (Pearl).

While Osta Smith's comments point to a real structural problem in the cooking profession, it also emphasizes the importance of winning these "different battles going on for women's rights"

through the competitive format of cooking. Winning a competition, as opposed to the more instructional formats of cooking TV shows, privileges the achievement identity that girl power media embrace. As Tasha Oren delineates, the cooking competition format moves towards a narrative of "suspense, conflict, humiliation and failure" and focuses on "displacement, confusion and discomfort as important pre-conditions to productivity" (30). Thus, the girl's journey on the talent competition depends on these various emotional rhythms for dramatic conflict, albeit to a less intense degree than adult programming.

Still, girlhood achievement on the talent search engages with the social and cultural discourses outside the show through the girl's celebrity media profile. While *MasterChef Junior* might not directly discuss sexism and discrimination on set, it allows its participants to field questions from the media that seek to make sense of the program's place in the larger context of female empowerment. In this way, *MasterChef Junior* manages to be a show about young female achievement and girls who get opportunities to move up the professional culinary ladder without the program doing the ground-level work of making the workplace and industry more equitable for women and girls.

At first glance, Osta Smith's win seems to disquiet the anxieties of *MasterChef Junior's* "boy problem," considering that two more girls would go on to win the following two seasons. Yet as her celebrification in other televisual contexts reveal, her achievement operates most powerfully as the *promise* of girl power and professionalized girlhood rather than as a force for actionable change. Since winning *MasterChef Junior*, Osta Smith has filmed the ABC pilot *Dream Team* with actor Justin Long, appeared on Steve Harvey's daytime talk show and *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, and participated in ABC's spin-off *Dancing with the Stars: Juniors* in October 2018. The latter program, which pulls together child stars from acting, reality TV, and

sports in a couples dance competition, presented 13-year-old Osta Smith in a frilly red apron dress and toque blanche performing the cha-cha with partner Lev Cameron in a white double-breasted chef's jacket (Figure 6). The gendering of the *DWtSJ* costumes—considering that Osta Smith is the professional chef and Cameron is not—further highlighted how talent girls' successes are still positioned in a traditionally feminine space. In doing so, the representation of *MasterChef Junior*'s first girl winner becomes a safe girl power commodity that can be invoked in different media contexts without disrupting hegemonic gender roles. As Banet-Weiser maintains, "empowerment may be realized, but it is realized within the context of brand culture" (*Authentic*TM 70). The work that young female chefs achieve in a sexist food landscape accomplishes its goals by providing visibility to women's underrepresentation in the celebrity culinary world. At the same time, the fight for girl power is only concerned with the image of the successful girl and not the institutional actions that need to occur to achieve gender parity in the food industry.

Figure 6: Addison Osta Smith and Lev Cameron in *Dancing with the Stars: Juniors*

Following Osta Smith, 11-year-old Jasmine Stewart and nine-year-old Beni Cwiakala became the next two girls to win *MasterChef Junior* seasons five and six, respectively. In addition to continuing the girl power trend on the program, Stewart and Cwiakala demonstrated the ability to pursue female empowerment initiatives in their respective cooking worlds outside the show. Stewart, an African-American girl from Milton, Georgia, has used her *MasterChef Junior* platform to promote nonprofit foundations she works for like Saving Our Daughters and the Boys and Girls Club. She has also developed a girl power self-brand through the hashtag #LetYourInnerGirlSlay. In an interview with *Food & Wine*, Stewart explained, "What I'm trying to do is inspire girls that whoever they are on the inside and whatever their aspirations are, to truly let that out, truly embody it, and slay" (Campbell-Schmitt). In season six, Cwiakala, who became known as the "punky Chicago girl" with short hair, leading viewers to wonder about her gender identity, cited Osta Smith as a major inspiration for entering the *MasterChef Junior* competition. Since winning in 2018, Cwiakala's Instagram has shown her appearing in the magazine *Cooking with Kids*, volunteering for charities and food drives around Chicago, and cooking with notable local female chefs like Mindy Segal.

The professional lifestyles these girls project illustrate an image of successful, can-do femininity, but they also convey a girl power that seems easily achieved and managed. For instance, Stewart launched a kid-friendly dessert class called "Jasmine's Delightful Desserts" in 2018, the first of a series of online courses from *Cooking with* MasterChef. Through a paid subscription to the digital platform Craftsy, aspiring chefs can learn to bake her famous pineapple upside down cake or French macarons. Stewart, along with Cwiakala and other *MasterChef Junior* winners, also assist with Camp MasterChef where, for $1,690 per week or $3,480 per two weeks, kids can learn to cook like their *MasterChef* heroes. Additionally,

children who want to cook like their favorite contestants at home can purchase the show's line of branded merchandise that includes "cutting boards, pepper mills, recipe boxes, and measuring cups priced up to $50" (Bulik). Despite these opportunities for aspirational kid chefs, *MasterChef Junior*'s brand of girl power as a force for change in the food industry comes at a steep price.

MasterChef Junior as a reality talent show produces images of professionalized girls thriving in competitive environments and leading the way for other young female chefs to smash the patriarchal kitchen ceiling. Yet the fact that cooking and home kitchens have traditionally been sites of feminine domestic life are important to consider in the context of this show. *MasterChef Junior* positions girl contestants as breaking into and shaking up the male-dominated culinary industry rather than addressing how this industry has appropriated and commodified domesticity in the first place. As aspirational cooks, girls must then have their parents enroll them in expensive cooking classes and purchase the kitchen tools and food necessary to practice and experiment with different flavors and techniques that will legitimize their talents. The visibility of young female star chefs like Osta Smith, Stewart, and Cwiakala further emphasizes how important testing one's culinary aptitude in a competitive space is if girls want to have any impact in shifting the gendered nature of the cooking profession. Watching these girls labor on *MasterChef Junior* and in their adjacent lifestyle media appointments provide hope and inspiration for those invested in the potential of girl power. At the same time, these programs are built to reproduce the anxieties of competition, reveling more so in the dramatic potential of social and cultural challenges than in solutions for enacting institutional change.

Insecurity and Confidence in *America's Got Talent*

Talent show girls demonstrate the principles of empowerment and hope for a future where women can advance in underrepresented professions. They also are subject to visual displays of anxiety and insecurity that structure reality TV's dramatic narratives arcs. As mentioned earlier, reality competition programs have framed these anxieties through gestures of empathy and encouragement for participants when they fail or when they appear nervous in their abilities to perform well. Children participating in junior talent shows have arguably already had the privilege of receiving this level of comfort and support when their acts produce less than desired results. Yet on programs like *America's Got Talent*, where contestants of all ages compete against each other, children have had to endure varying levels of criticism as the show has adjusted its evaluation methods since it first premiered in 2006.

Similar to *MasterChef Junior*, girl competitors on *AGT* are subject to competing discourses of self-improvement and authenticity in an effort to produce celebrity figures who do not appear to have the trappings of manufactured fame often associated with reality TV stardom. Yet what *AGT* also does is embrace awkward and imperfect presentations by inviting audiences to invest empathy and hope in its contestants through humanizing underdog stories. As girls get included in these "relatable" profiles, the anxieties and low self-confidence that purportedly hold them back become important branding elements in the creation of their emerging celebrity identities. In a way, *AGT* engages girlhood anxiety by reimagining it as a professional opportunity, rather than a drawback, that can lead to a more confident, successful, and compelling media star.

AGT is a long-running American reality talent competition that debuted on June 21, 2006 on NBC. As part of Simon Cowell's global *Got Talent* franchise, *AGT* solicits a variety of

talented participants across the United States to audition with acts including singing, dancing, magic, acrobatic stunts, comedy stand-up, animal tricks, and other genres. After American audiences and the four celebrity judges vote and eliminate contenders through a series of rounds, the winning act goes on to win one million dollars and the chance to headline their own show on the Las Vegas Strip. Unlike other talent competitions like *American Idol* and *The Voice*, *AGT* has no age restriction for who can audition, often lending itself to a high number of kids and teens trying out for the show (Keegan). Since *AGT*'s debut, the show has attracted a high volume of young female contenders, several of whom have gone on to win first place or achieve runner-up. The transformation of the program's format over the years, particularly in the way *AGT* relies on social media to expedite the talent hunt and promote its rising stars in viral YouTube videos, has created a highly visible space for career-minded girls. Moreover, the talent show's longevity reveals the changing demands of young female labor in the early part of the twenty-first century, demands that consider not just the public appeal of girls' talents but also their authentic presentations to different audiences across popular media platforms.

While the early years of *AGT* welcomed talent acts that were less-than-perfect, it still heavily relied on efforts to makeover certain contestants so that they appeared more suitable for the image of fame it desired. In the first season of *AGT* in 2006, 11-year-old Bianca Ryan became one contestant in need of improving her stage presence. During her audition, Ryan wore a short black ruffled dress and white ballet flats as she sang "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" from the musical *Dreamgirls*. While the young contestant received praise from judges Brandy and David Hasselhoff, her appearance needed an update according to Piers Morgan. "Change your hair. Change your dress. Change your shoes. And you will win this tournament," Morgan stated, before adding, "I have never heard a voice like that on an 11-year-old in my life."

While Ryan demonstrated incredible range in her singing abilities, the one roadblock potentially getting in the way of her winning was the way she was dressed. Particularly as she competed against other performers, many of whom were adults, her special vocal talents would not be enough to earn her first place; she would need to adjust to adult expectations and dress and act the part of a seasoned star—despite not being one in the first place. In her second performance, Ryan sang Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" while wearing a denim vest and a long bohemian-style skirt that hovered just above her bare feet. While Brandy and Hasselhoff did not like the song choice, preferring Ryan in a more Broadway-style, Morgan softened the blow by saying, "Well, I like your clothes." When host Regis Philbin asked Ryan how she was handling all of the harsh feedback, she gracefully (although a little shaken) said, "I appreciate all the criticism because I can take it and I can fix it."

The makeover of the reality TV contestant, as Brenda R. Weber has written about extensively, is centered on "television's imagination of the reasons one must be made over, the shame of refusing alteration, and the glory in becoming a polished, refined, beautiful, and confident individual" (5). While this is often represented in programs focused on adult women's bodily and self-transformations, girls also endure similar modes of criticism. The main difference is that girls are expected to alter their appearance and conduct to seem more mature, refined, and professional. In the case of singing competitions, as P. David Marshall argues, girls experience an identity construction called "the cusp-persona," where "the child celebrity actually uses music to shift their identity from child to adult" ("Music/Image and the Cusp-Persona" 190). This does not necessarily mean the girl embodies the erotic personae often seen in adult female performances (although this does not protect them from audience members fetishizing them). Rather, the girl projects a certain air of "becoming" where her talents make her seem

developmentally advanced for her age. It is through this becoming where feminized expectations of the girl begin to form, where the girl's remarkable talents signal a promise for the professional woman she will one day be, as well as a commitment to her normative femininity. In Bianca Ryan's finale performance, the young star seemed to manage the disconnect in her cusp-persona by wearing a formal mid-length green dress and styled hair to better accompany her mature singing voice (Figure 7). After finishing her song, another *Dreamgirls* ballad titled "I Am Changing," Piers Morgan noted that Ryan had changed her looks and now might even win the competition. The fact that Ryan did indeed win affirmed the importance of the professional styling of girlhood achievement, yet it also highlighted the necessity for these changes to point to a future career.

The makeover paradigm in later seasons of *AGT* has been more subtle in addressing the ways its contestants, especially its young female contestants, should change if they want to win the competition. As Su Holmes articulates in her analysis of the music competition *Pop Idol*, there is "emphasis on the external labor that goes into the image" of the competitor, yet this process must also factor in their "raw, natural talent, and, of course, an acceptable physical appeal ('what someone's got')—which is then yoked to a deliberately ambiguous focus on

Figure 7: The Professional Styling of Bianca Ryan on *AGT*

specialness" (155). While the image and talents of the girl are important in these reality competitions, the girl's selfhood—specifically, her sense of authenticity—must also be compelling factors in the girl's achievement. Starting in 2016 when Simon Cowell joined the season 11 panel of judges, which included TV personality Howie Mandel, former Spice Girl Mel B, and model and fashion designer Heidi Klum, *AGT* began to craft what I refer to as the "perfectly imperfect narrative" of some of its contestants. This narrative particularly engaged the confidence gap discourse girls had supposedly fallen victim to by profiling the insecurities and anxieties of its young female contestants through their backstories.

Grace VanderWaal, a 12-year-old ukulele singer from Suffern, New York, became the prototype for the perfectly imperfect talent girl that *AGT* would inadvertently measure other girls by. After her first audition, Simon Cowell noted that VanderWaal's "notes are a little bit wrong, voice is croaky at times, but that is what makes you perfect, so sweet, so charming, so real." VanderWaal's authenticity and down-to-earth nature were further constructed through her original songwriting. With ballads like "I Don't Know My Name," VanderWaal seemed to evoke a feeling of anonymity that spoke to audiences while also ironically finding a stage to make her name known and escape a life of ordinariness. During her taped interviews, *AGT* worked to show VanderWaal's relatability through fandom as well as a renouncement of fame. At one point, *AGT* filmed VanderWaal watching a compilation of YouTube users singing covers of her song before responding: "It feels like I'm a famous person or something—I'm not, don't worry!"

AGT's characterization of VanderWaal as "the most original diamond of them all" (in Heidi Klum's words) became a consistent branding strategy utilized in the representation of the young star's authenticity and relatability. Moreover, *AGT* negotiated this authentic brand by emphasizing VanderWaal's cusp-persona, associating her with established adult acts like Taylor

Swift and helping her sign a recording deal with Columbia Records, with whom she released her debut EP *Perfectly Imperfect* in 2016. Following VanderWaal's win on *AGT*, two more girls would advance to the final stages of *AGT*'s twelfth season in 2017: 13-year-old ventriloquist Darci Lynne Farmer and 10-year-old singer Angelica Hale. The originality of Farmer's act, along with her backstory of using ventriloquism to overcome shyness, endeared her to the judges and audiences who eventually voted for her to win the competition; Hale, on the other hand, placed second, despite her own reputable talents and compelling story of adversity where she survived a critical illness and went on to perform empowering pop ballads at children's hospitals.

The narrative and visual framing of the talent show girl as authentic becomes just as important as her exceptional skills in determining a winner. In the profile sequences for Hale, the young girl was often shown with her family or in her bedroom, daydreaming about the glamour and perks fame will bring. Conversely, Farmer was often interviewed outside, sometimes watching YouTube videos on her iPad of fans playing with their own puppets (Figure 8). In this way, *AGT* closely aligned Farmer with her predecessor VanderWaal, who was similarly filmed in the natural environment of her backyard engaging with fans over the internet. Especially as both girls are white, blonde, middle-class, and have experienced personal challenges to their self-confidence, *AGT* reinforced the notion that this type of achieving girl is relatable and inspiring to their many viewers, some of whom attempt to replicate the girls' talents. This works to place

Figure 8: Angelica Hale (left) and Darci Lynne Farmer (right) Sequences on *AGT*

Hale, who is Filipino-American, outside this ideal; while her story is moving, her reliance on manufactured pop hits cannot compete with the originality and participatory appeal VanderWaal and Farmer seem to offer.

In reality competitions, women and girls of color typically fail in their endeavors to win and are often seen as performing inadequately because the media narrative usually questions their authenticity and commitment to the show. As Rachel E. Dubrofsky argues, reality shows exhibit "strategic whiteness" by centering the emotional narratives of white women and marginalizing racial and cultural differences (30). This showed up in the 2018 season of *AGT* when two girls of color were identified for their authenticity and then scrutinized when they seemed to deviate from it. When the judges met 15-year old singer Amanda Mena, they commended her authentic story of immigrating to the United States from the Dominican Republic and persevering the bullying she received because she could not speak English. After singing Aretha Franklin's "Natural Woman," Simon Cowell praised her for having "genuinely natural soul." Yet it was in the live shows where Cowell saw Mena's stardom dim when she sang a Latin twist on Pink's "What About Us." Cowell remarked that Mena had potential to be a star but that she would be better in a girl group. Another instance occurred with 14-year-old African American rapper Flau'Jae. The Savannah, Georgia native was inspired to pursue music after her father, an up-and-coming rapper, was gunned down before she was born. In response to Flau'Jae's audition, where she rapped about gun violence, Howie Mandel expressed, "Wow…you are a wow…and it's not somebody who wrote a song, and it's not somebody who sings a song, it's somebody who lives a song and teaches us a lesson, and you're a star." Even Cowell seemed impressed, saying, "We provide the platform, you do the hard work. I'm not an expert, but I think you, the lyrics, the tracks, everything feels real."

From the beginning, it seemed that Flau'Jae's story fit *AGT*'s ideal young female contestant: an authentic girl who uses her talents to triumph amidst personal hardship. Yet as Dubrofsky maintains, "behaviors attached to white bodies are at an advantage, and authenticity, naturalness, and whiteness are intricately aligned" (20). Not long after, Flau'Jae's authentic stage performance would be questioned. After receiving the distinguished golden buzzer from guest judge Chris Hardwick, Flau'Jae was catapulted into the quarter finals where American audiences then failed to vote for her. Despite Howie Mandel and Heidi Klum's proclamations that Flau'Jae was "real," "honest," "inspirational," and "smart," all qualities that should make her a star, it was Mel B who provided the most discerning critique. According to the Spice Girls judge, Flau'Jae's hand-waving during the chorus of her song seemed unoriginal and manufactured compared to the rest of the work she had shown thus far. In other words, Flau'Jae's choreography seemed to pander to a commercial audience rather than emulate her true self. Flau'Jae's elimination, arriving after the judges lumped Amanda Mena's performance in the constructed arena of girl pop groups, demonstrates the extra hurdles placed on girls of color in reality TV. In the same season, 13-year-old Courtney Hadwin, a white singer from England who performed classic rock hits, had audiences questioning the authenticity of her stage fright when press reports revealed that she had previously competed on other reality talent shows and was not as shy as her stage presence suggested. However, Hadwin's performative shyness still allowed her to proceed to a later point in the competition than Flau'Jae or Mena. Girlhood achievement, as *AGT* demonstrates, must have natural, widespread appeal without trying too hard. Yet as these reality programs struggle to relate the personal hardships of talented girls of color to audiences unfamiliar with their experiences, these girls end up appearing desperate and disingenuous.

At stake in these representations of girlhood achievement is the preservation of authenticity in the face of constant critique and revision, the privileging of success at all personal costs, and the need to conform to a narrow ideal of professionalized girlhood that promises career longevity. In the 2019 season of *AGT*, this balancing act continued most notably with the tween girl group GFORCE from Toronto, Canada. Prior to their audition, *AGT* emphasized the celebrity potential of each of the five girls who go by pseudonyms (Zen G, OG, Boss G, Speedy G, and Hype G) that seem to evoke the girl power spirit of the Spice Girls. After performing an original song and dance routine, judge Gabrielle Union commented that she could hear Radio Disney playing the girls while Simon Cowell noted, "This is all about being authentic. You're very cute, very ambitious, the audience like you…girls your age should be having fun, and telling us…we should be learning from you, not the other way around." While the girls of GFORCE have professional and celebrity potential as a girl group that would fit right at home with Disney, they still required a commitment to presenting the truest version of themselves that they could. The professional lifestyling of girlhood, as *AGT* defines it, must attempt to balance confidence with insecurity and not conform too strongly to the artificiality of mass-produced celebrity. At the same time, authenticity becomes a part of this mass production of girlhood achievement on reality competitions, where its construction as confident or insecure becomes a professional endeavor with commercial appeal.

Hope and the Comfort of Young Female Labor in *Little Big Shots*

So far, this chapter has examined how the junior reality talent show engages with discourses of confidence and anxiety that reinforce the narrative that representations of girlhood achievement must maintain an honest portrayal of the girl while adhering to ideals of

professionalism and marketability. These ideals, particularly as they are reproduced in entertainment contexts, privilege the practice of celebrity and branding in the career building of the talented girl. While authenticity is greatly considered in the presentation of the girl, it is an authenticity that speaks to the normative expectations of audiences that is most valued. This authenticity is informed by the social and cultural preoccupations that determine how the girl's perceived confidence or insecurity can truthfully reflect a hopeful narrative of professional achievement that preserves her place in a neoliberal society.

The format of the reality talent show creates an even more precarious environment for the girl's talents as audiences and/or judges ultimately decide her elimination or continuance in the competition. As Guy Redden states, "the dispensability of the contestant at any time (and winners within a contracted period) is consistent with manipulation of transience by new capitalist elites so as to reap its benefits but externalize its costs to other parties, including an ever-more-flexible workforce" ("Learning to Labour on the Reality Talent Show" 137). In this way, the stakes of the professionalized girl in early twenty-first century media culture lie not only within the tensions between authenticity and identity transformation but also within the normalization of "fun labor" that benefits the commercial needs of the entertainment industries but does not guarantee future success, security, or compensation for the girl.

By "fun labor," I refer to work that is performed during leisure time, often with the goal of enjoyment, that in some way can contribute to the development of professional skills. Similar to what Brooke Erin Duffy calls "aspirational labor" or what Angela McRobbie terms "passionate work," fun labor is often uncompensated and is built around the notion of "doing what you love" at the risk of unstable work conditions and the blurring of leisure and labor boundaries. Where fun labor differs is that the intention of the work is not necessary to further

one's career or even seek payment, although it can indirectly lead to those things; rather, it is to do work that is gratifying and entertaining for the sole purpose of pleasing the self. Often, children are the subjects of fun labor, as they usually do not have the same home and career responsibilities in mind as the adults who care for them do. However, as McRobbie illustrates, young people, especially girls, are inundated with messages of the "dream job" in the creative industries. This makes fun labor a contestable space for girls as any interest they have is somehow framed as a future career. She argues that "capitalism makes a seductive offer to young women with the promise of pleasure in work, while at the same time this work is nowadays bound to be precarious and insecure and lacking the protection of conventional employment" (*Be Creative* 105). With this in mind, fun labor for girls acts as another tool in orienting them towards their future becoming—a confident self that values enjoyable, passionate work in a talent-led economy and also pleases the audiences who validate their accomplishments. Even more, fun connotes authenticity in the girl's work. Supposedly, if the girl is enjoying herself, then the work must not be exploitative.

Fun labor shows up most notably in the variety talent show *Little Big Shots*, an American production that features young children demonstrating a variety of impressive talents in between commentary and interviews with host Steve Harvey.[9] Specifically, fun labor, as represented through girlhood achievement, becomes a tool of hope and comfort in the reproduction of heteronormative femininity as an authentic brand of girlhood. Premiering on NBC's Sunday night timeslot on March 14, 2016, *LBS* surprised television executives when it attracted 12.8 million people and 14.6 million with DVR viewing (Yahr). The program had been the brainchild of Steve Harvey and Ellen DeGeneres who saw *LBS* fitting in with NBC's talent show line-up

[9] Harvey has since been replaced by actor and comedian Melissa McCarthy for the fourth season.

that already included *AGT* and *The Voice*. *LBS*, however, would nix the competitive storyline and instead operate as a celebration of children's talents and accomplishments, ranging from yodeling and acrobatics to arbitrary acts that highlighted their cuteness or special interests. With DeGeneres producing, Harvey served as host, engaging with the young participants in comedic interviews reminiscent of another child-centered series, *Kids Say the Darndest Things* (1998-2000).

While the show has been a hit with NBC's heartland audience, its global format has found success in other countries such as the Philippines and Great Britain, suggesting that there might be larger reasons for why *LBS* resonates with audiences worldwide. Paul Telegdy, NBC's president of alternative and late-night programming, speculated that child prodigies offer something to viewers that they cannot get anywhere else. In an interview with *The Washington Post* in 2016, Telegdy stated, "What is going on out there is so all-consuming and revolting, and I mean that…You spend your life absorbing what's going on out there at the moment…man oh man, come Sunday night, you just want to believe that there is something hopeful and fresh for the future. And kids just give you that" (Yahr).

Telegdy's comments touch on, albeit vaguely, the bleak political and social climate that has plagued not just the United States but other countries around the globe. Specifically in the U.S., the deluge of mass shootings, hate crimes, and opioid overdoses have dominated news media headlines, while the rise of far-right and fascist-leaning political leaders in high government positions have become a universal crisis many nations now face. Telegdy's observation that child-themed reality television for the whole family would provide a fun sanctuary from the cruelties of the world, though, is not a new discourse by any means. Film historian Kristen Hatch, in her book on Shirley Temple, relays how the child star of the 1930s

“functioned as an antidote to the ravages brought by modern life and as a repository of all that was lost with the turn toward rationalism and industrial capitalism” (12). On a personal human level, Jane O’Connor raises that society valorizes child stars “because they are what we can never be again and their ‘natural’ charm makes us believe in the ultimate goodness of people in their uncorrupted, pre-adult state” (142). While *LBS* does not address all these issues directly, or in the same way, the presentation and performance of its child stars do emphasize the light-heartedness of pure talent and the joys of work when done outside the high-stakes pressures of the real world.

During a 2018 episode, Steve Harvey’s conversation with Ariana Jalia, a six-year-old self-proclaimed author and entrepreneur, illustrates how the fun labor of girls exemplifies charm and ambition in order to receive attention for their achievements. In the interview, Jalia discusses a couple of books she has written, including one about a mustachioed character modeled after Steve Harvey. “I can’t tell you any more than that, ’cause that would ruin the whole surprise of the book,” Jalia says, before adding, “And second of all, I need to protect my IP.” Harvey, taken aback by Jalia’s industry knowledge, explains to the audience that the girl is referring to her intellectual property. “I’m going to quit talking to you like you’re six,” Harvey says. “Do you have any business goals or aspirations?” Jalia replies that by the age of nine she plans to have three million dollars in the bank. Despite the outrageousness of Jalia’s prediction, her confidence and charisma are what endear her to audiences rather than the fact that she can write a book or has the connections needed to publish it. Treating her like the CEO of her own company, Harvey last asks if Jalia has a life mantra. The young girl readily answers, “Well, if you put your mind and your heart into it, you can achieve anything you want to do. You can be an entrepreneur. You can be an artist. You can be an author. You can do anything your heart desires.”

The inclusion of ambitious girls like Jalia on *LBS* sheds light on how the commercial industries use child labor to create a space of fun and inspiration for audiences. Despite slow economic recovery and workplace harassment, the girl power optimism *LBS* espouses sends the message girls can achieve anything as long as they have the confidence and drive. As Anita Harris asserts of twenty-first century girls, "their bodies and labor power have become integral to the new economy, and they provide comforting images of continuity and cohesion in times that feel risky and uncertain" (*Future Girl* 184). Youthful femininity as comfort relates to the affective innocence and emotional vulnerability of girls, but it also refers to the self-made and can-do spirit evoked in postfeminist rhetoric.

The girl child as a symbol of hope during troubled times also supports the Horatio Alger myth that has influenced American ideology over the last century, stating that if one works hard enough, they can succeed despite the odds against them. Feminist researcher Valerie Walkerdine identifies Little Orphan Annie as the quintessential girl heroine with an inspiring "rags to riches" story. She writes that "positioning her as an orphan and destitute places her as without any kind of social or community support or without any psychological support: she is the archetypal self-made individual, the person who, it seems does not need anybody else and just has to get by and fend for herself" (87). Furthermore, Walkerdine notes, audiences have not viewed this feminine cultural archetype as "rational enough to be a natural child"; rather, the girl heroine would need to adopt characteristics of a "nurturant mother-figure" in order to be seen as rational (80). In this discourse, the girl heroine might represent the struggles and triumphs of the working class attempting to climb the social ladder, but society would only accept her achievements as they preserve a maternal sensibility. This does not necessarily mean that the girl needs to symbolize a

motherly figure, who herself is a source of comfort and care. Rather, the girl needs to maintain or at least not disrupt the familial social order through her professional achievements.

In *LBS*, girlhood achievement is often framed and valued by its association with heteronormative coupling. For instance, Steve Harvey's interactions with child talent participants often devolve into discussions of whether or not the children have "boyfriends" or "girlfriends," suggesting that kids must always consider their future marriage plans alongside their talents. These questions elicit laughter from the audience while the children squirm and smile nervously at the idea of having a romantic interest. During an episode in 2017, Harvey interviewed young dancing couple Lev Cameron and Sofia Sachenko about how they met. While Sachenko insists on saying "partner," Harvey's interruptions maintain that she says she was dancing with a boy. When Cameron tells his side of the story, he adds that Sachenko was the one who insisted on dancing with him. Sachenko's face puckers up as Harvey checks with Cameron: "So, *she* was pushing up on you." Sachenko attempts to justify this fact by noting how Cameron was one of the best boy partners at the studio, but Cameron responds with "I also have this theory that she likes me." Sachenko pushes back, claiming that Cameron is actually the one who likes her. Harvey tries to clear up the story, telling Cameron, "You broke up with that girl you was dancing with, 'cause you saw *her*." Sachenko's face lights up, preferring this retelling of events as it absolves her of the embarrassment of admitting she has a crush on her male dance partner. At the same time, Harvey's framing of the story contains Sachenko and Cameron in a heteronormative narrative that excludes the girl's rationalization that she selected a boy as a partner because of his dancing abilities. While the omission of Sachenko's dance strategy does not exactly downplay her skills and hard work, it does accentuate the importance of the personal—particularly as it enforces heteronormative kinship—in the representation of girlhood achievement.

The discourse of comfort and hope in *LBS* focuses on the normativity of gendered social roles and romantic relationships, constructing these details as authentic in the media representation of the girl performer. Even more, this emphasis on the personal begins to align girlhood talent with the public discourse of the self that audiences find endearing. In other words, the interiority of the girl becomes a spectacle of professional achievement by virtue of her media visibility and fame. While *LBS* showcases young girls who perform talents that require practice and skill, like playing a musical instrument or yodeling, it also presents girls who become famous for something cute they did that their parents recorded and then put on the internet. One four-year-old girl in particular made it onto *LBS* after a video of her eating blue cotton candy with an excited face at a Seattle Mariners game generated 600 million views online. The interview segment with Beatrix Hart, also known as "Cotton Candy Girl," applauded her accomplishment of becoming "internet famous" while awarding her with more cotton candy she could enthusiastically eat with Harvey in front of a live studio audience. Another young girl, six-year-old Bella Kaylor, achieved internet fame from a video her mother posted of her freaking out about seeing the live-action movie *Beauty and the Beast*. Kaylor's appearance on *Little Big Shots* showed her in a yellow princess dress being escorted by adult performers in royal-style costumes to the stage. After Harvey has Kaylor talk about her love of *Beauty and the Beast* and sing a couple of her favorite songs, he informs her that the show will be paying for a family vacation to Disneyland. "That's my dream come true," Kaylor exclaims to the audience. "That's all I ever wanted."

The attention given to young female internet stars like Hart and Kaylor might recall early criticisms of female celebrity and the talent crisis, where the focus on the private dramas of the (often female) public personality suggests that society no longer knows, or cares, what talent is

anymore. As far back as the 1940s, Frankfurt School scholars like Leo Lowenthal made observations that American society had shifted from a nation that spotlighted “idols of production” (e.g. politicians, entrepreneurs, war generals, etc.) to one that idealized “idols of consumption” (anyone working in the entertainment industry). This shift helped create the conditions for a celebrity system, and, as Christine Geraghty proposes, the category of celebrity and its emphasis on personal relationships, domesticity, private life, and leisure became particularly suited for female stars (105).

However, as Su Holmes and Diane Negra show, attention to the lives of female celebrities demonstrates a cultural anxiety over the perceived diminishment of reputable achievement. Holmes and Negra explain that “the coverage of physically, emotionally and/or financially ‘out of control’ female celebrities is predicated on public fears that we don’t know what talent is anymore and that the traditional expectation that fame is based on talent is dying out, giving rise to a set of ‘illegitimate’ female celebrities who are famous for ‘nothing’” (3). Particularly in the digital age of instant internet fame, what constitutes talent and achievement is varied and largely depends on popular reaction rather than cultural experts. Contemporary variety shows like *LBS* attempt to curate their talent not necessarily by how skilled the child is but by how they resonate with audiences. In this way, placing an acrobatic protégé next to a kid whose online video went viral is acceptable as long as they both elicit strong responses from the studio audience. Yet as girls are positioned in this lineup, their representations must still negotiate the gendered anxieties of illegitimate fame that determine if the comfort they provide for the public is enough to justify the recognition they receive. As a result, girlhood achievement hinges on the perception of authenticity behind the talent, where

audiences must believe that the girl is genuine in her skilled efforts in order to garner any attention or reward.

With its staged discussions between the host and child guest in front of a live studio audience, *LBS* stresses that the celebrification of the girl is just as important as her achievements. It is at this intersection of public persona and talent where fun labor comes into play, where an internet famous child enthusiastically eating cotton candy becomes valuable for the industries that market off of recognizable faces and family-friendly content. While some of the children who go on *LBS* end up pursing their talents more professionally, as *AGT*'s Darci Lynne Farmer did when she first performed on the variety show, other kids slide back into everyday anonymity. The ambivalence of success forms the bedrock of fun labor, where making a career out of a momentary guest appearance is not always the result or end goal (although it can be in certain circumstances). This is made possible when competition is left out and the focus instead is on the sheer enjoyment of watching children perform. Without this competitive framework, the discourses of girlhood achievement that expect confidence, ambition, and hope concede to the construction of authenticity and the publicization of private life. The celebrity identity of the girl, then, becomes an achievement in and of itself as it bends to the production whims as well as institutional demands that seek positive expressions of young female life.

Conclusion: The (Show) Business of Authenticity

The case studies examined in this chapter reveal how the discourses of achievement and authenticity that mediate conversations about girls emerge in different ways on the reality talent show. As these discourses inform how audiences interpret the production methods that strive for a more equitable competition, such as on *MasterChef Junior*, they also inform the conflicting

demands that evaluate the performances of girls on talent show stages like *AGT*. When these talents are removed from a competitive context and placed in an environment like *LBS* that celebrates and marvels over exceptional kids, girlhood becomes a site of comfort and hope that does not need to rely on traditional understandings of achievement to gain recognition. However, the variety show format feeds into discourses that cast doubt on girlhood achievement when the girl's reason for being on a program fails to present a recognizable talent like singing or tapdancing. Yet thinking about achievement in this way works to reinscribe masculinist notions of work built upon rigor and natural intellect, where privileged access to the social world allows for achievement to be based in professional work or citizen activity. As Michele Paule relays, "not only are girls already subject to gender discourses which require them to shape themselves as objects of desire and so involve them in a constant process of self-invention and subjective construction, but also a further complexity is added through their requirement to adopt some qualities which have heretofore been associated with masculinized success" (134). By measuring girls' achievements through the traditional framework that rewards male accomplishments, limitations are placed on how we value girlhood, and even more, how the work they do gets represented.

As authenticity continues to be an important factor for the professional lifestyling of girlhood across different media spaces, the practice of celebrity and the attainment of fame will remain processes that measure success later in life. For branding purposes, programs might edit the girl to appear confident in her presentation or more doubtful to provide a dramatic narrative enticing to audiences. Discursive anxieties also pervade these mediated spaces, calling attention to how girls are not achieving enough or not achieving in the right, often normative, ways. While these anxieties intensify the makeover narratives of young female competitors on talent shows,

they also work to validate the media attention girls receive. Overcoming these anxieties on a talent show frames the confidence gap as something that can be resolved within a neoliberal capitalist system that depends on women's and girls' labor to operate. This has further implications when considering the ways race and class determine the media legitimation of girls of color and their achievements. The imperative for girls to identify their anxieties in order to feel more confident thus must be read with the understanding that self-improvement and authenticity promise hope by enforcing traditional social and cultural hierarchies in a celebrity brand culture.

CHAPTER THREE

The Digital Girl Economy: Influencers, Slackers, and the Branding of Relatability

In August 2018, *The Atlantic* published an article by Taylor Lorenz titled "Posting Instagram Sponsored Content Is the New Summer Job" that detailed how the digitization of work in a post-recession United States had impacted girls' relationship to employment and professional development. According to Lorenz, teen girls have increasingly started to monetize their social media following for pay in response to the national shortage of seasonal and minimum-wage jobs, as well as the rigorous requirements of academic work limiting their availability for after-school employment. Small clothing brands and accessories start-ups, like Boogzel Apparel and Doux Lashes, had also begun reaching out to teens on Instagram and paying them $5 to $20 per post (depending on audience size and experience) to showcase specific consumer products. Furthermore, the article emphasized the professional skills girls would acquire by agreeing to these partnerships, from setting up a business email and PayPal account to creating media kits to negotiate better brand deals.

The following summer, Lorenz wrote about another entrepreneurial project lining the wallets of Generation Z girls in "Why Teens Are Selling Clothes Out of their Closets." Using the app Depop, a social shopping platform that is "a little bit eBay and a little bit Instagram," young people sell fashionable thrifted clothing at a low price while building their social media presence. The professional opportunities profiled in these two articles construct a hopeful and resourceful future for girls in the digital gig economy even while acknowledging the insecurities of a shifting jobs landscape. Girls' relationship to work in this context relies on a keen understanding of how the personal space as well as the cultural values that make up contemporary girlhood discursively construct a profit-making professional identity. In a digitized labor market, girls appear to have

greater access to the tools, resources, and social and governmental support that invest in their abilities and capitalist output as future female leaders in the corporate world. Yet in order to obtain social and economic clout in today's fragmented economy, the girl and her entire life must become a business. As girls participate in the monetization of their social media activity, the question remains how discourses of confidence and authenticity inform the professionalization of girls online. In other words, what might digital gigs like sponsoring Instagram content or thrifting clothes on social media platforms reveal about girls' relationship to entrepreneurial work in these intimate settings? How are race and class considered in the commodification of girls' social media spaces? To answer these questions, I investigate the seemingly discordant figures of the influencer and the slacker that have populated girls' digital culture and mediated professional development in the 2010s.

The professional lifestyling of the girl in the digital age relies on the practice of celebrity and self-branding to create multiple public identities that engage confident and anti-confident sensibilities. First, influencer refers to any social media user who produces corporate sponsored digital content that has the power to affect the lifestyle and purchasing decisions of those who follow them. As the role applies to mediated girlhood cultures, the influencer traffics in specific affective qualities, invoking the rhetorics of confidence and aspiration that make this online persona appealing *and* seemingly achievable to young audiences. In many ways, the girl influencer is an extension of Anita Harris' formulation of the can-do girl subjectivity, whose positivity, ambition, and independence make the girl a hopeful future citizen and participant in the consumer marketplace. The girl influencer is the can-do girl realized in a professional lifestyle context: she is already *doing* what the can-do girl promises in the way of corporatized branding and mass audience cultivation. On the other side of the coin is the girl slacker, a social

media persona dominant in what young audiences call "slacker YouTube" or "relatable YouTube," a quirky style of video-making defined by random zooms, vocal distortions, awkward insertion of memes and poorly Photoshopped JPEGS, and stream-of-consciousness storytelling. This content is also produced by what fans call "average" (read: white, Western, middle-class, thin) teens. What makes these videos "relatable" or "slacker" is the low-production quality and supposed lack of care for how to edit and structure the video, giving the impression that the girl is just like anyone else in their laziness, insecurities, and aimlessness. In short, these videos are stripped of the unachievable coiffed filter of traditional influencer content.

Despite their differences in expression, both the girl influencer and the girl slacker engage the logics of entrepreneurialism by practicing self-branding, audience engagement, and project and life management. The adoption of an everyday, leisurely aesthetic in their digital performances is supported by a longer history of women's work in digital spaces highlighting how emergent technologies have extended rather than optimized professional and domestic responsibilities. As communications researcher Marsha F. Cassidy shows, advertisements for home PCs in the 1980s and 1990s tried to convince women that they could move their work from the office back into the domestic sphere, thus leading to a greater focus on maintaining the family. In the convergence era of Web 2.0, Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson observe how self-help media reconstructed the "second shift" for women to perform extra work on the self in addition to their professional and household duties.[10] While the digitization of the workplace has made work seem more flexible and convenient (especially for women pursuing the elusive work-life balance), Melissa Gregg notes that this restructuring of labor makes it so that

[10] Ouellette and Wilson examine the *Dr. Phil* multimedia self-help franchise as a specific case study. Their analysis reveals that participants' interactivity with the franchise reinforced an "ongoing, mundane regimen of self-empowerment" that intensified the second shift of familial and affective labor completed at home rather than increased the enjoyment of the text (549).

"communication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence" (2). While the blurring of personal and professional boundaries in the digital age have noticeably encouraged compulsory behavior and neoliberal positionalities amongst women—many of whom are called to work more hours to achieve workplace stability and career advancement—this setting may have different implications for the next generation of girls who are more accustomed to its hybrid structure.

The scattered and fragmented environment of the post-recession economy has greatly informed how girl influencers and slackers appear contradictory when they really cohere to similar modes of branding and promotion. Critics and business analysts have observed the normalization of this work environment through what they call the "sharing economy" or "gig economy," defined by the move away from stable employment and by the embrace of temporary positions and contractual work usually obtained through mobile app services. Although freelancing and temp work have always been around, the gig economy expanded with the growth of lodging and rideshare apps like Airbnb, Uber, and Lyft in the early 2010s (Strom). Female workers in particular have been addressed by the gig economy's promise of work-life balance on a schedule that affords flexibility and control over domestic labor and childcare (Katz and Krueger 394). This growing trend has spurred a number of think pieces touting the benefits of choice, flexibility, and extra income for women ("Why Women Can—and Should—Cash in on the Gig Economy") as well as decrying the lack of attention the gig economy has paid to worker protections and benefits, affordable childcare, and workplace harassment ("The Gig Economy Won't Be a Feminist Godsend")[11]. Moreover, these discourses have evoked the growing dread that these constant work cycles will contribute to what cultural critics like BuzzFeed's Anne

[11] See DeFelice and Doyle for popular commentary.

Helen Petersen have termed "burnout," a syndrome clinically recognized as the result of chronic workplace stress and mismanagement. Even as entrepreneurs have lauded the gig economy for opening up more pathways to flexible employment for people, concern for the social, economic, and mental precarity of female gig workers (especially women of color, working class women, and differently abled women) draws attention to existing structural problems that underline this supposedly more liberated form of labor.

While some girls might not be old enough to drive for Uber or freelance through TaskRabbit, many still take advantage of the free-for-all employment market the gig economy has introduced. Most notably, the monetization of ads on YouTube has allowed girls to earn income from the creation of beauty and style video blogs as well as toy review channels and baking tutorials. Social media apps like Musical.ly and TikTok (lip-syncing platforms where users create and share their own videos) also provide teens with opportunities to grow an audience, attain stardom, and subsequently secure lucrative brand deals. Perhaps due to their protected status as minors, options for young girls to participate in the gig economy are limited and tend to be circumscribed in visibly gendered performances, branded content, and the practice of celebrity. As content creators, girls enact what Theresa Senft calls "microcelebrity" through the "commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good…" ("Microcelebrity and the Branded Self" 1). In her book *CamGirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, Senft chooses homecamming as an object of study where women foster a celebrity persona by broadcasting themselves to a captive audience over the web. Characteristic of this online performance is the blurring of private and public life into a branded commodity that relies on confession and visibility for cultural capital. The attention generated from microcelebrity is what sustains this kind of work, yet it also assigns new values

and creates different relationships to labor that girls now experience. Instead of the girl striving for work-life balance, the girl's life strives to become her work.

Taking into account both the girl influencer and the girl slacker in the digital gig economy, this chapter adopts a Marxist feminist approach that considers the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality in digital culture and how work is structured in and around the various presentations of the girl's life and labor online. The analytical frameworks of Kylie Jarrett and Kathi Weeks are particularly pertinent to this study in understanding how the girl becomes a business in a capitalist digital economy, where the commodification of everyday life must negotiate ambition and relatability in the self-branding of the girl. By relatability, I refer to Akane Kanai's formulation of the relatable as an "affective relation" in digital culture that "requires the production of a pleasing commonality…" (41). This process, which Kanai grounds in Arlie Hochschild's "feeling rules," particularly considers how young women "may articulate their experience of regulation to others in a neoliberal environment that demands both approachability and ambition" (31). The expectation to navigate the different realms of ambition and relatability creates a professionalized girlhood that seems to eschew work even as she works tirelessly to generate the desired results of her digital celebrity. As I argue, representations of influencing and slacking across digital environments recreate similar modes of productivity and reinforce racial and class hierarchies through the branding and commodification of private life.

Influencing and Flexing

According to a 2019 CBS news report, becoming a social media star who broadcasts her daily life to millions of followers while getting paid through brand endorsements and sponsorship deals has become a common aspiration among young girls (Novacic). From a very

young age, and sometimes with the help of family, girls can monetize their selfies and videos and become social media influencers, a term that emerged in the latter half of the 2010s to describe the influx of microcelebrities on Instagram and similar image and video-hosting platforms. Performing as an influencer means photographing and sharing one's life, interests, and style through a highly polished online persona that promotes an enviable lifestyle other users want to admire and emulate. Such images, as Alice Marwick observes, replicate aspirational lifestyles, contributing to the notion of "Instafame" that "reinforces an existing hierarchy of fame, in which the iconography of glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections is reinscribed in a visual digital medium" ("Instafame" 141). While influencer work is not specific to any age or gender, young girls who participate in this digital media production assert an entrepreneurial can-do girlhood that responds to the social panic over girls' low self-esteem and the impact it might have on their future careers. Girl influencers thus represent the optimization of the professionalized girl showing how her emotional and creative work from a very young age is commodified and assimilated into the digital gig economy. Despite the illusion of democratic freedom, choice, and intimacy digital labor promotes, girl influencers exemplify hegemonic principles of race, class, and professionalism as the norm for successful microcelebrity girls.

In *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture: Managing Affect, Intimacy, and Value*, Akane Kanai explains how the female professional identity strives to be accessible to internet audiences, writing that "young women in influencer, lifestyle and micro-celebrity work are labouring to produce a seamless account of the self to digital audiences in which the intimate and the commercial are deeply entwined" (9). This entanglement of the personal and the professional contributes to the idea that influencing can be empowering for women and girls seeking careers

that seem cool, glamorous, and under their creative control.[12] Often characterized as "passionate" work in popular discourse, influencing and similar jobs in the creative arts sector have put forth the idea that "work must become a fulfilling marker of self" (McRobbie, *Be Creative* 22). Feminist scholars have theorized that neoliberal capitalism has reshaped, and in some cases dislodged, young women's relationship to work, family, and community relations, creating a deep unhappiness that only a rewarding career can satisfy. In regard to influencing, girls appear to build networked communities that validate the life and work they present online through monetized attention when other in-person relationships fail to fully recognize their value. However, as girls are continuously subjected to a life fully commodified and managed under digital surveillance, their aspirations and emotions become strategic pawns in the construction of their developing professional identities.

Central to the girl influencer lifestyle is the expression of confidence that builds trust with online audiences and makes the girl seem approachable, empowered, and aspirational. Amy Shields Dobson identifies confidence as a valued trait of postfeminist femininity and as an affective commodity in digital media contexts where "girls' circulation of self-images that signal confidence and self-worth through smiles, bodily display, and sociality has exchange value" (*Postfeminist Digital Cultures* 134). More than just an emotion, confidence aligns the girl with a postfeminist tradition that values choice and independence not just in the female subject but in her audience relations as well. The girl who projects confidence inspires hope and positivity in her followers, and she entices them to mimic her life through specific consumer habits so that they may feel as happy and successful as she does.

[12] See Duffy and Hund's work on fashion bloggers.

The performance of confidence in girls' influencer accounts is significant for how the digital gig economy teaches girls at a young age to operate as professional entities and assume a can-do persona that appears to exist in every facet of their personal life. Employing confidence in this way works to create an entrepreneurial identity that will enable girls to participate in the processes and promised rewards of neoliberal capitalism. The work that goes into maintaining the appearance of confidence thus falls under what Eva Illouz terms "emotional capitalism," a process in which the marketplace and the language of self-value in the twentieth century have merged so that emotions are now "entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified, and commodified" (109). The ability to perform sentimentality and intimacy in the public sphere gives girl influencers an advantage in a digital economy that measures profit and value through attention—that is, through likes, shares, and retweets across a networked community. With this in mind, I want to think about confidence as a product of immaterial labor, which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as labor which "produces immaterial goods such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication" (292).

As immaterial labor, confidence can seem easily exploited in its use as a tool of empowerment in the girl influencer's celebrity self-brand. Kylie Jarrett puts Hardt and Negri's definition in the context of Marxist feminism and the commercial web, utilizing "the digital housewife" as a concept to show how the invisible entrapment and devaluation of domestic labor can explain the "contradictory dynamics of exploitation and agency associated with digital media capitalism" (3). Jarrett posits that feminist inquiry can clarify the ambiguities in the socially meaningful and exploitative work performed in online spaces, such as generating free user data for platforms and advertisers to use for their own benefit. Similarly, confidence straddles this contradictory line of exploitation and agency in giving girls' mediated displays added value

while demanding self-regulation in their celebrity performances for the purpose of maintaining advertising and brand relationships. As certain girls make a name for themselves on social media and attract corporate interest, upholding a consistent image of success, confidence, and self-respect helps keep the girl's business alive.

When teen YouTube star and influencer JoJo Siwa signed with Nickelodeon in 2017, confidence became a more structured trademark that included not just Siwa's effervescent personality but also the original programming, commercial products, and live events advertised to the kid network's audience. Siwa, who got her start on Lifetime's reality competition series *Dance Moms* (2011-present), initially garnered a reputation for being disrespectful in her mission to obtain a spot in Abby Lee Miller's esteemed dance company. Her association with her conceited mother, Jessalyn, also left Siwa in a difficult position to advance her career in a positive direction after her time on *Dance Moms* ended in 2016. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* in 2019, Siwa relayed how her YouTube channel became the perfect rebranding tool to help her form a more likeable public image (Spanos). Early videos of Siwa showed her sharing experiences as a competitive dancer, demonstrating dance moves, participating in viral video challenges, and starting a weekly segment called "JoJo's Juice" where the young star poured a different juice on her head after answering fan questions from Twitter. In short, Siwa's YouTube channel allowed her to perform confidence in a way that seemed genuine and more in line with her true personal self outside *Dance Moms*. While her management team's plan to engage fans across multiple platforms allowed her to cultivate a tight circle of devoted followers, Siwa's high-energy delivery and perpetually perky attitude quickly became her calling card in being able to reach both kids and parents searching for positive role models (Weiss). By building a self-brand imbued with cheerful confidence, Siwa demonstrated that the power of the girl

influencer lies in her affective labor and ability to appear authentic and non-commercial, even with her image deeply rooted in the processes of commodity capitalism.

By managing the intimate moments audiences see, girl influencers like Siwa create an authentic, confident persona that subtly engages the commercial markets that give them economic and social value. In situating corporate sponsored content in the authentic space developed online, the girl influencer makes consumer products feel familiar and amenable to her followers. This can be seen in what Crystal Abidin calls the "advertorial," a portmanteau of "advertisement" and "editorial" that is "thought to be more effective than dispassionate, clinical advertisements since they take the form of a personal narrative and incorporate Influencers' perspectives of having experienced the product or service first hand" ("Influencer Selfies" 7). For instance, Siwa frequently promotes her merchandise on Instagram as part of her everyday life and representation of her can-do personality (Figure 9). A post made on November 25, 2019 shows Siwa sporting a pink and white onesie with the text "Bows Are My Super Power" next to

Figure 9: JoJo Siwa Advertorial on Instagram

an image of her face; the adjacent caption reads: “Just living my best life in my JoJo onesie. Listen…this onesie is everything, I’m the happiest human! It’s available right now at Walmart!! Go check it out and Let me see you rocking your JoJo PJs!!!” While the advertorial invites Siwa’s followers to purchase the onesie through a specific retailer, making its direct consumer address obvious, it also personalizes the girl influencer’s request by reminding fans of their affiliation with Siwa’s confidence. By obtaining the JoJo onesie, and then tagging the young star in an Instagram post while wearing it, Siwa’s fans can participate in the affective narrative of “living my best life” as the “happiest human.” Furthermore, Siwa’s advertorial conforms to what Harris calls the authentic look and “confessional style” of the girl’s brand, drawing on the intimate and recognizable experiences framed in the friendly language captured in teen magazines (*Future Girl* 128). Especially as Siwa’s hyperfeminine merchandise appears to perfectly coordinate with her eclectic style in her personal life, the advertising language the Instagram post employs feels honest and devoid of opportunistic gain.

Transmitting the emotional value of advertorial content to users on a digital platform works to enhance and tighten attachments to the commodity, engaging with what theorists Luciana Parisi and Steve Goodman call “affective branding,” a process where users are “persuaded to consume signs and commodities that always already have a preemptive affective value built into them, which will be activated in the future” (cited in Garde-Hansen and Gorton 41). It is through affective branding that girl influencers are professionalized. Not only are they positioned as aspirational commodities with potential for brand longevity as they enter adulthood, they also engage with the immaterial enterprises of confidence and feminine empowerment seen as vital to future girlhood success.

While Siwa's fan engagement work on social media has allowed her to arrest some control over her sullied narrative on *Dance Moms*, the 2016 launch of her music video "Boomerang" more formally established the affective brand of confidence that would begin to carry her career. In the music video, Siwa and her mom drive up to school in a vintage sedan with one of Siwa's signature hair bows fastened to the front. A montage reveals different traditional cliques at the school, such as the mean girls, the obnoxious jocks, and the lonely shy girl. In the car, Siwa sings to her mom, "I don't really care about what they say, I'mma come back like a boomerang," while her mom lip-syncs back, "Won't let the haters get their way." The rest of the video follows Siwa in a sparkly purple skirt and pink denim vest, her blonde hair in her signature tight ponytail and bow, linking arms with two other girls in matching bows as they march through the hallways of the school.

While the song repeats that Siwa will "bounce back like a boomerang" despite the gossip and hateful words said about her, the music video ensures that this mantra extends beyond its star. As Siwa dances in the hall, she directs her song to the shy girl walking by the gossiping bullies: "Talk to the phone / Like they're all alone / Hide behind the screen / 'Cause they're just so mean / But we don't play it like that / We don't even fight back." Instead of making the video about Siwa's experiences dealing with the negativity of the *Dance Moms* set, attention is turned to the introverted tween girl (Siwa's target audience) who can find confidence and self-respect through the optimistic chorus Siwa delivers. Together, Siwa and fans can rise above the hate. During a later scene in a classroom, the shy girl gets into an altercation with the mean girls before Siwa steps in and initiates a dance-off to resolve their issues. Soon, everyone is dancing together and putting their conflicts aside in a world of acceptance and glitter.

While "Boomerang" helped set the course for Siwa's entertainment career, which further exploded on Nickelodeon, it also became a pivotal branding moment that related Siwa's personal struggles and solutions to a more universally shared experience: overcoming gossiping and bullying through the power of confidence. This self-confidence has been imbued in multiple JoJo Siwa consumer and service products as the star has gained popularity, including "JoJo's Closet" collection at Target, hair bows, sparkly notebooks, dolls, and concert tickets for her 2019 tour D.R.E.A.M. In many ways, Siwa's enterprise participates in Banet-Weiser's "market for self-esteem," where "self-esteem is crafted as a commodity, positioning the girls who are seen to be suffering from low self-esteem as particular sorts of vulnerable consumers" ("Am I Pretty or Ugly?" 90). By purchasing JoJo Siwa merchandise or listening to her music, girls can theoretically tap into the star's contagious confidence and can-do attitude that the star asserts really represents who she is. Siwa's celebrity narrative is thus positioned to be an antidote for insecure girls, especially as confidence is paraded as a vital entrepreneurial skill for future career success.

It is important to note here that Siwa's successful rebranding as an inspiring entertainer emerges from her ability to align confidence and authenticity with a white upper-class tradition of professionalism. For girl influencers who exist outside this realm, other approaches are taken to perform confidence and direct attention to their work for profitability. In a more extreme rendition of the influencer, the "flexer" is a lesser known identity in the social media arena drawing on the boastful energy of the rap artist scene. Popularized in the Rae Sremmurd song "No Flex Zone," a flexer refers to someone who tries to flaunt their wealth and reputation, even if their status actually suggests they market in off-brand or borrowed goods to substantiate their claims. In hip hop and rap music, flexing has been used to assert social power over opponents

and parade one's riches or sexual prowess, mostly from a Black male perspective (Anwar). In early 2018, flexer entered internet lexicon when a foul-mouthed Chinese Canadian 9-year-old girl from Vancouver by the name of Lil Tay began promoting herself on Instagram as the "youngest flexer of the century." Born Claire Eileen Qi Hope to a Canadian father and a Chinese mother, Lil Tay adopted the moniker when her older teenage brother Jason started sharing Instagram videos of the tween cursing and peacocking around luxury cars and homes. "I'm only 9-years-old but I be flexing on your momma's rent," Lil Tay says to her followers in one video while holding a wad of cash in a porcelain white bathroom suite. While both JoJo Siwa and Lil Tay draw on discourses of confidence in their respective microcelebrity brands, Lil Tay's racialized performance combats normative constructions of professionalized girlhood as it attempts to model achievement after Black male-dominated capitalist lifestyles.

Lil Tay's microcelebrity, while negotiating racialized and classed narratives of achievement, reveals a contradictory persona that initially thrived on the attention her inauthenticity generated before fizzling into obscurity. Audience fascination with Lil Tay boiled down to the unbelievable display of the rags-to-riches story the brother and sister team concocted. According to Lil Tay's videos, she grew up "broke as hell" in Atlanta, began "moving bricks" to get by, dropped out of Harvard, and at one point was even "partially black" before finding success as a rap artist (Levy). Instead of aligning Lil Tay with more traditional models of successful can-do girlhood, her microcelebrity relies on the spectacle of notoriety and risk by placing girlhood where audiences believe it should not go. In doing so, Lil Tay performs what Lisa Nakamura terms "identity tourism," a type of racial identity appropriation usually taken up in online forums where users can assume a race for its exciting and exotic appeal without experiencing the risks of being that minority in real life (183). Although audiences did

not necessarily believe Lil Tay's claims about being partially Black or even wealthy, the young girl's identity performance attracted attention and provided a platform for her and her brother to pursue fame. As she made more videos, Lil Tay demonstrated "aspirational production" by creating content that positioned her microcelebrity in a light similar to more established rap artist celebrities (Marwick, *Status Update* 122). By confidently performing as though she were a notable rap star riding in Rolls-Royces and destroying luxury items because she can afford it, Lil Tay challenged popular understandings of professionalized girlhood online by aligning herself with more racialized and masculinized modes of success.

While Lil Tay's digital popularity led to lucrative brand deals, the blending of her celebrity persona and her personal life disrupted the presentation of her overly confident performance. After being offered a five-year management deal, Lil Tay, Jason, and their real estate agent mother moved to Los Angeles to negotiate the terms of the young girl's career in April 2018. As an intertextual celebrity appearing on other internet stars' platforms, Lil Tay acquired a larger audience and more brand deals that permitted her family to live in California for about two months until a series of damning videos surfaced showing the tween smoking a hookah and being coached by her brother. An interview with ABC's *Good Morning America* attempted to clear up these troublesome videos. However, Lil Tay's conduct in the interview seemed to add further confusion around her persona as she asserted can-do qualities (ice skating, playing piano, performing ballet) with the at-risk behavior that she claimed was "really her" (Thorbecke and Ghebremedhin). Even more, a short-lived reality program on YouTube's Zeus Network titled *Life with Lil Tay*, where the young flexer attempted to apologize for using the N-word in a staged scene with her manager and mother, failed to authentically humanize her public persona. Finally, when her estranged father issued a court order to have Lil Tay return to Canada,

the young flexer disappeared from the internet except for a series of disturbing Instagram posts alleging abuse and neglect from her father, using the hashtag #FreeLilTay.

Despite the efforts of Lil Tay's management team to align the young girl with an alternative performance of confidence, achievement, and professionalism through the identity of the flexer, audience expectations of girlhood and Lil Tay's brand inconsistency created roadblocks. At the same time, Lil Tay demonstrated how professionalized girlhood in the digital age is highly dependent on race and class in the performance of authenticity. What Lil Tay's momentary flirtation with internet fame conveys, though, is a growing trend among internet stars who are migrating from the perfectly constructed nature of the confident girl influencer seen in commercialized examples like JoJo Siwa. While these girls produce content that appears different from traditional influencer media, their work actually reveals similarities in branding and promotion. As the following sections explore, professionalized girlhood in the digital gig economy adapts to the ephemeral landscape of internet culture, revealing how the girl attempts to obscure her labor for aesthetic purposes, and therefore, become more susceptible to the exploitation of her resources, energy, and time.

Memes and Online Media as Branding

Under the consolidation of personal and professional life in the gig economy, girls' digital culture has helped reimagine the aesthetic parameters and editorial content of influencer media by challenging the idyllic picture of the influencer. As the lines between private and public blur, the professionalization of girlhood online emphasizes the importance of imperfection and transparency, rather than propriety and restraint, in how the girl sells her labor. Professionalism, in the traditional sense, can begin to feel suspiciously covert under the

surveillance culture of digital spaces. Even as some girl influencers attempt to redefine the professional attributes of confidence, positivity, and aspiration in terms that feel more natural to their followers, their labor still relies on similar skills, tools, and strategies to maintain their audience and brand. In order to appear as if their digital media production required no planning or exertion, these alternative girl influencers apply concerted efforts in constructing and managing the appearance of authenticity. Often, this work still privileges hegemonic performances of gender, race, and class. In doing so, the professionalization of girlhood online becomes an invisible venture that masks its ruling class undertones. What this looks like for girl influencers manifests in different ways where the self-brand appears to maintain distance from consumer culture while refusing to reject the attention and value it provides them.

One of the primary modes of professional branding girls have utilized in the digital age is the creation and proliferation of internet memes and viral content. According to Limor Shifman, an internet meme is "(a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the internet by many users*" (7-8). Memetic content, with its ability to thrive in an economy of attention, sharing, and participation, can easily develop a brand's presence and reputation online—good or bad—and encourage audience engagement and feelings of attachment. It can also relate to audiences in ways that acknowledge the constructed nature of certain social and cultural rituals and institutions. For girls, memes as professional branding material tap into relatable approaches to gender performance and invite a variety of interpretations of mainstream gender norms. For instance, the circulation of the Hot Girl Summer meme in 2019, based on the song of the same name by rapper Megan Thee Stallion, led to a wave of posts that included selfies of girls partying on the beach drinking hard seltzer, ironic

photos depicting the challenges of fitting into hot girl standards, and corporate content from companies like Wendy's and Forever 21 capitalizing on the meme's popularity. The flexibility of the meme format thus permits more opportunities for self-brands to play within and even benefit from commercial culture without directly creating business contracts with corporations.

While memes provide ways for girls to develop self-brands and build an audience, they also contribute to the professional restructuring of everyday life, where the smallest moments in a day can be manipulated and generated into social and economic clout for one's business. However, memes also reveal how professionalized girlhoods adopt the language of marketing and consumerism and translate it through a process that strives for transparency. In other words, memes provide structure to the girl's brand as well as flexibility in steering it away from the inauthenticity of consumerism often associated with influencer media.

Memes are significant to girls for how they offer a sense of social belonging in ways that commercial culture may not always provide. The organization of relatable or remarkable experiences into shareable bytes of information is the cornerstone for most branding strategies, and memes can deliver both professional and personal advantages to girls in their online presentation. For example, in her study of "girl pain" memes on YouTube, Amy Shields Dobson reveals that girls perform anxiety, depression, harassment, and self-harm in the creation of web videos where they silently hold up title cards that narrate their traumas. By sharing their pain online, girls are able to foster comfort, understanding, and sociality with each other while drawing attention to universal problems that affect girls around the world. Memes also provide opportunities for expressing disillusionment or dissatisfaction with the status quo, especially when the concerns of marginalized and oppressed identities are not represented in mainstream society. Marcella Szablewicz's observations of disaffected youth in China and the expression of

self-deprecation through the meme *diaosi* convey how young people structure their feelings around humor and develop alternative pathways for social and economic mobility through digital networks. As these memes nurture community ties amongst their creators and audiences, they adhere to similar brand culture logics found in influencer media that "facilitate 'relationships' between consumers and branders and encourage an affective connection based on authenticity and sincerity" (Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM* 37). While the intention behind creating meme content may not be to develop a brand or generate profit, the strategies for distribution and the fostering of a captive audience strongly reflect how brands cultivate interest between consumers and the product or service being advertised.

As the commercial industries gradually integrate memes in strategies of profit-making, girls on social media have taken advantage of the social and economic capital that can come from engaging meme trends.[13] According to Lifman, because memetic photos and videos display a highly performative self, "uploaders become both the meme's medium and its message: their faces and/or bodies are integral parts of it. Thus, such memes are emblems of a culture saturated with personal branding and strategic self-commodification" (30). Girls' reliance on memes works to affiliate their brand with a larger, more recognizable cultural phenomenon. This can be seen on the lip-synch app TikTok where teen girls have created a subculture of bloggers called "egirls" that exhibit self-aware humor and performative femininity. The egirl is defined by a specific look (thick black winged eyeliner, cute hearts drawn under the eyes, and an anime style of dress) and is sometimes used ironically by users who find that exercising the egirl hashtag can

[13] Recognition of this process permeates the social media accounts of businesses that leverage meme content to illustrate how their brands are cognizant of internet youth culture. While communications researcher Whitney Phillips relays that the early days of participatory meme culture evaded marketers, likely because of its indecipherable and constantly changing nature, the organization of sites like Know Your Meme increased access and visibility, further encouraging the commodification of memes into brands (139).

generate thousands of followers and views (Strapagiel). For example, in the video trend "egirl factory," TikTok users record themselves being "taken" and turned into an egirl automaton dancing to a bass-boosted Japanese club song (Figure 10). Despite being framed as "internet flirts," egirls illustrate how young girls online utilize memes to develop a brand around the ironic use of heteronormative femininity. As TikTok egirl Ashley Eldridge proclaims in one of her videos, "Ok, riddle me this, why is it that men get so mad over girls being egirls. Listen, Jonathan, you're going to sexualize me anyway, so why can't I do it for a quick buck on the internet?" Acknowledging the perceptions their audiences have of them, girl influencers who create memes demonstrate a level of self-reflexivity that allows their brands to survive in a culture increasingly aware of the processes of commodification.

The distinction between memes and virals is important to make as each indicates different ways girls incorporate popular content into their self-brands. Lifman determines that a viral "comprises a *singular unit* (such as a video, photo, or joke) that propagates in many copies" whereas an internet meme "*is always a collection of texts*" (56). For example, egirl factory is a meme because it consists of video compilations parodying the egirl aesthetic. To describe

Figure 10: A YouTube Compilation Video of Egirl Factory Memes

something as "going viral" often means that the video, photo, or joke in question acquired thousands of views online in a short span of time and has led to other users making multiple versions or parodies of the original copy. A viral would be something like Rebecca Black's "Friday" music video from 2011 that quickly gained notoriety for being a terrible song, and in turn, generated GIFs and remixes riffing off the video.

However, some digital scholars, like Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, advocate against the use of *viral* for the way it "[o]ver-estimates the power of media companies and underestimates the agency of audiences" (21). Viral, they claim, connotes contagion and assigns too much authority in the way media can influence identities and perspectives. Instead, they offer "spreadable media" as a way to privilege the existence of choice and actions in how online content garners value. This is significant when looking at girls on the internet who find success through sponsored posts and commodified memes. The spreadability of their image may not always cohere to the personal brand they have established on their social media accounts as audiences reinterpret it through different contexts and manipulate it to fit their own situation. For girls, this can mean losing control over an image to capitalist interests that draw on the sexist, racist, and classist discourses that permeate the digital stratosphere. How to recast this attention back to the personal brand becomes a professional, and familiar, challenge for girls accustomed to navigating a culture that frequently infantilizes and dismisses their perspectives.

The process of rerouting the girl's media narrative online was a prominent part of the spreadability of microcelebrity teen Danielle Bregoli, also known by her rapper stage name Bhad Bhabie. In September 2016, an episode of the daytime talk show *Dr. Phil* (2002-present) featured then 13-year-old Bregoli and her mother Barbara Ann. The episode segment, titled "I Want To Give Up My Car-Stealing, Knife-Wielding, Twerking 13-Year-Old Daughter Who

Tried To Frame Me For A Crime," attempted to reconcile the Florida-native mother and daughter relationship until Bregoli, provoked by audience laughter, challenged the studio to a fight outside by saying, "Catch me outside, how about that?" However, Bregoli's accent, a manipulation of African American Vernacular English, made the phrase sound like "Cash me ousside howbow dah." The incomprehensibility of the teen's words inspired a stream of memes parodying the episode segment, and Bregoli quickly became known as the "Cash Me Ousside Girl" (Figure 11). The spreadability of the meme not only remained in meme groups on Facebook and Reddit threads. Eventually, in February 2017, the *Dr. Phil* segment scored a song remix by DJ Suede the Remix God and debuted on Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs at #34 and the Billboard Hot 100 at #88 (Zellner). Around this time, Bregoli reappeared on *Dr. Phil* to talk about her experience on a Utah ranch for "troubled teens." Accompanied by a psychologist and her mother, Bregoli presented a softer yet self-assured disposition. When Dr. Phil asked Bregoli if she thought the attention and bullying she received online was good or bad, the teen responded, "Both. I guess what's good for you is I made you like how Oprah made you. You were nothing before I came on this show."

Figure 11: "Cash Me Ousside/Howbow Dah" Meme from KnowYourMeme.com

Bregoli's reluctance to give Dr. Phil credit for providing the platform for her success, both as an internet star and as a reformed juvenile delinquent, was primarily interpreted by the public as a girl being disrespectful to her elders. However, Bregoli's defiance transformed into a pivotal branding moment that capitalized on the predatory nature of the self-help industry, positioning Bregoli as the evasive bad girl who is required to exist in order for *Dr. Phil* to function. By returning to *Dr. Phil* and showing she can play the game without sacrificing her authentic self, Bregoli's star image demonstrated the strength and potential of her brand to exist beyond her meme origins.

Indeed, a month after the episode aired Bregoli continued to develop her celebrity by participating in a viral marketing ploy for rapper Mook Boy's new song "Juvy" featuring the teen star. As part of the campaign, Bregoli's Instagram and Twitter accounts appeared hacked by a group called FACE Security that issued cryptic videos with an ominous message: "This is the modern day celebrity? This country glorifies and makes famous a young girl for being disrespectful to her mother. She is no idol. She is no role model. She is no god. Pay close attention to what happens next" (Baila) Utilizing Cyrillic script and distorted red graphics, the campaign worked to align Bregoli's "interference" with American ideals of girlhood and celebrity with the very timely nationwide concerns of Russian inference in the 2016 U.S. election. A girl's success, the videos posed, should not be determined by her surly temperament.

The eventual release of the music video dispelled rumors that Bregoli's accounts were truly hacked. In the video, Bregoli lip-syncs along as parodied images of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, and Harambe (the Cincinnati Zoo gorilla killed and later turned into a meme) cut in and out of the digitally glitching space (Figure 12). The teen is dressed simply in jeans and a Brooklyn NYC T-shirt, her long raspberry red ponytail and claw-like

Figure 12: Danielle Bregoli in Mook Boy's "Juvy" Music Video

manicure giving her look enough edge without being provocative. Lining her teeth is a platinum grill that further incorporates Bregoli into the rap aesthetic of Mook Boy's song. Relying on the theme of political memes, the music video attempts to subvert the alleged danger Bregoli poses to society by putting her in the same space as government leaders who pose real threats to the global order. Despite public fears that the "Cash me ousside" meme might have a bad influence on young people who engage it, Bregoli asserts that her image is mostly harmless in the grand scheme of things, and thus, approachable in the mainstream.

By leaning into audience outrage of the "Cash me ousside" meme, Bregoli managed to create a self-referential celebrity identity that was both transparent in its construction and well-composed in its commercial consumerism. While Bregoli might not fit the traditional model of what an influencer looks and acts like, the ability to translate her audience's affective attachment to a meme into a profitable brand illustrates how girls' digital culture supports as well as challenges professional ideals. Following the release of "Juvy," Bregoli's management team worked to integrate the branding success of the "Cash me ousside" meme into the teen's budding rap career. In May 2017, lawyers representing Bregoli sued Walmart and demanded that the

retailer stop selling T-shirts and sweatshirts that displayed her famous phrase (Peterson). Although Bregoli's way of speaking and dressing directly coopted urban African American culture, the popularity of the teen's catch phrase as a brandable, and therefore, commodifiable meme allowed her to enjoy the rebellious benefits of racial difference in a white-privileged society. Bregoli was able to use the spreadability of her meme to reimagine the cultural boundaries of the influencer identity all the while managing the threat of difference in the professionalism her whiteness could afford.

The professionalization of Bregoli further demonstrated the importance of managing race and class in creating a self-brand based off her meme. Performing under the stage name "Bhad Bhabie," Bregoli continued to use AAVE as well as reference the backlash her meme generated amongst critics in the launch of her first two music videos in August and September 2017 on YouTube. In her first music video, "These Heaux," Bregoli's "haters" are personified through angry mobs of middle-aged women holding signs that read "We Will Not Catch You Outside" and "Mothers Opposed to Bhad Bhabie." Bregoli's second music video, "Hi Bich/Whachu Know," represents her critics as members in a judgmental, out-of-control court room who have put Bregoli on trial. In the back rows are supporters who hold signs that say, "We Luv You Bhad Bhabie!!!" and "You Grown as Hell but You Still Hatin," referencing the self-righteous adults trying to save, persecute, and capitalize off of Bregoli's popularity. By the end of the video, Bregoli is electrocuted in an orange jumpsuit that transforms into a white lace shroud that gives the teen a holy appearance. "Grown as hell and you still hating / I look at you and thank God I made it," she raps. As Bregoli's song points out the irony of her (mostly) adult haters resorting to immature and tactless behavior in criticizing her infamous trajectory to fame, it also commands respect for how Bregoli turned a meme into a career. However, the music video also indirectly

shows how Bregoli's whiteness allows her to reinforce this respect in her branding. The repetition of "White J's, white Porsche / White wrist, white horse" in "Hi Bich," layered onto the image of Bregoli in a white shroud, at first attends to the irony of purifying or saving the troubled teen who found success by being troublesome. Yet what this pattern also accomplishes is the reinstitution of whiteness, specifically the whiteness of girlhood, as an incorruptible and highly revered state of being.

Because of her status as a young white female teen rapper, Bregoli has been afforded more opportunities to challenge the commodification of her memetic image while maintaining the rewards of her newly minted celebrity position. In another music video, this time for her single "Bestie" featuring Kodak Black, Bregoli is seen grumbling about being "forced" to stop the song to do a mandatory product placement. In February 2019, the release of her Snapchat reality series (aptly titled *Bringing Up Bhabie*) also showcased Bregoli challenging the production structure of the docu-series. During "previously on" montages of each five-minute episode, Bregoli interjects and complains to someone off-camera that viewers do not need to see a recap for something they just watched. The demonstration of Bregoli's awareness creates a more intimate picture of the girl's personal and professional life as her managers seamlessly integrate her celebrity into the social matrices of Snapchat and YouTube. Her whiteness has given her a more accessible presence, a way for audiences to indulge in her performative misbehavior with reassurance that she is not really in trouble and is actually in on the construction.

As memes have opened up ways for girls and their guardians to play with and be more reflexive with their image, practicing self-awareness in the commodification of the brand allows girls to negotiate the expectations of a professionally personal life and encourages the expression

of frustration, anxiety, and insecurity. At the same time, the breakdown of more formalized digital media content obscures the work girls actually do without removing the white capitalist framework in which they operate. Girls' professionalization in digital spaces appears to offer a progressive escape from overburdened and high stakes workloads even as it recreates pressures and limitations to succeed.

Towards a Slacker Aesthetic

The increasingly personal nature of professional life in the digital realm has provided outlets for girls to establish a work-oriented identity around their daily online activity. Where memes were once simply the province of 4chan, Reddit message boards, and private blogs, they have now been translated into a language marketers and entrepreneurs can use to reach a specialized audience that claims to value transparency and authenticity in social and even business interactions. This reimagining of public presentation, ushered in by the flexibility of the digital gig economy, has noticeably appeared in the visual aesthetics and communication patterns of girls' social media content. In April 2019, *The Atlantic* observed how some teen girl influencers have begun to reject curated feeds and staged Instagram pop-up experience photoshoots (Lorenz "The Instagram Aesthetic Is Over"). These girls now veer towards posting unfiltered or unflattering pictures of themselves that might include paragraphs of text detailing their struggles with burnout and the stress of maintaining an ideal self. In the same month, writer Rosie Spinks of *Quartzy* noted that this oversaturation of preened influencer content had peaked. Spinks predicted a swing in the opposite direction, where the slacker sensibility of the early 1990s could return as the self-optimization of neoliberalism begins to show little returns for members of Generation Z, who will eventually be saddled with student loan debt and few career

prospects. This move towards a slacker aesthetic, especially located in girls' entrepreneurial digital work, is interesting for a number of reasons. While these discourses highlight how girls may be trying to escape the social pressures of performing an ideal and empowered feminine self, they also convey how the marketplace is adjusting to understand and commodify this authentic-leaning aesthetic.

While journalists have only recently noticed this trend of girls migrating away from the picturesque performance of the Instagram look, feminist scholars have determined that similar rejections of work and achievement have been happening in other girl cultural spaces as well. According to Michele Paule, popular discourses of girls in educational environments have advanced the "girls hang back narrative" where girls disengage from the pressures social and educational institutions place on them to achieve. Presented with multiple ways to pursue their professional careers, girls supposedly feel paralyzed with fear of making poor decisions, especially when it seems girls are expected to succeed now that women have more freedoms and resources to make the path to self-fulfilling achievement easier. This reluctance to choose specific aspirational endeavors, Paule argues, is rooted in issues of class and cultural capital, where the reinforcement of middle-class values and masculinized models of competition in schooling can present a feeling of unbelonging or unpreparedness for girls who do not identify with certain class practices and systems of knowledge (136).

Yet even as these girls attempt to extricate themselves from the rhetorics of achievement and confidence, their "hanging back" does not necessarily signal an outright rejection of work or upward mobility. As Kathi Weeks posits, "the refusal of work, as both activism and analysis, does not simply pose itself against the present organization of work; it should also be understood as a creative practice, one that seeks to reappropriate and reconfigure existing forms of

production and reproduction" (99). In this way, the girls hang back narrative, as it applies to the hybrid personal/professional space of digital contexts, should be conceptualized as another mode of creative and even entrepreneurial expression. Akane Kanai furthers this claim in looking at how girls' expression of boredom in work suggests a "hyper-awareness in relation to rules of productivity" rather than a rejection of work (49). The present model of working forty or more hours a week may no longer be conducive to young people's lives, which are increasingly organized across social networks, mobile apps, and other digital technologies. Refusing the capitalist system of waged labor, where productive output is valued over human life, means finding a way of working that is favorable to the structure of private existence. However, as privacy has become more and more organized around public spaces, girls' digital media production continues to operate under capitalist jurisdiction.

The girls hang back narrative has appeared in twenty-first century popular culture as the female slacker, a figure who negotiates the limitations that come with living under a neoliberal, postfeminist regime that promises opportunity for young female professionals. The female slacker, however, is not just a withdrawal from traditional structures of work. Rather, she is the embrace of an alternative focus of work in women's lives, a focus that seeks to shed the polished exterior of professionalization and privilege the chaotic interior with all its frustrations and anxieties. The term slacker in girls' digital media seems to call back to a masculinized popular culture that has championed anti-establishment burnouts from 1980s and 90s films like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Slacker* (1990), *Clerks* (1994), and *Reality Bites* (1994). In a twenty-first century context, fictional women on television, such as Liz Lemon in NBC's *30 Rock* (2006-2013) and Hannah Horvath in HBO's *Girls* (2012-2017), reclaimed slacker to illustrate the exhaustion and dejection of young women who strive to "have it all"—a career, relationship,

family, and beauty—only to face personal, social, and economic barriers preventing them from achieving middle-class dreams (Hoby).

As members of Generation Z have come of age, "slacker YouTube" and "VSCO girls" have normalized the girl slacker through recognizable styles and modes of address on social media. For instance, the VSCO girl (named after the photo editing and sharing app) is known for her minimal makeup and effortless vibe dressed in oversized T-shirts, Birkenstocks and Crocs, and large scrunchies to hold up her messy beach waves. Most notably, the girl slacker tends to be white, thin, and traditionally feminine with enough economic and social privilege to spend time, money, and energy posting and managing her online accounts (despite the insistence that her work is spontaneous and requires little planning). While the slacker, in all its various gendered iterations, is representative of a collective frustration with traditional structures of work and productivity (not to mention despair with an economy that offers restricted opportunities to succeed), it is also a racialized and classed performance privy to the visual politics of commercialization and branding.

Even in her supposed refusal to engage in any sort of management or commercialization, the girl slacker's aesthetic is still calculated and cognizant of the social currency relatability has in the current digital economy. By aesthetic, I refer to what Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff define as not only "appearance" but also "voice, posture, demeanor, body, language, self-presentation on social media, and so on" that make up the visual and performative presentation of the self or object on display (35). The appearance of the slacker aesthetic in girls' social media performances evokes the reluctance and anxieties of the girls hang back narrative. The maintenance of such an aesthetic relies on neoliberal practices of labor that typically draw on the self-surveillance and feminine upkeep of the beauty-industrial complex. The slacker

aesthetic, then, connotes a retreat from efforts to police and perfect an image that strives to meet the goals of commercial beauty ideals. As slackers, girls may post multiple selfies from the same photoshoot without caring that it disrupts the curated look of their Instagram profile. Girls also invoke what Nick Douglas calls “internet ugly” by “[e]xploiting tools meant to smooth and beautify, using them to muss and distort” their face, voice, body, or surroundings (315). Acne or a bad hair day are not covered up or corrected—not in order to make a statement about being one’s authentic self, but to show that the girl simply does not care. Discussions of confidence and achievement are noticeably absent and are instead replaced by ramblings about the girl’s idiosyncrasies and insecurities. The desired effect is a brand that does not participate in the rat race of influencer culture.

Emma Chamberlain, a white American teen girl who was named one of *Time*’s most influential people on the internet in 2019, personifies the professionalization of the girl slacker aesthetic. Born on May 22, 2000 and raised in a Silicon Valley suburb, Chamberlain began making videos in 2017 as a way to stave off boredom. By 2019, she had acquired nearly 8 million followers and 700 million views, a feat that motivated her to drop out of school and move to Los Angeles where most YouTube celebrities reside (Golden). In the beginning, Chamberlain’s videos attracted attention for their stark departure from the hyperproduced content of more established YouTubers. Instead of investing in higher production methods and marketing tactics, Chamberlain relies on an “I don’t care” attitude of random zooms and cuts, facial distortion filters, and clashing sound effects (Figure 13). In most of her videos, she can be seen providing a long narrativization of her day or opinions, peppered with curse words, while drinking an almond milk latte, her hair in a messy bun and acne on full display. As the “anti-influencer,” Chamberlain has come to exemplify another side of girl culture that rejects overly

Figure 13: The Slacker Aesthetic on Emma Chamberlain's YouTube

ambitious attempts at feminine maintenance, despite her efforts to quickly promote her merchandise at the beginning of each video. At the same time, her videos establish a different set of expectations for young female achievement where emotions are at the epicenter of work. The slacker aesthetic, as defined through Chamberlain's range of affective expressions on screen, privileges immaterial labor, not necessarily as it is represented through confidence but through anxiety.

As Chamberlain demonstrates, performing a slacker sensibility is not about rejecting work and commodification but about reframing the intentions and goals so that they seem to more authentically represent, and validate, the collective exhaustion of chasing success. Such work takes on the form of what Crystal Abidin calls "calibrated amateurism" in digital spaces, where "actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur […] by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital" ("#familygoals" 1). Calibrated amateurism is more than just constructing a behind-the-scenes preview of the online persona though; it is about bringing the feeling of spontaneity and authentic disclosure

onto the stage and making mistakes, erratic behavior, and meta-commentary a part of the performance. This practice and aesthetic carry over into the creative work girls do online, which strives for a simple, almost messy approach that invokes the frustrations and fatigue of keeping up with the expense and glamour of the Instagram influencer. As girls have helped pioneer this shift in digital entrepreneurial content, representations of young female professionalization are now hinged on the ability to appear effortlessly relatable and comfortably innovative in a way that reimagines rather than disrupts traditional work patterns.

In her social media production, Chamberlain manages to simultaneously perform as an influencer model, advertising clothing her followers can purchase, while displaying her annoyance with keeping up with a commodified lifestyle. In a video Chamberlain made in May 2019, "GET READY WITH ME TO GO OUT *TRANSFORMATION*," the teen is shown wearing a hoodie over her head while explaining to viewers that she has been experiencing depression, boredom, and no desire to leave her home. Upon deciding that she will go out for a change (on a Sunday night), salsa music begins to play, and Chamberlain starts hyping about what a great time it will be. The rest of the video proceeds like a step-by-step guide for a girl's night out. As Chamberlain illustrates how she plans to get ready while brushing out her freshly showered hair, the camera zooms in on her face and the text "im not having fun" appears on the screen. "I hate doing this," Chamberlain says while blow drying her hair. "Can you tell I don't know how to do this?" In the next steps, Chamberlain brushes her teeth, gets toothpaste on her hoodie, and then parodies an influencer makeup tutorial by displaying her cosmetics against her hand as delicate music plays and a lens flair filter dances around her head. "You know, I use these products, but I really don't know what they do, but I use them anyway because I think that's what I'm supposed to be doing," Chamberlain says. In the final step, Chamberlain picks

out her outfit and reveals the final product: a black crop top, red track pants, heels, and no purse because that “would’ve required too much work.” Standing awkwardly in her bedroom, the text “it’s terrible” flashes on the screen before Chamberlain, choosing to not go out after all, begins dancing to club music at home.

Chamberlain’s brand interrogates pressures of feminine upkeep while continuing to go through the motions expected of her. Her use of facial filters, goofy soundtracks, comedic text, and clever edits create a slacker aesthetic that expresses self-deprecation as it strives towards meeting expectations that seem to have no purpose other than fulfilling society’s description of femininity. In other words, Chamberlain is not “giving up” trying to fit into societal standards; she is performing the routine of going out and using the video as a platform to air the frustrations and confusion that sometimes come with traditional beauty routines. However, as the rest of Chamberlain’s digital content shows, the teen participates in “candid” photoshoots and style videos showing off her carefree street modeling for commercial brands (Figure 14). While these images include text that suggests impulsivity, like “i literally took these pics on one of those grass strips connected to the sidewalk. how awkward is that. so many dogs have shit on this

Figure 14: Emma Chamberlain Promoting Crapeywear Collection on Instagram

grass," they still conform to a relatable aesthetic that is increasingly becoming commodified across fashion and other commercial industries. The presence of Emma Chamberlain merchandise, featuring T-shirts and hoodies referencing jokes from Chamberlain's videos, as well as the debut of her fashion line "High Key" on the virtual shopping app Dote, further illustrate the star's entanglement with the very industries she purportedly rejects. Yet this contradiction is not simply an example of hypocrisy amongst teen girl social media enterpreneurs who "sell out" once they realize they can make money from their anti-conformity ethos. Rather, the commodification of the girl's slacker aesthetic demonstrates acceptance of this reimagining of productivity and work, where the girl's labor must appear effortless despite usually requiring some effort.

Though the slacker aesthetic claims to shirk perfection-chasing and insincere attempts at product placement, its existence in the digital space of celebrity sponsorships (where a person's branded social media presence accrues ad dollars and grows cultural capital) means that it still carries value in a capitalist system. Nick Douglas explains that amateurish content created on the internet is part of a cycle that includes "corporate and political interests, whose goals are often at odds with those of internet creators," that profit off internet ugly when it spreads and reaches the edges of mainstream culture (334). A prominent example of this can be seen in the YouTube videos of Joana Ceddia, a white middle-class teen girl living in Toronto, Canada known for being awkward and witty while clumsily navigating feminine norms and expectations on a shoestring budget. Most of Ceddia's videos are characterized by a distinct stream-of-consciousness delivery she conducts using a $4 microphone she found at a convenience store (Sung). While Ceddia also sells merchandise (mostly trinkets from her videos, like a pair of small pink sunglasses), her videos are centered on parodying meme trends and influencer content

that assumes its followers also have an expendable income. More than just something to laugh at, Ceddia's performative act of failure and slacking offers audiences a way of relating to the world when expectations for perfection and success seem unreachable. While girls' engagement with this practice could be interpreted as subverting the ambitious demands of influencer media, it actually demonstrates how social and economic anxieties inform the ways girls negotiate the fragmented status quo of work and professional life.

In a video titled "I DIY'd Emma Chamberlain's new clothing line," Ceddia attempts to recreate Emma Chamberlain's expensive wardrobe photoshoot using cheap fabric such as felt, jersey material, bathing towels, and elastic bands she found at Fabricland. In her bedroom, Ceddia sets up shop and cranks out her mother's sewing machine to help her stitch together Chamberlain's red tank top, scrunchie, "poopy" jacket, and "mysterious" yellow jacket—most of which end in fashion disaster. "So why am I making this video, you may be asking," Ceddia poses. "Well, how do I put this nicely? If you're not willing to drop $25 on a pack of three scrunchies, this video is for you." The style of the video, like many of Ceddia's other projects, relies on sudden zooms and close-up jump cuts that either focus on her goofy facial expressions, awkward coughs, or nothing of significance in the frame. This "constructed cringe," the act of purposely creating scenes of embarrassment or discomfort for entertainment, becomes a significant part of Ceddia's brand and overall aesthetic as a girl slacker (Figure 15).[14] While cooler girls would try to edit out moments of awkwardness, or at least couch them as a cute mistake, Ceddia leans heavily into them for comedic effect.

Between Chamberlain and Ceddia, the girl slacker embodies an acceptance of the imperfect, lazy, and insecure girl who feels pressured to keep up with the theatrics of traditional

[14] I would like to credit RS Deeren for helping me come up with the term "constructed cringe."

Figure 15: Joana Ceddia Parodies Emma Chamberlain's Fashion Photoshoots

femininity. However, while Chamberlain's engagement with commercial culture is obvious, Ceddia's brand is more subtle in her parody renditions, poking fun at the supposed slacker sensibility of her peer. As the relatability of the slacker has been expressed across social media, fashion labels and brands like Marc Jacobs have tried to implement this aesthetic into their own marketing, turning to and sometimes incorporating girls to further solidify their claims to authenticity. Girls also conform to and sell this style, sometimes creating tutorials on YouTube demonstrating how to be a relatable girl or a VSCO girl. Yet in this desire to articulate relatability in the girl's social media presence, Kanai argues that "the self, while losing its *particularity*, also enters into a strategic relation with the social" (145). In other words, the generality of relatability requires that the girl also appeal to the broader nature of mainstream culture. She must lose the unique qualities that position her outside the achievement-oriented picture of can-do girls in order to grow and sustain her audience. In trying to develop her brand and expand her network so that she can continue creating web content, the girl is beckoned to adopt certain entrepreneurial skills, thereby placing her on the status-seeking path where influencers trek. However, the girl does not necessarily become a copy image of the influencer

by promoting her brand online. Because the slacker aesthetic is deeply rooted in a desire to appear relatable, the girl masks the hard work that she puts into creating her star identity. In carefully managing the appearance of effortless labor, I argue that the girl slacker represents a professionalized girlhood that is not really accessible to any type of girl—let alone girls who are not white, middle-class, thin, and conventionally feminine. In fact, the girl slacker maintains that it is only acceptable for certain girls to enjoy the social and economic benefits in creating the illusion of rejecting traditional patterns of productivity.

The Tyranny of the Relatable White Girl Trend

For girl producers who identify as either influencers or slackers, or somewhere in between or even off the spectrum, the core feature that presents dominantly in their performances and brands is relatability. While slackers seem to fully embrace this need to appear identifiably normal and transparent about their insecurities for the general public, influencers also value authenticity and honesty even as they visibly construct a confident persona who participates in the pageantry of social media fame. The social contract between creator and audience member relies on certain shared cultural experiences and ways of knowing and being, making relatability not a *rejection* of ideals but a *negotiator* of normative standards between two or more parties that often draw commonality from hegemonic positions. The YouTube videos of white middle-class teen girls like Emma Chamberlain and Joana Ceddia exemplify this measure by responding to feminine normativity and demonstrating their clumsy or messy engagement with it. However, the popularity these YouTubers and their videos attract is predicated on whiteness as a normal, relatable subjectivity. Even as girls of color adopt similar editing styles and modes of address in their videos and images, relatability still exists within the purview of white girl culture online.

The "Relatable White Girl" (RWG) trend emphasizes race as a gatekeeping mechanism into the commercially viable realm of relatability that companies and brands have privileged in their audience cultivation. While journalists have written about "basic white girl" culture (often represented as a girl who engages in mainstream crazes marketed to her demographic, like drinking pumpkin spice lattes from Starbucks), Black YouTubers have been some of the earliest to identify this trend. In a YouTube video posted on October 16, 2018, then 25-year-old Kenya Wilson developed her thoughts on what she called "The 'Relatable' White Girl Trend," taking into account popular white social media stars and the similarities they share: being pretty, funny, young, heterosexually desirable, and educationally and financially ambiguous. "They're being what you think being relatable is to you and me," Wilson expresses to her viewers. Throughout the 22-minute video, Wilson breaks down how certain white girls on YouTube thrive on people's insecurities through a performance of relatability. As Wilson observes, the reality often indicates that most of these girls are wealthy due to the monetization of their accounts, and they come from a higher-class status than most of their fans. In her last point, Wilson argues that the relatable white girl has racist and other exclusionary undertones. "How many relatable Black girls are there on YouTube? They don't happen," Wilson states. "If you take it away from race, even certain white people can't fit into this category. If you're fat, you're not allowed to be a relatable white girl YouTuber. If you're poor, you're not allowed to be a relatable white girl YouTuber."

Wilson's sentiments shed light on a pivotal feature about girls who participate in the digital gig economy: the faces that attract the most attention conform to a privileged way of being and living. To situate this lifestyle under the heading of relatable means to further normalize white supremacy and ignore the tensions of class warfare that continue to

disadvantage marginalized groups from thriving in a capitalist market. While scholars like Brooke Erin Duffy have observed how social media producers who convey feelings of ordinariness and relatability often come from a world of social and economic privilege, girls who also present this façade contribute to a discourse that dictates that professional success is easily attained by young girls, no matter their background or circumstances. Yet as Kristine Ask and Crystal Abidin reveal in their study of self-deprecating memes among college students, relatable digital content tends to only focus on shared experiences while failing to acknowledge how issues of gender, sexuality, race, or ability could be a part of that narrative. Instead, the erasure of identity from relatability, at least when it presents a challenge to hegemonic norms, allows relatability to be a cultural tool that disciplines girls into sameness. For girls who follow the conventions of the RWG trend, race and class are nothing and yet mean everything in the context of finding success and creating a professional identity that people will take seriously.

While girls of color are usually not considered creators of relatable content, some still exercise the production skills, awkward performances, and everyday anxieties expected of the RWG. Kayla Nicole Jones, a Black teen YouTuber, embodies some of the values of the slacker aesthetic while dabbling in influencer media with professional photoshoots and songs she has recorded (Figure 16). Joining YouTube in 2014 with her account "Nicole TV," Jones gained attention for a humorous ponytail tutorial video she posted in March 2015 where she styled her hair into a sharp point using copious amounts of hair gel. In the video, Jones mimics the style of beauty tutorials using a voiceover to describe the steps while making silly faces for the camera. As the video progresses, Jones' voiceover gets increasingly frustrated with herself on screen as she brushes her hair in a sloppy manner and screws up her face into "ugly" expressions. The video as of this writing is one of Jones' most viewed content (with over 9.5 million views) and

Figure 16: Kayla Nicole Jones as Professional and Relatable

eventually earned her the nickname "Ponytail Girl" on the internet. The rest of Jones' channel mostly represents a mix of parody videos (such as "Church Folks Be Like" and "Ghetto ASMR") and fashion hauls from notable African American retailers, each textured with her distinct "fake cries" when an outfit looks ridiculous on her body or a fake eyelash keeps falling off. While Jones' exaggerated anxieties and struggles with beauty routines are specific to Black experiences (e.g. fitting a wig, wearing a silk cap, doing edges, etc.), her use of self-deprecating humor adds to the relatable slacker aesthetic. Meme accounts on YouTube, for instance, began turning some of Jones' most humorous moments into compilation videos, using titles like "Nicole Tv Being a RELATABLE QUEEN for 5 minutes straight." Despite not being an RWG, Jones has managed to tap into the cult of relatability, even if at times she is used to boost the views of other accounts.

Although girls of color are traditionally not considered a part of the relatable trend, their humor and expressions are still widely used across the internet in the form of GIFs and reaction shots that strive to connect to relatable experiences. Some critics have admonished this practice, calling it "digital blackface," where white people employ images, videos, and GIFS of Black

people to represent their own emotions and reactions to posts on social media. More than just a seamless way for white people to perform a Black subjectivity, the use of Black phrases, gestures, and facial expressions across the internet does not contribute to the economic and social well-being of Black people in a system that actively discriminates against them and their culture while allowing white people to co-op it without repercussion. For instance, the phrase "on fleek," a quote from a 2014 Vine video when then 16-year-old Kayla Lewis showed off her groomed eyebrows, made the leap from Black Twitter to mainstream culture as beauty articles, corporate social media accounts, and an Ariana Grande video began using it in their marketing (Grady). As its origins got lost in the media hubbub, Lewis attempted to trademark the phrase so she could use it in her own cosmetics line. It is important to point out that "on fleek," as well as other expressionistic terms and styles derivative of Black youth culture, only become relatable to the wider public when commodified and deployed in the brands of major corporations, industries, and celebrities. As bell hooks writes, "It is within the commercial realm of advertising that the drama of Otherness finds expression. Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening" (370). The resonance of Black youth culture lies in its "coolness," its ability to seem different and fresh from the mainstream. Yet without disrupting the white supremacist norms of Western society, the relatability of Black girls and their culture remains only a marginal interest, implemented when needed to capture public attention in a distraction-filled digital landscape.

The professional lifestyling of girlhood in the digital gig economy might not be all white, but the rules and codes that it follows reinforces white middle-class values and heteronormative femininity as relatable subjectivities. The RWG brand, then, it not necessarily a description of the types of girls who create relatable content but rather an aesthetic that is represented in the

performance, editing, and affective engagement that maintains a pattern of familiarity and comfort among internet audiences. In other words, these girls do not have to belong to privileged classifications, but they must enact these dominant traits in the way they talk, dress, gesture, and stylize their online presentation for an audience accustomed to whiteness and feminine normativity. Kanai argues that "the pleasure of feeling relatable—or relating to a particular post in the public—is premised on reducing difference," which in turn is premised on white, heteronormative, middle-class life being the identity by which all other experiences are judged (132). This is not to say that marginalized people can never be found relatable outside this dominant paradigm; indeed, social media platforms have allowed such communities connected by gender, race, sexuality, class, size, or ability to share and commiserate with members of the same group without their value being dictated by hegemonic interests. Yet for girls living in the digital gig economy, where personal interactions are articulated through a language of commodification and branding, experiential moments that appeal broadly to white, heteronormative femininity are seen as instrumental to their professional development.

Conclusion: Recreating Old Patterns of Productivity

The growth of the digital gig economy through social media platforms and apps that encourage individuals to develop their public persona and brand has become an intrinsic part of girl culture and discourses of professionalization. While the explosion of fashion bloggers, Instagram influencers, and YouTube microcelebrities might seem like a passing fad, the networking and branding strategies employed in these creative appointments are incredibly valued in the fragmented gig economy climate of the 2010s, where personality, connections, and reputation are more likely to help secure work than skills and education alone. As early twenty-

first century girls spend much of their time on social media, they begin to pick up some of the knowledge and digital tools required for success in their future professional endeavors. At the same time, girls are also subjected to the toxicity of overproduction and the porous boundaries between work and leisure characteristic of the digital age.

As girl influencers, discourses of can-do girlhood and female achievement encourage the performance of confidence in the brand in order to maintain relationships with sponsors that value such positive affects in their marketing. Some girls have begun to push back against this idealized portrait of youthful femininity, instead opting for a “relatable” or “slacker” approach to express a more authentic and unfiltered self that rejects traditional paradigms of work and shows awareness of their commercialization. While this approach might seem to engage in popular discussions about burnout and the high expectations placed on girls to succeed in school and their future careers, it actually becomes another commodifiable avenue, this time masking hard work and achievement in order to appeal to the cult of relatability and generalized experience. Girls are then expected to showcase their insecurities, laziness, and lack of work ethic to increase followers and monetization opportunities. However, there are little protections or resources in place to help them when mental health issues may become serious and require the girl to step back from the professional celebrity identity she has created.

This supposed shift from influencer to slacker should not be understood as complete abandonment of the influencer lifestyle and the framing of young female perfection. Many girls on social media still strive for the right angle, lighting, outfit, background, and text that capture a hyper-produced version of their real lives. The popularity of the girl slacker should instead be thought of as a focus on a new aesthetic that still requires similar modes of productivity and branding that are represented across influencer content. The production value might seem low in

these projects, where girls rely on handheld cameras and arbitrary edits and zooms that evoke a DIY sensibility, but the time and effort put into producing weekly videos and associated content on Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok suggests serious intention and hard work. The appearance of this low barriers to participation makes girl slackers seem more relatable, appealing to a broader swath of girlhood that fits outside the narrow demands of achievement and perfection. Yet as white, thin, middle-class teen girls have been profiled as the face of the slacker aesthetic and promoted through YouTube's algorithm, the reality of relatability suggests that old hierarchies of privileged girlhood are still enforced. The RWG becomes a desirable professional identity in the digital age, particularly as it seems to reject oppressive patterns of productivity and work and promote new ways to participate that appear more conducive to the daily operations of personal life. Discourses then frame this type of work as more authentic and "progressive," despite evidence suggesting that it still privileges a narrow mindset of girlhood and achievement. Girls who fit outside this paradigm (such as girls of color, girls who are poor, girls who are fat, and girls who are queer) cannot fully enjoy the benefits of the slacker aesthetic as long as social institutions continue to deem these identities as inadequate in contributing to a neoliberal capitalist system. The professionalization of girlhood, particularly in digital culture, is an exclusionary performance that parades as tolerant of other methods that lead girls to success.

CHAPTER FOUR

Girls for Future: Networked Celebrity Activism and the Politics of Empowerment

At the U.N. Climate Action Summit in New York City on September 23, 2019, 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg addressed 110 adult audience members with a powerful refrain: “How dare you?” Thunberg, who first attracted global attention for her Fridays for Future school strike the year before, became a highly visible figure in American media for the way she bluntly accused political and corporate representatives for their inaction regarding climate change policy. After leaving New York, international news and prominent public figures solidified Thunberg as an enterprising young celebrity at the center of the climate change debate. Actor Jane Fonda said she was “inspired by Greta Thunberg” during a “Fire Drill Fridays” demonstration in Washington, D.C., while Leonardo DiCaprio praised Thunberg as “a leader of our time” in an Instagram post where the environmentalist actor posed with the teen. Thunberg is representative of an increasing trend where girls are becoming publicly visible activists whose fame brings attention and value to social justice movements and politically aware marketing campaigns. At the same time, the centering of Thunberg in the climate change narrative draws on discourses of race and class that elevate the girl activist from rebellious young upstart to professional celebrity spokesperson.

The framing of girl activists like Thunberg in contemporary media culture has not always taken seriously the issues girls care about and fight for in their communities. While girls have been active participants in the organization of social movements throughout history, their presence in these political spaces have often been erased, sidelined, limited, or reduced to a temporary pastime. Mary Celeste Kearney, in her work on the riot grrl punk scene of the 1990s, observes that media outlets frequently misrepresented political female youth subculture as a

lifestyle, condensing girl activism to an aesthetic rather than highlighting its political valences ("Missing Links" 210). Because girls have been seen as lacking the necessary education, experience, and skills needed to effectively organize and negotiate with leaders and organizations on social policies, their perspectives have largely remained marginalized in political conversations. However, as Jessalynn Keller has explored, girls' social justice activity in digital spaces illuminates the ways "feminist blogging constitutes a form of *accessible activism* for some girls," where the process of cataloguing and sharing posts reflecting on the formation of a political subjectivity challenges cultural assumptions of girls' passivity (*Girls' Feminist Blogging* 49). The visibility of girls' activism online creates space for their experiences to be heard and validated, even as they navigate misogynistic and racist corners of the internet. Especially as feminism has become a more accepted political stance to adopt in mainstream society, girl activists now appear to be more accessible, attractive, and professional to humanitarian causes and brand campaigns seeking socially conscious youth audiences.

This chapter intends to understand the role of celebrity and brand culture in the professional lifestyling of girl activists whose visibility and rise to fame have been central to the marketing of national and global social movements in the 2010s. From Malala Yousafzai to Greta Thunberg, teen activists like Jazz Jennings, Emma González, Marley Dias, and many others have been instrumental in kickstarting conversations about girls' access to education in the Third World, transgender rights, gun control, Black girl representation, and climate change. While more established celebrities like Emma Watson, Amandla Stenberg, Rowan Blanchard, and Yara Shahidi have participated in activist and diplomacy operations, ordinary girls ushered into the limelight more so exemplify the ways celebrity culture online functions as a

professionalization tool guiding girls to organize their activism around the self-branding politics of authenticity and intimacy.

The branding of political movements situates ordinary girls between an activist subjectivity and a consumer position, where activism becomes a commodity to be bought and sold in a corporate landscape. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that commodity activism has had an increased presence in the neoliberal era, where "activism is reframed as realizable through supporting particular brands" and "consumer citizens can satisfy their individual needs through consumer behavior, thus rendering unnecessary the collective responsibilities that have historically been expected from a citizen" (*Authentic*TM 18). While audiences are not necessarily purchasing commercial brands that claim to support girl activists' causes (although some do), they are engaging the image, messaging, and promise of the girl's self-brand. This brand represents and appeals to a moral desire to see girls change the world when the world has often excluded and oppressed them on the basis of gender, race, class, age, sexuality, ability, and nationality. Managing this affective relationship between consumer citizen and activist self-brand requires the construction of a girl image that negotiates the tensions between her commodification and her social justice goals.

The professionalization of the girl activist and the value her fame brings can be understood through what Zeynep Tufekci calls "networked microcelebrity activism." Tufekci defines the networked microcelebrity activist as "a politically motivated actor who successfully uses affordances of social media to engage in a presentation of his or her political and personal self to garner attention to a cause" (857). Unlike traditional celebrity activists who enter activism from a privileged social and economic standpoint, thus bringing with them an established and trusting audience, networked microcelebrity activists rely on the digital practices of self-branding

and promotion to generate public interest from a grassroots position. Ordinary girl activists who employ these tactics demonstrate an understanding of how political goals and achievements in the social media age are structured around the curation and management of a compelling and credible image that challenges adult perceptions of impactful youth social justice involvement. Often, this credibility is wrapped up in how the girl promotes her self-brand as an empowered agent or how she affiliates herself with adjacent brands and organizations. While the girl activist's mobilization online and in other mediated spaces showcases her passion and drive to seek justice, the work she puts into it as a microcelebrity illustrate how important the commercialization of her professional image is to the circulation of social causes in a capitalist society.

Through an examination of several girl activists whose claim to fame is connected to the social justice issues they represent, this chapter attempts to theorize how networked microcelebrity activism organizes contemporary girlhood around professional, entrepreneurial-style traits valued within a neoliberal feminist culture. By this, I refer to Banet-Weiser's formulation of the self-brand as a product of postfeminism's integration into consumer culture, where self-branding becomes a "new social arrangement that relies on different strategies for identity construction and hinges on more progressive ideals such as capability, empowerment, and imagination" (*AuthenticTM* 69). Furthermore, social justice's discursive relationship to the empowerment of oppressed people creates the conditions for girl activist work to be closely connected to postfeminist ideals of independence, choice, and self-advocacy. Because of this, I argue that the professionalization of girl activists generates tension between the self-brand commodity and the collective social justice aims these girls promote. While professional traits like self-promotion and social and emotional management appear necessary in garnering

attention and mobilizing action around the girl's cause, they also define action and solutions to social injustices in capitalist terms that satisfy the commercial media markets. Through different celebrity brand narratives, girlhood's political power arises from her ability to function as an entrepreneurial activist whose self-brand matches the mission of global corporations.

Defining the Professional Girl Activist

Frequently deployed as agents of progress in humanitarian media campaigns, girls have come to represent the professionalization, and therefore management, of activism in the digital age. Since the early twenty-first century, nonprofit organizations (NGOs) like the Nike Foundation's Girl Effect, the Obama Foundation's Let Girls Learn, and the Girl Rising campaign have used the images, words, and experiences of girls to elicit public sympathy and justify the social and economic potential of the girl. In their study of Girl Effect, Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill reveal how NGOs often frame girls' entrepreneurial integrity and ability to contribute to the labor force as key components to ending capitalist-created issues like global poverty, positioning neoliberalism as the "liberating force through which patriarchy can be defeated" (90). Youth media campaigns, like Disney Channel's Project Green, also focus on how girls can protect the planet through what Morgan Genevieve Blue calls "purposeful consumption" of celebrity brands, programming, and products related to the corporation ("Girlfriends Go Green" 151). As girl activists have become more visible on social media platforms, they have been subject to postfeminist discourses that frame them as independent, empowered, and reassuringly feminine. While some girl figures have certainly contested this mediated presentation, social movements still value a public representative that can earn the trust and respect of not only policy decision-makers but the general public as well.

While the tensions that arise between the girl activist's commercial appeal and social justice subjectivity seem specific to the early twenty-first century, they actually precede the digital age. The work that goes into crafting and managing a celebrity girl activist has often relied on hegemonic discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and age to make uncomfortable truths more palatable to the public. An early example of this practice can be traced back to Claudette Colvin, the 15-year-old African American teen from Montgomery, Alabama who refused to give up her seat to a white woman on a segregated bus on March 2, 1955—six months prior to Rosa Parks' more widely known incident. While Colvin's demonstration reached the attention of the NAACP, the organization ultimately did not want the teen girl to become the face of the Civil Rights Movement because of her age and the fact that she was pregnant (Rumble). Five years later in 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges and six other Black children were integrated into an all-white elementary school in New Orleans, Louisiana. Bridges, in particular, became the focus of school desegregation in the media. Photos of U.S. Marshalls escorting the young girl past angry mobs of white people into the school, later memorialized in the famous Norman Rockwell painting, "The Problem We All Live With," would come to position Bridges as a hopeful symbol of civil rights (Figure 17). Unlike Colvin, who carried negative connotations

Figure 17: U.S. Marshalls Escorting Ruby Bridges

of hypersexualized Black girlhood, Bridges represented “innocence” walking to school in her “Sunday best,” pursuing her education in the face of death threats and social exclusion from other classmates (DeLuca). While only being six at the time, Bridges displayed the appropriate traits of respectability, as well as eagerness to be a citizen of an educated society, that the Civil Rights Movement desired in order to sway public opinion in its favor.

As the cases of Colvin and Bridges show, a pregnant teenager starting a bus boycott would have made the resistance appear unruly and transgressive to the public, whereas a young schoolgirl trying to get an education evoked civility and sympathy for the cause for racial equality and justice. As a result, Bridges affirmed the “cultural legitimation” of the Civil Rights Movement, a process that P. David Marshall explains is needed for political leaders to “establish contact with the mass public” by way of reworking “cultural sentiments so that they can be integrated into the constructed character of the leader” (*Celebrity and Power* 213). At its foundation, the professionalization of the girl activist draws on the hegemonic cultural codes already mediating social relations and capitalist industries. Instead of directly challenging problematic power structures, the presentational framing of the girl activist tends to subsume familiar political performance styles for the purpose of long-term sustainability in the public eye. In the digital age, cultural legitimation is still at work, mediating the construction of an activist self-brand that plays into postfeminist and neoliberal sensibilities of girl power and its potential to “change the world.”

In the networked celebrity activism of girlhood, authenticity and intimacy work together to sell an idea of who the girl activist really is beyond her news media construction. In other words, the private/public presentation of the girl activist online helps humanize the cause as well as justify the girl’s political identity by aligning her with a recognizable organization or brand.

Social media, Alice Marwick argues, produces an "attention economy" that "treats visibility as status" and mediates how everyday people present themselves online and with others (*Status Update* 143). This framework makes it possible for the microcelebrity girl activist to construct her self-brand around "mobilization, validation, and scope enlargement," three social goals Tufekci borrows from political sociologists William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld to illustrate how activism is conducted across mass media networks. In Tufekci's terms, mobilization refers to the connecting of activists to each other individually rather than the reliance on formal organizations (854). Validation occurs through "sustained internal legitimacy" between activist parties online that can then seek external validation from mainstream media reporting on the cause (855). Lastly, scope enlargement can mean having a political cause go "viral" across social networks through "easy copying, sharing, and distributing among interconnected peer networks" (855). For girl activists engaging with these modes, there must be an understanding of how to perform the private life with the professional presentation online and in other mediated spaces in order to appeal to a brand culture that values authenticity.

One of these activist performances mirrors the entrepreneurial work and consumption practices of the influencer community where girls often participate. Girl activists in an attention economy will sometimes partner with goodwill brands to broaden their audience and supposedly amplify their impact through a business that has more resources and influence. For instance, Xiye Bastida, a 17-year-old indigenous climate activist from Mexico who helped lead the Fridays for Future protests in New York City, has posted sponsored content on her Instagram account (@xiyebeara). In one such post in November 2019, Bastida participates in Nike's #MySportMyCity campaign, revealing pictures of herself wearing Nike brand athletic shoes while holding a sign that reads, "There is no climate justice without social justice" (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Xiye Bastida and Nike's #MySportMyCity

Next to the series of images, the caption states: "My sport is activism […] As activists we can redefine what sport is, and we are already doing this every time we stand up for a cause!" Bastida's commodity activism reinforces the humanitarian initiatives of Nike while expanding her activist message to the millions of people who follow the global corporation. As Paula Herrero-Diz and Marina Ramos-Seranno note in their study of young activist practices online, brands use "empowered minors to take advantage of their power of prescription" and position themselves as companies that are "concerned about their audience's reality" (109). In doing so, girl activists like Bastida are integrated into a professional world where activism becomes sponsored content that seals the contract between corporation and girl. While it is unclear if these girls get paid for including a brand hashtag on their social media posts, their participation in the digital attention economy still assigns social value to the work they do.

Girl activists do not always directly engage with corporate brands to validate their professional presence, and in fact, do strive to disrupt the capitalist status quo through creative content that knowledgeably critiques systems of oppression. Even as girl activists participate in commodity culture, Henry Jenkins et al. observe that youth efforts may actually "involve a hijacking of the vast publicity apparatus to spread political messages that might not otherwise be heard" (89). Isra Hirsi, a Black Muslim teen activist living in Minneapolis, often uses her close political affiliation with her mother, Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, to advance her U.S. Youth Climate Strike mobilization efforts on Twitter (@israhirsi). In November 2019, Hirsi created a series of TikTok meme videos relaying her anti-capitalist beliefs. In one such video, Hirsi appears to be dancing in a public restroom as the song "In the Party" by female rap artist Flo Milli pounds in the background. As Hirsi lip syncs to the song, several text blocks appear that read "capitalism taking ur man," followed by the satirical reasons capitalism is a strong romantic rival: "insane student debt"; "not being able to make a livable wage"; "overly expensive medical bills, rent, and the fear of never being financially stable." Hirsi ends the video dancing in a stairwell as the text "rich moderate reps laughing at americans suffering" appears above her head.

Meme videos like Hirsi's illustrate the ways girl activists of color form what Keller calls "networked counterpublics," internet communities that "disrupt neoliberal and postfeminist discourses that privilege individual action rather than collective social change" (*Girls' Feminist Blogging* 78). While these publics are not formally organized, they are "produced through discourse circulated among strangers that demonstrate at least minimal participation" (79). By using TikTok as an activist space, Hirsi translates political ideals into a multimodal and subcultural medium that teens are familiar with and can understand. Even more, she uses the

platform (initially intended for apolitical lip-sync videos) to spread political messages where TikTok audiences might not expect. As Anita Harris observes, the presence of these online DIY cultures and networked activism are important examples for how girls are "negotiating the absence of traditional citizenship identities" ("Young Woman" 492). At the same time, Harris argues, "participating in online cultures and networking is a form of developing citizenship skills, regardless of any specific involvement in political causes" (492). Expanding the definition of participatory culture and citizenship can relay how girl activism online takes on different forms, including but not limited to microcelebrity work. The process of developing and promoting a self-brand in correlation with a social cause does not simply mean giving into the powers of commodification. Particularly in the digital age, girl activism learns to negotiate social justice goals through strategies of professionalization that give them traction in an attention economy.

As the next three sections show, girl activists in the early twenty-first century are constructed through a multiplicity of media appointments, as well as racial and class discourses, that determine how activism and authenticity fit into the professional microcelebrity presentation. Specifically, I examine how the professional lifestyling of girl activism manifests in the management of identity politics, the negotiation of trauma in the brand, and the persuasive potential of anger. In a way, this work takes the old feminist adage "the personal is political" and tries to manage it through the social media expectations of intimacy, attention, and promotion. Drawing on the lifestyling of entertainment and confessional culture, the girl activist negotiates her personal life within her public one to create a celebrity persona that resonates with audiences' everyday lives, aspirations, and hopes for the world. In doing so, audiences form an attachment to the political issues she cares about, associating the girl with the progress made in

seeing those issues effect positive change. The professionalization of the girl activist thus demonstrates the various ways these affective attachments between girl and audience are managed and showcased to promote female confidence and resilience as solutions to global economic problems.

The Management of Wokeness

In November 2015, 10-year-old Marley Dias made headlines when her book drive #1000BlackGirlBooks started trending on Twitter. Earlier that year, Dias had launched the project in order to bring attention to the lack of Black female-centered literature she noticed in her school curriculum. With the help of her activist mother's Philadelphia-based GrassROOTS Community Foundation Super Camp for young girls, the preteen managed to surpass her goal of collecting 1,000 books about Black girls to donate to a primary school and library in Jamaica. By the end of 2016, she collected over 12,000 books, organized a reading party at the Obama White House, appeared on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and guest-edited a special edition of *Elle* magazine (Khan). While Dias' story illustrates how social media can increase exposure to important causes, it also demonstrates how the mediatized self-brand negotiates the radical potential of digital youth activism within a mainstream media framework. Her numerous television appearances and web interviews discuss the importance of youth activism, yet these guest spots do so in ways that measure the success of these ventures in terms of media attention and entrepreneurial development. Although Dias' self-brand promotes racial justice and inclusivity, her work manages the expectations of keeping her message alive in an attention economy that tries to soften its systemic influence.

As Dias appeared in news interviews, first to promote #1000BlackGirlBooks and then to advertise her 2018 book *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You!*, her activist representation drew on the formal qualities of diplomacy and civility in getting her views across to a wide audience. Selling the urgency of this issue to powerful and influential media figures, as well as to the general public, has relied on what I call the "management of wokeness" in negotiating radical politics for citizens with more moderate or conservative social views. The term "woke" refers to a discourse of racial and social justice awareness that circulated in Black consciousness raising groups in the twentieth century before the Movement for Black Lives in 2012 brought it into the mainstream lexicon (Tate). In contemporary popular culture, Black cultural critics like Maya Binyam have noted how its usage has been distilled and coopted by liberal white people and corporations to appear socially aware to the injustices of the world without taking constructive action to break down systems of oppression. As Binyam points out in an article for *The Awl*, what "masquerades as a feat of anti-racism is really just a poorly devised self-help regime, better designed to confirm the wokeness of its participants than to inspire any awakening." Managing wokeness thus refers to how activists and media outlets frame awareness of social oppressions as professional development in a neoliberal culture that values progressive ideologies and sensibilities as they serve commercial market needs. To manage wokeness means to rein in the radical potential of change for a formal audience while maintaining the appearance of care and concern for injustice. However, it can also mean adhering to social niceties in order to seamlessly integrate progressive ideologies into public discourse.

The media performance of Marley Dias navigates the management of wokeness in subtle ways, particularly during talk show programs and interviews where an exchange of social justice ideas emerges between girl activist and host. In these spaces, Dias is presented as intellectual,

approachable, and uplifting, her image asserting specific racial truths in the memorable ways she responds to questions. During a 2015 press interview, Dias' rationale for starting the book drive became an oft-quoted anecdote crucial to her celebrity media identity:

> "I told her [my mother] I was sick of reading about white boys and dogs," Dias said, pointing specifically to *Where the Red Fern Grows* and the *Shiloh* series. "What are you going to do about it?" my mom asked. And I told her I was going to start a book drive, and a specific book drive, where black girls are the main characters in the book and not background characters or minor characters." (Baker)

The repetition of "sick of reading about white boys and dogs" in Dias' story provides a humorous entry point for talk show hosts to discuss the racial and gendered implications of only presenting one type of experience to read about in the classroom. In a 2018 interview on ABC's daytime talk show *The View*, co-host Abby Huntsmen burst out laughing, asking Dias, "Like *Old Yeller*?" as the teen directed the conversation back to the importance of reading while still advocating for different perspectives in the literature. Larry Wilmore, of the short-lived Comedy Central program *The Nightly Show*, also pointed out the irony of Dias sharing a name with the book *Marley and Me* (about a man and his dog) in a 2016 episode before following up with, "Why do you think it's important to read about someone who's like you?" The circulation of Dias' narrative in these interviews allows her frustrations with limited racial representation to become an identifiable and familiar message that speaks to microaggressions Black children experience regularly but might not articulate in ways that are validated in a white-dominated society. In a talk show setting, Dias's activism engages in dialogue that first praises the girl for

identifying a “simple” problem before opening up the conversation to consider the larger social implications of the girl’s work.

While Dias’ book drive has allowed her to branch off into other activist avenues, such as giving TED-talk style presentations, her management of wokeness has had to negotiate more nuanced questions of racial injustice and reframe responses that reflect a more judicious approach to her advocacy work. For instance, in an interview with “Literacy Daily,” a blog produced on the International Literacy Association website, Dias is portrayed as challenging a question about how literacy plays into her social justice campaign for racial harmony:

> I don’t usually define my work in terms of racial harmony. To me, my work is really about understanding. I want to make sure that people are taking the time to learn about others. I also want people to imagine black girls as leaders and accept that we can be and are the main characters of our lives. I know that if this understanding happens, racial harmony may be the outcome, but racial harmony is not the first thing I think about when I think about my work. Achieving equity and opening spaces for black girls and others to learn are the core reasons for my campaign. Also, sometimes I think when we say harmony it can make people feel like they are being forced to get along. (Deloza)

While Dias emphasizes the importance of representation, especially for Black girls, in her activism, she insists that working towards racial harmony is not the target outcome because it might deter some members of her audience who are resistant to its obligatory connotation. Instead, Dias offers “understanding” and dialogue as more ideal pathways to achieving equity, demonstrating awareness of the challenges to social change her activism supports. Fighting for

equity for Black girls is central to Dias' brand, yet her media image manages this mission using diplomatic language that maintains professional decorum.

The 2018 release of Dias' youth activist guide, *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You!*, further refined the girl's hopeful message through personal anecdotes and factual information and resources, situating activism and authenticity in the framework of entrepreneurial achievement. The book, which included an introduction from African American filmmaker Ava DuVernay, followed eleven chapters about Dias' activist beginnings, the communities she supports, and the strategies young people can use to get involved in their own activist initiatives. Wearing a salmon pink blazer, bowtie, and trendy glasses, Dias appears both professorial and entrepreneurial on the book cover, embodying the success and personal empowerment of other girl motivational texts (Figure 19). The advice Dias imparts in her book emphasizes togetherness and systems of support in furthering social justice causes. Yet this

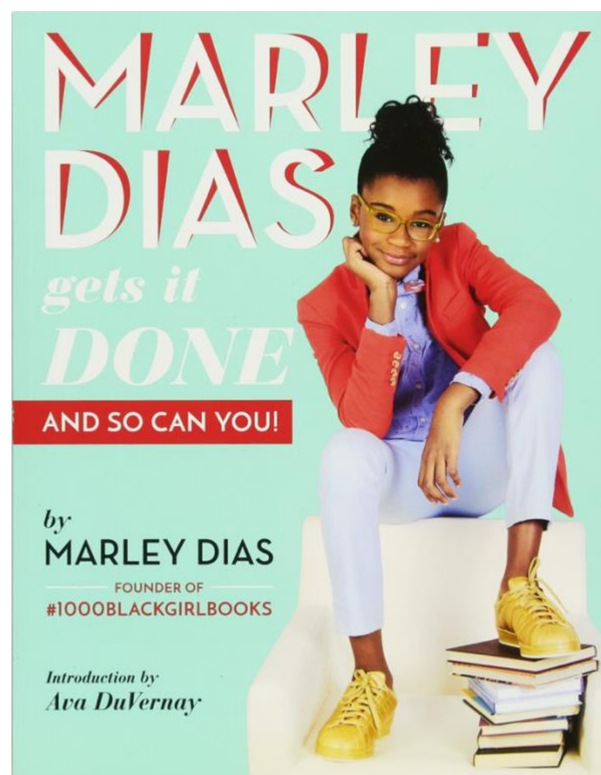

Figure 19: Book Cover for *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You!*

message is also peppered with neoliberal missives for followers to find their “true passions,” make their activism “personal,” and discover inner strength to persevere through setbacks. Dias’ call to action, while useful as a motivational tool for inexperienced teens, also works to “[m]obilise ideas and motifs of the post-humanitarian regime: empowerment, newfound freedoms, orientation to the future, self-responsibilisation, resilience and economic productivity” (Koffman, Orgad, and Gill 160). Posthumanitarianism imagines short-term resolutions and individualized action to systemic injustices rather than comprehensive political change to global structures. As scholar Jessica Taft asserts in her analysis of girl activist organizations, “by only teaching skills for facing barriers, not removing them, this model implies that society, the public, and the community are unchanging arenas” (21). With this in mind, the pedagogical function of Dias’ book speaks more to the development and management of the professional youth activist, which involves navigating personal insecurities and inexperience in order to address systemic oppressions. The complexity of Dias and how her media persona manages wokeness illustrates the tension of contemporary girlhood activism as it exists between the superficial social justice of commercial culture and the transformative mobilization needed to disrupt oppressive barriers.

In the professionalization of the girl activist, the management of wokeness both restricts the girl’s reach in a capitalist society and politicizes her self-brand. Even more, her young age and perceived innocence complicates this process in a media culture, where her message is sometimes portrayed as endearing as it also integrates important marginalized truths into public discourse. Particularly as girl microcelebrity activists like Dias come from historically underrepresented communities, their ability to converse warmly with an audience who might consider their existence or positionalities “too radical” or “too dangerous” is critical to their campaign’s sustainability. Sometimes, the girl activist aligns her work with more powerful mass

media entities that benefit from the symbolic value and illusion of inclusivity that their relationship with the girl provides. In turn, the girl activist appears more trusted in her relation to familiar brands and public figures. However, as George Pleios theorizes in his work on celebrity activism, by assigning symbolic value to the celebrity ambassador, solutions to global crises also remain in the symbolic realm. Pleios contends that the process of implementing problem-solving strategies "takes place according to the media persona's values, norms and meanings, not according to political values, which means that diplomatic issues are handled and are being resolved in mass communication terms" (255). In other words, social solutions are developed out of the celebrity activist's personal and moral code. While media visibility can be useful in stimulating serious conversation, celebrity activism can misrepresent an ongoing problem as easily fixed through their own perseverance and achievement.

The professionalization of girl microcelebrity activism relies on this visibility to reinforce not only the significance of the social issue but also the girl's credibility as a spokesperson and future leader. Yet by ensuring credibility in a global capitalist system, the girl activist participates in processes of normalization that obscure and erase marginalized aspects of the issue at hand. For instance, the popularity of transgender activist Jazz Jennings, a Florida teen girl who migrated from YouTube to the TLC reality docu-series *I Am Jazz* in 2015, illustrates how girl activism can build credibility while maintaining standards of normative femininity. As I argue elsewhere, the Jennings family on *I Am Jazz* represent the "normative queer family" as they raise a transgender daughter who strives to participate in traditional teen girl experiences, like dating boys, wearing makeup, and developing breasts, thus reinforcing normative gendered practices of becoming a woman (Johnston 462). Furthermore, the docu-series builds trust between Jennings and her audience as her daily life as a transgender teen invokes the

“familiarization function” of television by exposing viewers to stories of transgender experiences on a routine schedule (Marshall, *Celebrity and Power* 130). While this process strengthens Jennings’ position as a transgender activist, it also administers normativity as a form of credibility for the professionalized girl and transgender rights at large.

Beyond her reality TV show, Jennings has cultivated a professional celebrity persona rooted in social justice activism for transgender people as well as commercial branding for traditionally feminine products. Jennings first appeared on a special episode of ABC’s *20/20* with Barbara Walters when she was six-years-old and later became the subject of a documentary on the Oprah Winfrey Network. At 14, she co-authored a children’s book about being transgender and made *Time*’s list of “25 Most Influential Teens of 2014.” Shortly after the premiere of *I Am Jazz*, Jennings released a memoir, *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen*, and signed on as a spokesperson for the skincare company Clean & Clear. Through Jennings’ various entrepreneurial accomplishments, her celebrity has come to represent what Michael Lovelock observes as “progressive, pedagogical and transformative potential” that “augment the parameters of normative personhood to encompass a narrow model of transgender subjectivity” (738). By seeing Jennings thrive in media coverage, audience perception of transgender issues is primarily based on the achievements of transgender public figures and not the social and political hurdles that present dangers to their livelihoods. This is not to say that Jennings should appear like she is struggling (in fact, reports of her deferring her Harvard acceptance for mental health reasons indicate that she likely is). Rather, her celebrity accomplishments carry symbolic value and thus flatten the conversations around the social barriers the transgender community face. As she secures business and speaking engagements

beyond her show, Jennings' successes come to represent the heartbeat of the transgender community.

In the professionalization of Jennings' celebrity, the management of wokeness operates via normalizing gendered performances and assimilating transgender personhood into a capitalist framework. This becomes apparent in three spokesperson appointments that feature the young teen in popular media campaigns: Clean & Clear's #SeeTheRealMe, Knixteen's "The Jazz Bra," and Gillette Venus' #MySkinMyWay. Together, these campaigns affirm Jennings' trans activism by aligning her with a hetero-feminine consumer identity viewed as necessary to the development of a confident and empowered female professional. Moreover, as these ads use Jennings to demonstrate the transformative potential of loving your skin, finding the right bra, and choosing to shave your legs, they contribute to the symbolic narrative of transgender acceptance through individual lifestyle choices that prime young girls for womanhood.

The selection of then 15-year-old Jennings for Clean & Clear's #SeeTheRealMe campaign for their line of acne treatment products in 2015 significantly integrated contemporary trans youth activism into the teen consumer marketplace. The release of the digital commercial in April 2016 maintained this narrative. In the web ad, Jennings is shown reflecting on the struggles of growing up trans while staring pensively at a sunset. "Growing up has been quite a struggle being transgender," Jennings says in voiceover. "Some kids greet each other with hugs and then just give me a hi. And sometimes I've even been called an 'it.'" The sad tempo of the commercial shifts as she opens her front door, inviting her young female friends into her house to do each other's makeup and try on clothes. Despite past ostracization from her peers, Jennings finds confidence in participating in traditionally feminine bonding practices that make her feel accepted. In an extensive analysis of the #SeeTheRealMe campaign, Rachel Reinke observes

how the video invokes the “gendered, racialized, and classed underpinnings of ideal citizenship” to position Jennings as an “ideal trans(normative) girl citizen subject” (42). Reinke further explains that “in order to allow viewers to feel ‘at ease’ with Jennings being considered a ‘real girl,’ her transgender subjectivity must be ‘overcome’” (43). To this end, the video relies on upbeat music and high key lighting as Jennings relays how she “decided to make a change and put herself out there” to become “just one of the girls.” While Jennings highlights the oppressive bullying and low self-esteem she has endured, her attitude is transformed when participating in female friendships and norms of feminine upkeep.

The commodification of Jennings’ celebrity continues in other professional appointments that attempt to frame resolutions to low self-esteem and body discomfort through consumer products. The professional girl activist, these campaigns suggest, cannot fight injustices (or be taken seriously by the public) if she does not rely on the marketplace to help her feel and look her best. In September 2018, teen underwear company Knixteen released an online video promoting a bra Jennings helped design. The video, titled “Bra Boss with Jazz Jennings,” features the teen speaking candidly in a white studio space about how she used to be excited about wearing bras because it “made her feel like a woman”; however, as her breasts continued to grow, bras became uncomfortable and she decided to stop wearing them. Jennings is next shown collaborating with designers in the creation of the “Jazz Bra,” a purple and blue tie-dye bra with scalloped edges meant to perfectly conform to her chest. “Being transgender, people are always trying to invalidate my identity,” Jennings says as she twirls around in the studio. “Being able to participate in something about bras, and femininity, and being a woman is just so empowering.” The celebration of traditional femininity and the products that reinforce it are modeled as an act of resistance in Jennings’ trans girl activism. Not only does she get to embrace

her love of bras again, but she also gets to act as an entrepreneurial “bra boss” designing a bra that transforms her activism into a commodity for individual consumption. While Jennings simply lent her story of finding her authentic self to Clean & Clear, her relationship with Knixteen more directly imbues her activist message into an entrepreneurial story as well as a bra other teen girls can purchase.

A few months later in February 2019, Jennings became the spokesperson for another brand campaign, this time with Gillette Venus’ #MySkinMyWay and their aim to “re-right” the rules of skincare, body hair, and shaving. A video posted to Jennings’ personal YouTube account posed the question “Do I Shave My Legs?” to her 678,000 followers. In the video, Jennings directly addresses her viewers to discuss her new partnership with Gillette Venus and why she decided to start shaving her legs again (despite a previous video claiming that she had stopped shaving because it was a “byproduct of the gender binary”). As Jennings elaborates on her change of heart, she relies on the marketing language of Gillette to express how she wants to “write the rules of [her] own skin” and encourage her viewers to “do it your way” when it comes to shaving. She further justifies how Gillette aligns with her beliefs because of their support and validation of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, yet she qualifies this by emphasizing how the ad campaign is for “everyone.” While Gillette Venus values inclusivity and choice in how women choose to shave, choice is ultimately decided within the confines of a woke consumerist language. In using her personal YouTube channel to promote her new spokesperson deal, Jennings employs the authenticity and trust built into her microcelebrity persona to fortify the goodwill branding of a commercial company. Jennings’ activism is thus activated through its commodification as she lends her voice, image, and social justice language to a feminized consumer culture that assigns financial worth to her work.

The girl activism of Marley Dias and Jazz Jennings demonstrates how the celebrity media presentation of confidence, positivity, and inclusivity help modulate rather than stimulate systemic change. At the same time, their position as supposedly innocent (and therefore apolitical) girls allows them to negotiate contentious social justice ideas within normative frameworks of race and gender. In doing so, the girl maintains a professional self-brand that imagines social justice awareness and objectives as they support and are supported by a capitalist system of productivity and consumerism. As the next section explores, the intimacy built into the self-brand, as well as the sharing of personal moments across media networks, showcases the pain and trauma girls sometimes endure as activists, where the resilience their images demonstrate signify key opportunities for entrepreneurial training.

Professionalizing Trauma and Tragedy

The Taliban's 2012 murder attempt on a Muslim Pakistani girl advocating for female education in the Swat Valley became a defining moment in Malala Yousafzai's activist career. Years later as a student at the University of Oxford, Yousafzai's humanitarian work is still deeply centered around the horror that thrust her into the international spotlight. In 2013, Yousafzai, her father Ziauddin, and Pakistani entrepreneur Shiza Shahid founded the Malala Fund to help build schools and support girls' education in under-resourced communities in the Global South. Around the same time, Yousafzai released the autobiography *I Am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* and appeared in the 2015 American documentary film *He Named Me Malala*, which followed the events before and after the attempt on her life. Later in 2019, Yousafzai released *We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls Around the World*, a collaborative book project that used the

activist's story as a springboard into other traumatic accounts from young female refugees around the world. The emphasis on trauma in Yousafzai's celebrity media narrative elicits not only global attention but international sympathy, especially in Western contexts that view the Global South as hindered by oppressive patriarchal regimes. Instead of being something to "get over," trauma becomes a professional branding tool of Yousafzai that frames the resilience of Third World girl activists as empowering for Western feminist causes.

The discourse of resilience draws on the postfeminist sensibilities of self-management and female achievement that beckon women and girls to "bounce back" from failure and hardships. Resilience suggests a return to the status quo with a rejuvenated state of mind primed for tackling the challenges of living in a late capitalist society. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad call this figure the "bounce-backable woman" and define her as a mostly middle-class subject who "'springs through' hard times via a combination of intensive self-management strategies and positive mental attitude (PMA), which together shape the ability to adapt and recover from difficulties" ("The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman" 478). For girls, this bounce-backable figure is already seen as an inherent part of her image, where the girl's flexibility in response to social and bodily change allows her to adapt to adversities that might come her way. As Angela McRobbie asserts, the "pleasingly, lively, capable and 'becoming' young woman, black, white or Asian, is now an attractive harbinger of social change," where girls' supposed fearlessness to lead the way during uncertain economic times works to signify future stability for her home nation ("Top Girls?" 722). Resilience is thus an opportunistic trait to possess for the entrepreneurial middle-class young woman unafraid of taking risks because of her protected social positioning; unlike women and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, the bounce-backable female subject has enough safety nets to catch her if she falls. This discourse intersects

with the confidence gap that critiques girls' inability to take risks due to low self-confidence. Because of their vulnerable positioning, girls lack the resources and safeguards to help them be confident and bounce back from disastrous outcomes.

In the case of Malala Yousafzai, the discourse of resilience has been infused in the media narrativization of her trauma and recovery. While Yousafzai does not fit the white, middle-class, Western bounce-backable female subject, her fight against the patriarchal Taliban and her advocacy for girls' education have become symbols of perseverance that resonate with a Western social justice values system. Following her recovery in England after being shot by the Taliban, the media initially referred to Malala Yousafzai as "Shot Pakistani Girl" before the hashtag #IAmMalala turned her into a household name and social movement. Coverage of her rehabilitation in the West highlighted her transnational activism, advocating for women and girls' education around the world, yet circumscribed it as oppositional to oppressive patriarchal regimes seen as inherent in Muslim communities. In a discourse analysis of Yousafzai's media coverage, Rosie Walters determines that the British press reproduced reports on Yousafzai that were "rooted in perceived hierarchies that still see Pakistan, Islam and Pakistani gender relations as inherently inferior to the United Kingdom, secularism and gender relations in the West" (652). Despite Yousafzai being Muslim, her fight for female education in her Taliban-occupied home was framed as breaking away from traditional gender norms imposed by Muslim ideologies. Even more, her story seemed to support Western interventionist rhetoric of educating "inferior" societies and promoting democratic ideals.

While the reporting of Yousafzai's trauma in Western media elicited public sympathy and attention for a cause important to her activism, it also worked to professionalize Yousafzai's resiliency through a relatable hashtag that would soon become her brand. The circulation of

#IAmMalala on social media in November 2012 worked to raise awareness of global education by asking users to align themselves with a Pakistani teen girl activist recently shot for voicing her beliefs against the Taliban. In doing so, the transformation of Yousafzai into a hashtag made her an “iconic” symbol. This status, which youth researcher Helen Berents claims is often ascribed to global at-risk girls in the media, erases the “specificity of their suffering” through “first-person media campaigns” (518). By this logic, #IAmMalala sheds the details of Yousafzai’s story and the importance of her fight in her particular locale as citizens in the West conflate Yousafzai’s struggles with their own. However, even as #IAmMalala invites the public to engage in this performative relatability, pretending as if they empathize with Yousafzai’s experiences, it still meets Yousafzai’s activist goals by raising awareness of her suffering and her fight for girls’ education. I assert that the branding of Yousafzai’s resiliency through hashtag activism reveals the complicated predicament of the global girl self-brand: on the one hand, Yousafzai’s voice echoes in parts of the world it may have otherwise not reached, but on the other, her message is open to the interpretation of Western audience members who choose to use her cause as a means to an end.

The tension of Yousafzai’s self-brand can also be conceptualized as the struggle between the image of the at-risk Third World girl who garners international sympathy and the risk-taking activist who challenges destructive imperialist nation-states. While some scholars have described how Yousafzai is “deployed to justify military invasions and educational interventions in Muslim countries” (Lesko, Chacko, and Khoja-Moolji 40), others have emphasized the ways she disrupts Western imperialist discourse by producing a counter-narrative that treats the Taliban as a political resistance rather than a religious sect (Ryder 183). Through these different frameworks, Yousafzai comes to embody how societal problems are explored and resolved through the

interiority of the resilient girl activist who takes risks, even ones involving her own life, for the greater good. The girl activist thus wavers between being *at-risk* and being a *risk-taker* depending on the strategies of branding and promotion that can professionalize her trauma or tragedy into a confident and resilient symbol of hope. In Frank Furedi's investigation of "therapeutic culture," the state of being "at risk" invokes passivity and dependency, whereas the more active "taking a risk" stirs up notions of choice and experimentation (130). This logic suggests that at-risk girls are in a vulnerable position of having things done *to them*; however, their status in public discourse also illustrates how their vulnerability becomes their identity and way of *actively* engaging with the world as an activist. While the #IAmMalala hashtag may have positioned Yousafzai in the most passive at-risk position, her later media image reveals a more professional presence as a risk-taker making decisions to further her cause despite the threats on her life. The production of two books and a documentary recounting her horrific shooting specifically contribute to the professionalization of Yousafzai's trauma, turning a painful circumstance into a resilient brand that empower women and girls around the world. Even more, this brand perfectly fits into the work of corporate leaders advancing philanthropic causes that value girls' education in a globalized economy.

As relatability has become an important affective strategy to employ in digital media productions, Yousafzai and her team have found ways to balance her resiliency brand by showing her embracing imperfections that might seem contradictory to her educational activism. Despite the physical and psychological trauma she had endured, Yousafzai's later image appeared to persevere and succeed as she pursued her studies at the University of Oxford. In a video titled "Malala's advice on making the most of your time at university" posted to the Malala Fund YouTube account in September 2019, Yousafzai regales the life lessons she has learned in

higher education. The video opens with classical music and the text “Malala’s Guide to Excelling at University” unfolding over collegial shots of bookcases and students studying. Suddenly, a record scratch interrupts the montage. Yousafzai appears on the screen in a yellow floral garment and green headscarf, chuckling, “I don’t think I’m a good advisor on this,” as the “Malala’s Guide” graphic revises itself to read “Getting Through University.” What follows is an account of Yousafzai’s challenges at university and her advice to new students on how to balance schoolwork, rest, and socializing with peers. The video, and several others like it on the Malala Fund YouTube channel, attempt to present a more authentic view of Yousafzai that show the young education activist as imperfect in her own educational experience. To this end, the viewer’s perception of Yousafzai as an overachieving scholar attending Oxford is disrupted and replaced with stories and images of the young woman socializing and rediscovering the “funny self” of the “old Malala” before the shooting. While these web videos still adhere to Yousafzai’s brand of resiliency, they also reconstruct her professional image in an authentic framework important in microcelebrity networks.

The resiliency established in Yousafzai’s celebrity brand demonstrates how trauma is managed and packaged into a hopeful and relatable message that invites the public to feel more positively about the causes of girl activists. Part of this restoration work can be found in the conflict between an accomplished media persona and the more authentic presentation of imperfection and insecurity. As Koffman, Orgad, and Gill contend, Yousafzai has already exemplified this “dual construction of the girl as a victim and agent of potential” in the imperialist framing of her “feisty, girl-power inflected mode of contemporary (post) feminist (post) humanitarianism” (5). The professionalization of her trauma, negotiating the opposing

subjectivities of girl in crisis and elder teen advisor, positions Yousafzai as a valuable and powerful figure who represents self-empowerment and endurance in spite of personal adversity.

In the United States, media reporting on gun control advocate Emma González has similarly engaged discourses of resilience meant to highlight female empowerment in the face of political opposition. On February 17, 2018, just three days after surviving the Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, González gave an impassioned 11-minute speech at the Rally to Support Firearm Safety Legislation in Fort Lauderdale. The image of the visibly shaken Cuban-American teen and her shaved head, stirring the crowd with her chant "We call B.S.!," drew considerable attention for the way González seemed to be pushing back not just against gendered norms of femininity but also professional norms of public presentation. Instead of participating in respectability politics to persuade those in power, González employed strong accusatory language that expressed her anger, frustration, and skepticism with the false promises of political figures to tighten gun laws. In an interview with *Variety*, Claudia Eller described González as "[m]ustering remarkable resilience and courage when she transformed her anguish and heartbreak into unabashed activism." As González wiped away tears and shouted into the news mic, press reports fixated on the raw grief on display, situating it in an empowering narrative quite different from the demoralizing cycle of past mass shootings. Following González from shell-shocked massacre survivor to resilient gun control activist (with a unique edgy look) would also provide powerful branding opportunities for the growing movement.

News coverage of the developing March for Our Lives student-led demonstration that González organized with fellow classmates David Hogg and Cameron Kasky, among others, focused on the female teen's resiliency as a professionalizing force in her activism. In fact, González and her peers seemed so articulate and knowledgeable in interviews with the media

that conservative pundits and conspiracy theorists speculated that the teens were "crisis actors" hired to emotionally appeal to the public on stricter gun control laws (Grynbaum). In an opinion piece for *The New York Times* titled "A Young Activist's Advice: Vote, Shave Your Head and Cry Whenever You Need To," González detailed the sleepless nights and incessant work she and her peers performed at Kasky's house to get their #NeverAgain movement off the ground:

> You can see very clearly in those early interviews that all of us had deep dark circles under our eyes. No one had an appetite. No one wanted to leave Cameron's house, not even to take a shower. None of us wanted to stop working. To stop working was to start thinking. And thinking about anything other than the march and the solutions to gun violence was to have a breakdown.

González characterizes hard work not as an achievement to be proud of but as a distraction from engaging with the trauma she shares with her classmates. Resiliency, despite being framed in the media as a courageous force propelling González forward, suggests refusal to cope with the pain of loss. In a way, resiliency becomes a performative act that might recognize the pain underneath but mostly obscures its impact on the worker's productivity. When utilized in conversations about González, resiliency conveys perseverance, elasticity, and professionalization—an ability to see the trauma and then put it to work.

In digital spaces, González's image complicates this resiliency framework in a few ways that challenge notions of respectability and recovery for girl activists reeling from tragic events. For instance, Jessalynn Keller observes how González's media presentation invokes "feminist snap," a concept formulated by Sara Ahmed to describe a feminist refusal of resiliency as a mode of survival while living under the stress of patriarchy. Keller identifies *Teen Vogue*'s coverage of González as pivotal in espousing her brand of feminist snap, which allowed the teen to pen an

op-ed where her "snappy girlhood" challenges "not only gender norms but also norms around age, which dictate a benevolence to adult patriarchal authority" ("A Politics of Snap" 16-17). As González points out adults' refusal to solve the gun violence crisis and respect the experiences of terrorized youth, she continues to confront the respectability politics young people are expected to deploy in their pursuit of successful structural change. In short, González refutes the notion of "playing nice" often invoked in discourses of resilience.

On her social media accounts, González's snappy girlhood can be seen in the way she confronts other celebrities who attempt to interpret and commodify her trauma. In May 2019, Madonna's "I Rise" music video sampled part of González's rally speech from her first public appearance. A month later, the pop star again invoked gun violence in the music video for "God Control," this time showing people being gunned down on a dance floor. In response to the second video, González posted to Twitter (@Emma4Change): "This is NOT the correct way to talk about gun violence, unlike how many fans have been exclaiming – people who have been working in the GVP [Gun Violence Prevention] community know how to talk about gun violence, not most celebrities." Here, González deploys her professionalized trauma to call out Madonna for not having the proper credentials or experiences to speak comprehensively and sensitively about the gun violence epidemic. By refusing to "rise above" the offense Madonna and her fans have committed in social and political discussions, González utilizes the public influence her tragic experiences have yielded to tell Twitter users that "if you tweet pictures or videos from the video of #GodControl, please tag it as Triggering for fucks sake." In criticizing Madonna's misguided approach to the gun violence conversation, González highlights the importance of trauma-informed activism in leading the charge for how the movement should be shaped.

Part of this management unfolds in the way González and the #NeverAgain movement have branded aspects of the teen girl's image and messaging that negotiate resiliency with authenticity. While both resiliency and authenticity are constructed discourses, they provide different effects in the professionalization of the girl activist. For instance, González posted a candid tribute to Mental Health Awareness Day on Instagram (@emmawise18) on October 10, 2019: "I have raging anxiety and it makes me yell quietly to myself – I have PTSD and it makes me feel like I'm gonna die – I have Depression and it makes me feel like the only motivation in life is to sleep another day – but I'm working on it. We love Her for Trying. We love You for Trying." The post, accompanied by a smiling photo of González with her hands on her hips, at first seems to convey how the young activist still feels positive despite dealing with a range of mental health difficulties. When scrolling to the second photo uploaded with the post, González is shown crouching with her back to the camera, revealing "Fuck the Police" in bold yellow lettering on her denim jacket (Figure 20). The "bait-and-switch" function of the Instagram post disrupts the resiliency narrative audiences assume González is engaging, in turn creating a jarring effect that enforces the radical self-brand the teen has embodied throughout most of her

Figure 20: Emma González's Mental Health Awareness Post on Instagram

media appointments. González challenges expectations of the resilient female subject by holding this figure up as a façade before breaking it down with what appears to be a more authentic presentation of her beliefs system.

The circulation of González's politically radical image in commercial media culture has also allowed her look to be appropriated, commodified, and therefore professionalized for a larger audience that may be distrustful of her non-normative performance. After speaking at the March for Our Lives rally in 2017, González's choice to wear an olive green jacket with a Cuban flag patch inspired other supporters to create similar radical looks. The "shared fashion statement," as Henry Jenkins and Rogelio Alejandro Lopez assert in their analysis of the participatory politics of the #NeverAgain movement, expressed "solidarity" with González, whose jacket "helped her to embody the change she wants to inspire" (118). The reach of González's celebrity has extended to other corners of consumer culture, including González's attempt to trademark "We Call B.S." for shirts, hats, and bandanas, as well as sweaters and shirts containing a QR code that, when scanned with a mobile device, registers the participant to vote (Silva). This commodification of González's activism, both direct and indirect, cements the teen's leftist politics in the professional lifestyling of her image. While activist messaging can often get lost in the mass production of marketable materials, it is important to acknowledge that González's brand of snappy girlhood becomes something followers can wear to express discontent with the political status quo. In doing so, González represents a shift in how the professionalization of girlhood in the early twenty-first century can successfully incorporate non-normative ideals into their public branding and promotion.

As public figures like Malala Yousafzai and Emma González demonstrate, the framing of resiliency in girl activist narratives works to rebrand traumas as professional opportunities that

emphasize the importance and urgency of the girl's cause. Often, media representation suspends girl activists between at-risk victim and risk-taking survivor, where the girl's story is used to elicit sympathetic responses and serve as a guide to the public on how to grieve and rally. While Yousafzai and González counter the dominant discourses that attempt to mediate their celebrity self-brands within a white Western capitalist framework, their public images negotiate these emotional responses alongside more professional presentations of empowerment and leadership during dark uncertain times. The girl activists so far have illustrated the ways the networked celebrity self-brand modulates the language, emotion, and challenges of social justice in order to prosper within the branding framework of commercialized mass media. Yet as Emma González has especially revealed, the professionalized girl's ability to combat respectability politics while maintaining a foothold in the attention economy indicates a greater tolerance for girls challenging social and economic systems to change their destructive ways of governing. The next section explores the continuation of this work through Greta Thunberg, accounting for the rise of organized youth activist movements in the late 2010s and the potential of girl anger as a professional tool to achieve political aims.

The Mobilization of Girl Anger

In May 2019, a 34-minute web video titled "Make the World Greta Again" was published on *Vice* showcasing the rise of teen activist Greta Thunberg and the lead-up to the first global climate change protest on March 15, 2019. In the video, the Swedish teen's environmental activism is framed as the antithesis to President Donald Trump, whose decision to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement in 2017 notably clashed with international efforts to combat greenhouse gas emissions. While Thunberg and Trump could not be any more different, *Vice*

attempted to make uncanny parallels between the two. For instance, supporters of Thunberg were shown expressing their admiration for the teen's ability to "tell it like it is," a characteristic often attributed to her Asperger's that also happens to evoke Trump's caustic way of speaking candidly to his followers. However, instead of beckoning people to reclaim a "forgone time" of capitalist prosperity for white upper-class Americans, "Make the World Greta Again" advocated for the reunification of an environmentally conscious global society looking to young people for direction. In short, Thunberg's straight-shooter approach identified her as the professional leader in need of making this movement impactful.

Like the girl activists discussed so far, Thunberg has been subject to the discursive tensions that negotiate her self-brand between her collective activist goals and the commercial media culture that benefits from the circulation of her image in the public sphere. In August 2018, 15-year-old Thunberg first attracted media attention when she began skipping school on Fridays and striking outside Swedish parliament. A blog she penned for *Medium* in the same month articulated the urgency she felt about the climate change crisis: "How am I supposed to feel safe when I know that we are facing the most acute crisis in the history of mankind? When I know that if we don't act now, everything will soon be too late?" (Thunberg). As followers shared Thunberg's article and image widely across social media, she also became the subject of commercial interest for entrepreneurs and eco-profiteers seeking to benefit from her international popularity. For one, the social media start-up, We Don't Have Time, allegedly used Thunberg's image without permission in digital adverts focused on climate action, generating millions in profit in which only ten percent were funneled into a charitable fund (*The Local*). At the same time, it has not been Thunberg's civility and positive spirit that have made her image so attractive to audiences and venture capitalists. As a "diminutive girl with pigtails and a fleeting

smile," Thunberg's self-brand manages to accommodate the unruly disposition of youth rebellion while still maintaining appeal and credibility in a commodity culture (Crouch).

While the marketing and selling of youth rebellion is certainly not new, the political framing of Thunberg's celebrity is significant for how it centers anger and the construction of transparency in the girl activist's media presentation. As the last section explored, "angry" girl activists like Emma González have helped pave the way for this self-brand to circulate without distancing the audiences these activists hope to attract. While social media commentary still paints Thunberg as a "hysterical teenager," it also accommodates the viewpoint that the teen is an inspiring activist who refuses to make world leaders comfortable in their inaction (Vertigan and Nelson). This discursive tension can be understood through what Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehl conceptualize as "awkward activism," an affective mode of engagement tied to contemporary activist movements that account for the messy contradictions of space and location in the digital realm. The "awkward aesthetic" particularly resonates with youth and the discomfort of becoming, which "evokes gangly bodies, hormones out of whack, libidinal (or other) urges colliding with familial prohibition, the sense of sticking out while using every means necessary to conform, and the willingness to assert opinions while these are still forming" (150). For Thunberg, her presence on social media as well as in the news refuse to conform to the respectability politics and girl power optimism typically expected of girls her age. Instead, Thunberg is shown as angered by the fact that government leaders have "stolen" her "dreams and childhood" by letting the planet die before she reaches middle age. As Sara Ahmed posits, "anger is not simply defined in relation to a past but as opening up the future" (247). Thunberg's anger, rather than being "stuck" on the object of climate change, is reaching towards a call to an unarticulated action. Her anger thus feels awkward or uncomfortable to some audiences,

especially from a teenage girl, but its overall effect conveys movement forward when so much climate change policy feels stagnant.

Thunberg's ability to mobilize followers using anger, all the while retaining speaking privileges with government heads and organizations, maintains the awkward by virtue of her race and class positioning. The girl activist can appear distressed, frustrated, and condescending and still have her image and ideas carry widespread influence around the world; meanwhile, girl activists of color struggle for similar levels of visibility (Unigwe). Furthermore, as the daughter of Swedish actor Svante Thunberg and opera singer Malena Ernman, Thunberg has access to the entertainment industry as well as knowledge of how her appearance will be mediated. As she notes in an interview with *The New York Times*, "That's one of the pros of having a famous mother. I'm quite familiar with the media and how it works" (Sengupta). While Thunberg's message undoubtedly resonates with a large portion of the world's population, her ability to navigate the awkwardness of her age and political influence (defined as the "Greta Effect") demonstrates the importance of identity in the professional lifestyling of girl activism.

Thunberg's connections, buoyed by her notability as a climate change activist, also allowed her to generate support and funds to reduce her carbon footprint and sail across the Atlantic Ocean on a racing yacht to attend the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit in New York City. News coverage of these events characterized Thunberg as receiving "rock star treatment," selling out venues for speaking engagements, meeting the Pope and other influential public figures, and even wading through the paparazzi (Watts). Thunberg's social media activity has reinforced these high-profile engagements through photos of the teen standing with crowds of protestors while sharing information she has learned about how specific communities and groups are facing the ecological crisis. The continuity maintained across media platforms allows

Thunberg to seem professional and organized in her activist efforts, fortifying her celebrity as evidence of her individual success. At the same time, the mediation of Thunberg's image obscures the value of whiteness in girl activism that allows her anger to circulate in media culture without threatening the oppressive racial and class policies.

The articulation of anger, when accompanied by rationalization, becomes a professional tool that white girl activists like Thunberg can employ. Their anger is not reined in or managed but instead bolstered by persuasive rhetoric that hails white masculine figures in charge of making environmental decisions. Although Thunberg skips school and refuses to mince words when talking to world leaders, her identity as a successful girl is never put in jeopardy. Instead, the press emphasizes Thunberg's "flawless English," (Crouch), "social media savvy" (Hertsgaard), and ability to articulate scientific fact while using "anger" and "shame" to great effect (Read). During an April 2019 meeting with MPs in Westminster, environment secretary Michael Gove admitted to "feeling guilty" as Thunberg called the UK's fossil fuels policy "absurd" for supporting the "UK shale gas fracking industry, the expansion of its North Sea oil and gas fields, the expansion of airports, as well as the planning permission for a brand new coalmine" (Watts). Thunberg's use of emotional appeals with political and scientific evidence allows her to express personal discontent that is contextualized by credible research. Even more, her established reputation has given her a platform to dispense criticism of capitalist overreach, accusing her audience of allowing "entire ecosystems" to collapse while talking about "money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth" (Read). The fact that Thunberg manages to maintain her professional girl status while disrupting expectations of emotional restraint conveys how critical race and class are to the girl activist's visibility and influence in a mediated political space.

Anger, according to feminist scholar Marilyn Frye, requires "uptake" from another person or domain in order to be taken seriously or else be seen as "just a burst of expression of individual feeling" (89). While Thunberg's anger finds "uptake" among political and scientific leaders, it has also been fortified by its potential to empower feminist and disability activists. Thunberg's reason for becoming angry began when she learned about the climate crisis in school. Understanding that world leaders were not taking effective action, she fell into a deep depression where she refused to speak or eat until she decided to "do something" and begin protesting (Haynes). As she prepared her transatlantic voyage to the UN Climate Action Summit, conservative critics like Steve Milloy called the activist an "ignorant teenage climate puppet" while Michael Knowles of Fox News dismissed her as a "mentally ill Swedish child." In a Facebook post on August 31, 2019, Thunberg responded to the personal attacks with a photo of her smiling as her yacht approached the New York City coast:

> When haters go after your looks and differences, it means they have nowhere left to go. And then you know you're winning! I have Aspergers and that means I'm sometimes a bit different from the norm. And – given the right circumstances- being different is a superpower. #aspiepower

Thunberg's reframing of her perceived weakness as a "superpower" illustrates the resiliency discourse at work, bolstered by the pairing of a smiling photo as opposed to her usual serious disposition. After Thunberg gave her impassioned speech at the U.N., President Trump tweeted: "She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!" Rather than directly addressing Trump's condescending message, Thunberg's Twitter bio briefly changed to reflect the tweet, demonstrating that the President's words had not deflated her confidence. Furthermore, as news sites like *Huffington Post* identified, Thunberg's

powerful “refusal to smile” became seen as a feminist statement pushing back against the misogyny highlighted by the #MeToo movement (Pasha-Robinson). As Thunberg’s image feeds into these intersecting cultural discourses, her angry and defiant attitude—rather than her support system and celebrity networks—are centered as the progressive force helping her self-brand change the world.

As the media coverage of Thunberg highlights, the teen activist’s anger towards the political inaction of world leaders is held up as an enlightening example of how young people are changing the world in a way that adults are not. Additionally, Thunberg’s act of dismissing the sexist, ableist, and ageist insults thrown her way reinforces the idealism of resilient girl power, where a smiling Facebook post becomes proof of the girl’s durability to “ignore the haters” and carry on with her work. However, what remains obscured in this construction is how Thunberg’s transnational celebrity enables the appearance of her individual success, and therefore, the impact of her message to effect global change. Thunberg elicits widespread media attention even as her performance challenges codes of professionalism through emotional language that admonishes her superiors, making it appear that the emotional appeals of girls have influence in the political sphere. Yet as Sara Ahmed observes, “the cultural politics of emotion is deeply bound up with gendered histories of imperialism and capitalism,” where the subaltern woman is “posited as ‘failing’ to ‘live up to’ the standards of truth in their emotionality” (170). Thunberg’s ability to employ anger while being seen as a resilient force worthy of political attention reifies racialized and classed notions of what kinds of girls are listened to in the climate change debate. Although Thunberg has had success in broadcasting her message and influencing an international audience, it is a success that is defined in terms of privileged citizenship and the global capitalist reproduction of her celebrity.

The work that Thunberg has accomplished and the impact she has had in directing attention to the climate change movement convey how girl activism, when elevated as a professional endeavor that intersects with progressive political discourses, becomes a powerful force in early twenty-first century media culture. It is at this intersection where the girl's self-brand determines how to navigate the commercialization of her cause that might prove to be antithetical to her aims and morals. In an Instagram post on January 29, 2020, Thunberg (@gretathunberg) addressed concerns about the use of her name and the Fridays for Future movement for illegal marketing purposes:

> Imposters, trademarks, commercial interests, royalties and foundation…First: Unfortunately there are still people who are trying to impersonate me or falsely claim that they "represent" me in order to communicate with high profile people, politicians, media, artists etc. […] Second: My name and the #FridaysForFuture movement are constantly being used for commercial purposes without any consent whatsoever. It happens for instance in marketing, selling of products and people collecting money in my and the movement's name.

Thunberg continues to explain how these instances have led her and her family to decide to trademark her name and Fridays for Future, as well as set up a non-profit foundation to handle book royalties, donations, and prize money in a transparent way. The post, which included a close-up photo of Thunberg giving a wry smile, conveyed how girl activism in the social media era could potentially regain control over the celebrity image and away from the commodification of commercial culture. To do so requires the girl to adopt a professional presence and treat her activism as a business to be managed. In this case, the professionalization of girlhood may

demonstrate how girls can control their mediated image as their self-commodification becomes a personal and political affair.

Conclusion: Confidence for Change?

The attention given to famous girl activists in the early twenty-first century illustrates how images of girls not only provide hope through performances of confidence and resilience but also the reinforcement of commercial culture in the branding of their activist identities and causes. At the center of social justice campaigns, girls are used to demonstrate how social, economic, and environmental solutions can be obtained through individual professionalization as seen in the development and amplification of a microcelebrity brand. The commercialization of the girl activist may at first seem contradictory to the vision of transformative activism that seeks to dismantle capitalism for true gender, race, and class justice. Yet as Banet-Weiser argues, "brand cultures" are "structured by ambivalence" where "hope and anxiety, pleasure and desire, fear and insecurity are nurtured and maintained" (*Authentic*TM 217-218). The branding of girl activism can soften its potential for systemic change as much as it intensifies public awareness and affective engagement, and yes, even confronts harmful regimes to change for the better. Particularly as girls seem most understanding of the various uses and functions of social media brand culture, the future of activism is very likely to rely on their expertise in organizing social movements around the commercialization of authenticity and intimacy.

As this chapter has explored, girl activism in the digital age negotiates the consumerist tendencies of a brand culture with the social justice goals that strive to disrupt capitalist systems of oppression. The professionalization of girlhood takes on this task through the management of woke progressive ideals that frame the girl activist as safe even as she challenges mainstream

discourse to consider revolutionary ideas of gender, race, and class. At times, this process might appear as commodity activism, where the girl promotes social justice via her alignment with a brand or company that claims to share in her belief system. While the girl succeeds in spreading her message to a wider audience, her commercialization risks restricting her reach to the realm of passive consumption. The branding of intimacy, especially through physical and psychological trauma, becomes another way the girl engages the public as a professionalized activist whose resiliency signifies leadership and movement towards healing and social solutions to violence. While the media presentation of girl survivors often depicts them in this postfeminist mode of resolving inner turmoil through sheer willpower, their social media activity illustrates challenges to recovery. Significantly, girl activists convey how trauma-informed activism can successfully brand a movement that needs to remember the violence from which it was birthed.

Lastly, the procession of girl activists in the 2010s seem to indicate a growing shift towards anger as a political and professional tool to enact institutional change in response to global crises threatening the future of humanity. While anger has long been used in activist organizing, particularly in communities of color and the riot grrrl movement, its ability to take up space in the form of a teen girl on an international platform while garnering respect from world leaders seems a significant accomplishment worth noting. It is also worth acknowledging that girl bodies that can wield anger to great effect are often white and/or exist in middle to upper-middle class spaces. The emergence of girl anger in activists like Emma González and Greta Thunberg seems more possible as a long-term activist strategy that resonates with other mainstream political movements from #BlackLivesMatter to #MeToo. Even more, the use of anger in their professionalized activism has become important to the growing resistance against Donald Trump and the far-right ideology he and his followers invoke. What is significant about

girl anger, though, is not how it seems to reject the stereotypical positivity of girl power. Rather, girl anger expresses another side to the call for confidence that is supposedly so lacking among twenty-first century girls. Young female activists are angry at the injustices done to them and the communities they care about, but they are not hopeless. Instead, they represent a more reactive version of confidence that still leads to a professionalized future while shaping how that process can best reflect their cultural climate. As girl activists organize in the streets and on the internet, they demonstrate how activism is kept alive as an affective brand that circulates in a commercial media culture.

CONCLUSION

Confidence in a Time of Anxiety

While working on this dissertation, I have been reflective of my own girlhood experiences with confidence and anxiety and how these emotions have organized my professional journey. Always the quiet and obedient straight-A student, I strived to please my teachers and establish a strong foundation in school that would lead to a "successful" life. Recently, I revisited the diaries I kept as a tween girl living in New Mexico and noticed how a fear of mistakes drove me to create a professional plan for my life. On August 13, 2002, I learned that my sixteen-year-old babysitter, who was a top student and athlete, had gotten pregnant. "I'm a bit afraid of her now, and my future…if a good girl can get pregnant, what are the chances for me and my friends?" my twelve-year-old self wrote. Because I saw myself in my babysitter, the knowledge of her pregnancy shook my worldview and made me afraid that I would somehow succumb to choices that could potentially ruin my reputation and vision for my life. I resolved to create a plan—a physical list to follow to keep me on the straight and narrow:

1. Be good and polite.
2. Get good grades.
3. Finish high school without becoming pregnant, and gladly except [sic] to go to college.
4. Try to get into Oxford, but if not, try University of Missoula.[15]
5. Finish college, and any college after college, and get a degree in literature.
6. During college, get a part-time job, apartment, and car. Apartment can come after college, just in case I live in a dorm.

[15] Incidentally, I did end up at the University of Montana at Missoula for my undergrad.

The list continues, covering my marriage, established career, and one-to-three kids, until I retired at the age of 62 (!!) in Florida after selling my Pokémon cards and Beanie Babies that I was assured would be worth a fortune someday. While this list makes me laugh now, it also makes me realize that anxiety, rather than confidence, had been the driving force for many of the choices I wanted to make and still make to this day. These reactions, while specific to my personal experiences, belong to a significant historical discourse tracing the supposed lack of self-confidence among girls and how technologies of professionalization responded to this crisis in the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century.

The confidence gap that Kathy Kay and Claire Shipman claim holds girls back and dramatically impacts their future professional endeavors seems to miss a vital consideration: how embracing one's imperfections and failures is hard to do when societal safety nets are absent and cultural attitudes reject personal choices that do not support capitalist standards of productivity and social reproduction. Sometimes, it is anxiety and a fear of failure that drives us forward, often to unhealthy degrees, rather than the embracement of an insecure and imperfect self. Achieving confidence through an acceptance of personal flaws is also an action primarily executed by white and middle-to-upper-middle class girls. Yet even as girls are encouraged to take these steps to bridge the gap, they primarily do so in a professionalized culture that is only open to inadequacy and anxiety as long as these things can be managed and commodified. The at-risk girl, then, does not simply exist in the margins; she must serve a greater purpose in the developmental narrative sold to girls that pushes them to be authentic and work hard because that is how they are ultimately valued in a neoliberal capitalist society.

The discourses of confidence and anxiety that unfold from the can-do-/at-risk paradigm have informed the professional lifestyling of girls in early twenty-first century media culture. In

these various media presentations and appointments, girls are organized around the social and economic promises of their productivity. Living under the pressure to satisfy a network of parents, teachers, peers (both online and off), and social institutions, girls are consistently faced with expectations to succeed in ways that are visibly useful to the operations of a globalized economy. Especially in a surveillance media culture that seems to present more and more opportunities and tools to build a celebrity brand and audience, girls are seen as meeting their potential when they professionalize their private lives according to the logics of commodity culture. As writer and former Facebook employee Katherine Losse puts it, “the personal [is] professional” (141).

While this dictum mostly describes how contemporary life has adjusted to the pressures of neoliberal society, its discursive influence in the presentational media of girlhood conveys the importance of sowing the seeds of professional life in one’s youth. In this way, girlhood is a *productive* mode of female empowerment rather than a protected entity kept away from the pressures of work. As a talented girl on reality TV, or a budding influencer on YouTube, the personal lives of girls are positioned to be the initial footsteps in a woman’s professional journey. This realization is important for girls as it seems to respond to the confidence gap in providing mediated examples of entrepreneurial achievement, where girls are somehow able to circumvent structural inequalities and create their own economic success because of the supposed democratic affordances of contemporary media culture. Attaining confidence and self-empowerment, then, becomes a commercial endeavor rather than a feminist one, even as these terms parade as anthems for gender equality in the workplace.

As I have argued, girlhood is represented as a business that relies on confidence and the management of anxiety for capital at the same time that it operates as a guarded institution that

ensures the continuation of heteronormative femininity and the patriarchal family through capitalist reproduction. In a presentational media culture, where celebrity functions as a "pedagogical tool and aid" in the "discourse of the self," contemporary mediated girlhood utilizes strategies of branding and promotion to teach us to value girls based on achievements that feel authentic as they serve a commercial purpose (Marshall, "The Promotion and Presentation of the Self" 36). This celebrity construction, in turn, obscures the hierarchical nature of race and class that informs the professionalization of everyday life that structure girlhood achievements.

We can see this practice in the work of celebrity mothers who manage their daughters' entertainment careers, relaying a strong investment in the maintenance, or aspirational attainment, of class status that protects the white patriarchal family and adheres to the politics of female empowerment. The hope and anxiety placed on girls to achieve these goals emerge in the competitive narratives seen in reality programs that showcase talented youth, where girls' confidence and insecurities are used to promote success myths as authentic representations of (often white middle-class) girls' achievements. Race and class continue to inform the professionalization of girls in digital spaces, particularly in the social media production of girl influencers. As the online youth aesthetic has shifted from filtered content to a slacker sensibility, overextended work practices are portrayed as effortless, allowing the self-brands of overachieving white girls to appear relatable and authentic. On the larger scale of international politics and policy, girl activists negotiate confidence, trauma, and anger in the celebrification of their professional presentations. News media signify these highly visible girls as the face of movements like gun control or climate change, invoking them to achieve their goal of "saving the world" while softening their revolutionary rhetoric for commercial appeal. While the

professionalized girl is not entirely restricted in her pursuit of challenging norms and institutions, she is shown to modulate her appearance and demeanor in ways that value authenticity as they open herself up to commodification.

At stake in this project is the normalization of the professional as personal in the everyday development of girls as they grow up in a world increasingly organized around surveillance media. This becomes a problem when the professional often champions a certain racialized and classed citizen that adheres to a politics of respectability that actively marks othered bodies as unacceptable or deviant and therefore undeserving of attention. The professional girl is reinforced in images of talent and confidence that permeate television shows, news programs, feature films, and social networks. Particularly in spaces where girls are given the opportunity to speak or interact with their audiences, the achieving girl becomes an authentic and relatable figure who seems to prove that hard work and anxiety management can lead to success. More so than adult women, the personal has no other choice but to be professional for girls who are usually restricted from full-time employment. As such, the professional attempts to give girls the methods and skills to support and advocate for themselves, even as it leaves some girls out of this process.

While laws are in place to regulate paid work girls might take on, such as in the entertainment industry, the indistinct boundaries between labor and leisure in digital spaces make it more challenging to distinguish where the girl's personal pastime ends and her performance of the professional begins. In this way, girls also participate in the presence bleed Melissa Gregg describes in terms of adult work culture, where the boundaries around personal and professional identities loosen and anxiety sets in as workloads feel ever-present and endless. The compulsory call to work that applies to this process mostly impacts adult women with full-time work and

care responsibilities. Yet as my case studies reveal, surveillance media illustrates that girls are being primed at an early age to value achievement and work through personal issues that might create roadblocks to their future careers. Branded as female empowerment, these representations encourage girls to find ways to capitalize on their everyday life if they want to be valued and taken seriously in a world that typically dismisses their voices from public debate.

The professionalization of girlhood has continued to resonate as the twenty-first century progresses and surveillance media shape women's and girls' place and influence in public life. Major cultural shifts brought on by the popularity of feminism in mainstream spaces have shown how the gendered landscape for girls' future opportunities is changing to accommodate new forms of leadership and advocacy. In the early 2010s, nonprofit organizations have emerged in order to encourage girls to pursue interests in computer science and equip them with the necessary computing skills to pursue careers in STEM. The launch of Girlboss Media, a company founded by former Nasty Girl CEO and *#Girlboss* author Sophia Amoruso in 2017, has worked to create editorial content, videos, and podcasts aimed at a younger female audience seeking advice in their personal and professional life. In the same year, the Fearless Girl statue, a bronze sculpture of a young girl with her fists on her hips, made a profound statement when it was installed in front of the New York Stock Exchange to promote gender-diverse companies with women leaders. "Know the power of women in leadership. SHE makes a difference," the plaque below the statue reads. The influx of microcelebrity girls in commercial media spaces, from JoJo Siwa to Emma Chamberlain, demonstrates how the traditional professional trajectory for women is changing at a young age to accommodate the influencer and the notion of work as an identity and brand that must be consistently managed. The continued embrace of celebrity as a tool to negotiate the private in the public self seems to suggest that the professionalization of

girlhood will be highly focused on fame as a job. While this may be true to an extent, this process also reveals that celebrity equips girls with the skills needed to navigate the diminishing barriers between private and public life that redefine leadership and self-empowerment as brandable commodities.

As neoliberal conceptions of professionalized girlhood persist in twenty-first century popular culture, the achieving girl as a complex composite of confidence and anxiety reigns as the "It" girl at the end of the 2010s. Billie Eilish, an American teen singer known for her ethereal electropop music, baggy clothes, and neon hair, was branded as a "weird achiever" in an *NPR* "Best Music of 2019" editorial. In the article, Eilish is described as bringing a confident spirit and professional attitude to her live performances despite dealing with social anxiety. Her creative work, invoking the subversiveness of youth rebellion, attempts to disrupt perfectionism in a way that inspires "a new kind of entrepreneurship, which adapts to norms instead of dismantling them" (Powers). The public fascination with girl stars like Eilish boils down to how the rejection of achieving girlhood and feminine normativity can make the girl appear more authentic and more aware of how her image is used in the media. Confidence still exists, but it exists as a more subversive, more subtle performance responding to a culture of anxiety and insecurity supposedly hindering the futures of young girls. Eilish demonstrates how that anxiety can be managed and transformed into a mega-successful career, relying on her celebrity to amplify the personal and emotional qualities of her character that resonate with the disaffected but still hopeful youth culture. In this way, the professionalization of girlhood in early twenty-first century media culture may be reimagining rather than closing the confidence gap, creating new challenges and questions to old problems as the performance of confidence shifts to accommodate changing social, cultural, and technological structures.

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beat/7702012/cash-me-outside-remix-hot-100-dj-suede-remix-god. Accessed 4 Sept. 2019.

curriculum vitae

JESSICA E. JOHNSTON

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EDUCATION

PhD **University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee** May 2020
English (emphasis: Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies)
Dissertation: "The Business of the Girl: Celebrity and the Professionalization of Girlhood in Early Twenty-First Century Media Culture"
Dissertation Committee: Tami Williams (Chair), Elana Levine, Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, Michael Newman, Jessalynn Keller (University of Calgary)

Graduate Certificate: Women's and Gender Studies
Specialization: Feminism and Digital Culture, Television Studies, Celebrity and Stardom, Girlhood Studies

MA **University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee** May 2015
English (emphasis: Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies)
Master's Thesis: "Sex Education on YouTube: Analyzing Online Video as a Space for Youth to Engage in Sexual Dialogue"
Master's Committee: Tasha Oren (Chair), Tami Williams, Elena Gorfinkel

BA **University of Montana at Missoula** May 2012
English (emphasis: Creative Writing, Film Studies)
summa cum laude, Davidson Honors College

Edinburgh Napier University Fall 2011
ISEP-Study Abroad (Edinburgh, Scotland, UK)

FELLOWSHIPS

Distinguished Dissertation Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2019-2020
Recognizes the most academically excellent PhD students at dissertator status.

Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2016-2019
Provides three years of support for outstanding underrepresented students in graduate study.

HONORS AND AWARDS

James A. Sappenfield Fellowship in English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2018
Recognizes academic excellence; recipients are selected by department faculty within each graduate plan.

Eliana G. Berg Award for Graduate Research, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2017
Outstanding research in Women's and Gender Studies; paper recognized: "On the (Cutting) Edge: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and the Glass Ceiling in the Political Media Discourse of Hillary Clinton."

Heldrich-Dvorak Travel Fellowship, Southwest Popular/American Culture Conference 2014
Travel award presented to first-time conference attendees; paper recognized: "'Till Regeneration Do Us Part': *Doctor Who*-Themed Weddings and the Performance of Fandom."

UWM Chancellor's Graduate Student Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2013
Presented to incoming high-quality graduate students.

PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Journal Articles

"The Reality of 'Messy Real Life': Jazz Jennings and the Dramatisation of Young Transgender Celebrity in TLC's *I Am Jazz*." In "Special Issue: The New Reality of Reality Celebrity," edited by Erin Meyers and Alice Leppert, *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2018, pp. 455-469.

"The Doll 'InbeTween': Online Doll Videos and the Intertextuality of Tween Girl Culture." In "Special Issue: Locating Tween Girls," edited by Melanie Kennedy and Natalie Coulter, *Girlhood Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018, pp. 59-74.

"Subscribing to Sex Edutainment: Sex Education, Online Video, and the YouTube Star." *Television and New Media*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2017, pp. 76-82.

"*Doctor Who*–Themed Weddings and the Performance of Fandom." In "Performance and Performativity in Fandom," edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul J. Booth, *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 18, 2015. http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0637.

Book Chapters

"Under Western (Girls') Eyes: Cultural Appropriation and Feminism in the Celebrity Fashion of Kendall Jenner and Gigi Hadid." In *Celebrity and Youth: Mediated Audiences, Fame Aspirations, and Identity Formation*, edited by Spring-Serenity Duvall. Peter Lang, 2019.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"Lala Feminism: The Ambivalence of Late Capitalist Femininity in *Vanderpump Rules*." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Denver, CO, April 2020. (Chair).

"Mother Knows Best: Managing the Girl in the Reality TV Family." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Seattle, WA, March 2019. (Co-Chair).

"Girl's Got Talent: Gender, Celebrity, and Achievement in Reality Talent Shows." International Girls Studies Association Conference. University of Notre Dame, IN, March 2019. (Chair).

"White Women's Wrath: Reconsidering Feminist Narrative Television in a Post-Election Context." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Toronto, Canada, March 2018.

"The Managed 8-bit Heart: Technology, Status, and Emotional Labor in *Black Mirror*." Single Lives 2017: 200 Years of Independent Women in Literature and Popular Culture. University College Dublin, Ireland, October 2017.

"Growing Up Trans: Negotiating the Celebrity and Labor of Teen Activist Jazz Jennings." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Chicago, IL, March 2017.

"On the (Cutting) Edge: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and the Glass Ceiling in the Political Media Discourse of Hillary Clinton." Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI, February 2017.

"Girl Meets Queer: Interpreting a Queer Girlhood through Disney Channel's *Girl Meets World*." Film and History Conference. Milwaukee, WI, October 2016. (Chair).

"Hello Barbie, Hello Virtual World: Performances of Girlhood in the Age of Digital Doll Play." Console-ing Passions Conference. University of Notre Dame, IN, June 2016.

"Little Girls, Monstrous Secrets: How Genre Paradigms Can Restrict Our Understanding of Girlhood in Mass Culture." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Atlanta, GA, March 2016.

"The Disposable Sex Worker: Distortion and Dehumanization of Sex Work in Film and Media." National Women's Studies Association Conference. Milwaukee, WI, November 2015.

"Gross Girlhoods: Disgust, Trauma, and the Female Adolescent Body in the Film *Wetlands*." Film and History Conference. Madison, WI, November 2015.

"What Every Woman Must Know: Sex Ed on YouTube and the Power of the Female Voice." International Association of Media and History Conference. Indiana University, IN, June 2015.

"'Till Regeneration Do Us Part': *Doctor Who*-Themed Weddings and the Performance of Fandom." Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Conference. Albuquerque, NM, February 2014.

UNIVERSITY-LEVEL TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee – Department of English, Department of Film Studies

Instructor
*Television Criticism and Theory***,** Spring 2019
Lectured and graded upper-level undergraduate course building on forms and strategies of television narrative, analysis, and industry. Students composed an industry analysis and developed a television pilot presentation.

Introduction to Television Studies, Spring 2017, Spring 2016 (online)
Lectured, graded, and created D2L course materials for lower-level undergraduate course on the fundamentals of form, images, and narrative in television. Students wrote textual analyses focused on narrative, production and aesthetics, and ideology and representation.

Entertainment Arts: Film, TV, and the Internet, Fall 2016 (online), Fall 2015 (online)
Created D2L lecture and discussion materials and graded for introductory undergraduate course on aesthetic features of different media, their interrelationships, and developing critique. Course counts towards Digital Arts and Culture Certificate.

College Writing and Research, Spring 2016, Fall 2015, Spring 2015
Lectured and graded for introductory undergraduate course in English focused on extensive engagement with academic research writing and reflective analysis. Students produced a portfolio of original research and revised writing.

Introduction to College Writing, Fall 2014, Spring 2014, Fall 2013
Lectured and graded for introductory undergraduate course in English focused on critical reading, writing, and revision, with an emphasis on reflective inquiry and academic writing conventions. Students produced a portfolio of revised essays reviewed by other instructors in the English Department.

Teaching Assistant
History of Film I: Development of an Art, Fall 2017
Graded and led discussion sections for lower-level undergraduate course focused on film history from the late 1800s-early 1940s.

Entertainment Arts: Film, TV, and the Internet, Spring 2015
Graded and led discussion sections for lower-level undergraduate course covering aesthetic features of different media, their interrelationships, and developing critique. Course counts towards Digital Arts and Culture Certificate.

New Mexico State University-Carlsbad – Department of English, Department of Creative Media Technologies

Adjunct Instructor
History of Film: Global Perspectives, Spring 2016 (online), Spring 2015 (online)
Designed and adapted lower-level undergraduate course (according to Quality Matters instructional design training) for Canvas exploring the development of film in the 20th century around the world.

Introduction to Digital Video Production, Spring 2013
Lectured and graded introductory hands-on course studying the tools and techniques used to produce independent video. Students produced a Spring showcase of their final short films.

Introduction to Digital Video Editing, Spring 2013
Lectured and graded introductory course on the software and techniques of non-linear digital video editing.

General Composition, Spring 2013
Lectured and graded developmental English course designed for students to build college-level writing skills in the form of short essays and reflective journaling.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Writing Center Aug. 2014-Present
Writing Tutor – Milwaukee, WI
Consult and guide undergraduate and graduate students with writing assignments and projects across a multitude of disciplines, covering how to generate topics, organize ideas, develop content, refine language, and revise drafts. Film and edit new alumni tutor bios for the Writing Center website.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee English and Film Studies Aug. 2013-May 2019
Graduate Teaching Assistant – Milwaukee, WI
Instructed roughly 500 undergraduate students in 18 face-to-face and online courses in writing, research, film studies, and television criticism over 16 semesters. Designed and implemented in-class activities, lectures, and
assignments. Assessed quality of student work according to course objectives and incorporated changes to improve curriculum. Supervised training of new instructors and evaluated classroom teaching.

College for Kids/Teens Jun. 2016-Jul. 2019
Summer Program Instructor – Milwaukee, WI
Adapted college-level courses into one- to two-week summer courses for middle school and high school students. Topics included: fiction writing, television representation, film studies, and participatory culture.

Upward Bound Math and Science Jun. 2015-Jul. 2019
Summer English Instructor – Milwaukee, WI
Developed and taught a 6-week summer English and writing curriculum for underprivileged high school students interested in pursuing the STEM fields in college.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Career Development Center Feb. 2014-Aug. 2014
Career Resource Assistant – Milwaukee, WI
Aided career counselors with scheduled and walk-in student appointments, designed career resource hand-outs, and performed videography work for promotional purposes.

New Mexico State University Carlsbad Sept. 2012-May 2016
Instructional Designer (Jun. 2014-Dec. 2014) – Carlsbad, NM
Adapted a college-level course (History of Film) for online students of New Mexico State University according to the Quality Matters Rubric (5th edition). Completed online training for QM instructional designer certification and piloted the course during Spring 2015.

Digital Media Studio Assistant (May 2013-Aug. 2013) – Carlsbad, NM
Maintained the campus film studio and cataloged camera equipment to create an orderly and efficient classroom environment for the digital media department.

Adjunct Instructor (Jan. 2013-May 2016) – Carlsbad, NM
Lectured, graded, and led discussions and activities for courses in the English and Creative Media Technology Departments, both face-to-face and online.

Marketing and Public Relations Coordinator (Jan. 2013-May 2013) – Carlsbad, NM
Wrote and edited profile stories on students, faculty, and different departments as the university correspondent for the Carlsbad Current-Argus newspaper. Filmed campus events and produced several short commercials and promo videos for TV and the university website.

Administrative Assistant (Sept. 2012-Jan. 2013) – Carlsbad, NM
Organized competition events and assisted students with transcripts to ensure progress towards certificate and associate degree completion in the Welding and Manufacturing Department.

Videographer, Photographer, and Reporter Sept. 2012-May 2013
Freelancer – Carlsbad, NM
Contributed written and filmed news stories spotlighting local events, charities, and organizations for an independent digital news company.

The Mosaic Company May 2012-Aug. 2012
Videographer Intern – Carlsbad, NM
Filmed and edited training videos with Final Cut Pro and Adobe After Effects and integrated them in new training software (Lectora) to engage and inform employees on mining safety.

Big Sky Documentary Film Festival Jun. 2009-Feb. 2010
Festival Programming Intern – Missoula, MT
Systematized festival organizers' scores for film festival applicants. Created and shared promotional materials for the festival around the Missoula community. Assisted the Programming Manager with scheduling and local sponsorship of specific films.

ACADEMIC SERVICE

The Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference May 2014-May 2019
Chair (May 2018-Present) – Milwaukee, WI
Organized the theme, abstract call, and keynote invitation (Rachel E. Dubrofsky, University of South Florida) for a 2-day graduate-level interdisciplinary conference that attracted 50 presenters across the Midwest and North America. Secured funding from university groups and managed a $9,000 budget for conference venue, food, and related events. Created abstract reading criteria for volunteers and designed and scheduled the conference program. Facilitated a professional pedagogy workshop with other conference organizers for attendees and volunteers.

Co-Vice Chair (May 2017-Apr. 2018) – Milwaukee, WI
Developed outreach strategies for the conference call-for-papers focusing on graduate programs in the Midwest. Managed the volunteer schedule and coordinated with faculty to act as panel respondents.

Volunteer (Dec. 2015-Feb. 2017) – Milwaukee, WI
Supervised the registration table during the conference, transported lunch, and provided rides to out-of-town presenters to conference events.

Hospitality Liaison (May 2014-Feb. 2015) – Milwaukee, WI
Orchestrated accommodations and transportation for non-local conference presenters. Drove presenters to and from the airport and train station. Researched and shared restaurant and commuting options in the Milwaukee area.

Children and Youth Media and Culture Scholarly Interest Group Jun. 2017-Present
Graduate Representative – Toronto, Canada; Seattle, WA; Denver, CO
Manage the social media presence for Children and Youth Media and Culture, a scholarly interest group within the Society for Cinema and Media Studies organization. Share calls-for-papers, book chapters, and related conference events across member networks. Communicate important information to the membership regarding SCMS meetings, travel awards, and mentorship program. Solicit panel sponsorships and promote panels before and during the annual SCMS conference.

Center for 21st Century Studies May 2018-Nov. 2018
Volunteer – Milwaukee, WI
Greeted presenters and managed the registration desk for the annual Spring conference for the Center for 21st Century Studies, a humanities research institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Transported visiting scholars around the Milwaukee area for campus talks.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee English Department Dec. 2015-Aug. 2017
Graduate Representative (Aug. 2016-Aug. 2017) – Milwaukee, WI
Offered program information and maintained communication with prospective and accepted graduate students in the Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies track. Organized social events to foster community among students and faculty. Produced and shared weekly email news bulletins on relevant events, job openings, and call-for-abstracts. Coordinated student bios to include on the program website.

English 102 Mentor (Dec. 2015-May 2016) – Milwaukee, WI
Advised two new instructors with developing syllabi, assignments, and activities for English 102: College Research and Writing. Facilitated monthly meetings to discuss strategies and challenges of the course. Conducted teaching observations later in the semester and provided verbal feedback and suggestions for improving classroom instruction.

cream city review Oct. 2013-Jan. 2015
Art Editor and Videographer – Milwaukee, WI
Solicited and reviewed art work submitted to *cream city review*, a creative literary magazine located at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Created issue covers using Adobe InDesign. Filmed reading events promoting upcoming issues of the magazine and edited them into short videos for YouTube.

New Mexico State University-Carlsbad Sept. 2012-Dec. 2012
Film Series Coordinator – Carlsbad, NM
Developed a monthly fall community film series to foster a closer relationship between the public and the college. Organized lecture speakers for each film and facilitated Q&A with audience members after the screening.

The Oval Jan. 2011-Apr. 2012
Design and Layout Editor – Missoula, MT
Developed the layout and cover design for *The Oval*, an undergraduate literary magazine at the University of Montana. Prepared short fiction, poetry, and visual art in Adobe InDesign. Collaborated with campus printing services to ensure successful printing of each issue.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

International Girls Studies Association 2019-Present
Society for Cinema and Media Studies 2014-Present