Keeping Up with Postfeminism: The Branding of the Kardashian Sisterhood

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Introduction

Kris Jenner, the self-proclaimed “momager”\(^1\) of the Kardashian family said, “I think you guys have to stay united and realize that anything either one of you does builds the whole Kardashian brand.”\(^2\) She offered this advice during the episode “All for One and One for Kim,” of the wildly popular television series, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, to placate the three eldest sisters, Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé, after a disagreement concerning the amount of time they have been spending on their individual projects as opposed to the unified family brand. This comment, perhaps overlooked by the casual viewer, acknowledges the underlying ideological framework of the Kardashian empire: sisterhood sells. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* presents sisterhood as the foundation of their entrepreneurial ventures. To be successful, the Kardashian sisters encourage the empowerment of women and celebrate the neoliberal, post-feminist idea that women can “have it all.” Further examination proves, however, that their construction of femininity continues to be heteronormative, upholding stringent beauty standards. The Kardashians demonstrate the power of women working together, but also glorify individual, even narcissistic, improvements of the self. In these ways, they are contradictory icons in a post-feminist age.

In this paper, I will demonstrate the ways the Kardashian family uses the medium of reality television, along with other social media, to cultivate an “authentic realness.” Established by an overt willingness to grant the audience what is perceived as an unfiltered glimpse into their most personal moments (e.g. when Kourtney gives birth or when Kim goes to a fertility doctor), the Kardashians attract a fan base appreciative of their apparent genuineness. In the age of reality shows like *Catfish*, which films the first meeting of couples

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\(^{1}\) A term trademarked by Kris Jenner. It describes her dual role as both mother and manager to her eldest daughters, Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé, from her first marriage to Robert Kardashian, Sr., and her youngest daughters, Kendall and Kylie, from her second marriage to Olympian Bruce Jenner (who recently transitioned to Caitlyn Jenner).

who have only interacted online to overwhelmingly disastrous consequences (one person is usually not who they claim to be), viewers are skeptical of fabrications; therefore, when *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* makes a claim to “real” drama, it creates an apprehensive audience, one who demands total transparency. As a result, the sharing of seemingly personal information forges an imagined bond of friendship between the sisters and their viewers, culminating in a virtual sisterhood.3

I will then expose the contradictory ways the Kardashians position themselves in relation to the post-feminist framework of today. According to media critic Diane Negra and other scholars, this millennia is a post-feminist period that dismisses the need for active coordination of organized movements because females have, allegedly, managed to reach a status equal to that of men.4 Although the Kardashian sisters exhibit many ideals of post-feminism, such as a type of “empowerment” that celebrates a command of sexuality and a recognition of consumer culture as a primary source of fulfillment, they also challenge the emphasis on neo-liberal individualism by advocating the value of sisterhood, a fundamental aspect of second-wave feminism. Beginning in the 1960s and extending through the 1980s, women embraced second-wave feminism for the “the promise of sisterhood”5 and a desire to become “a group with the capacity to act.”6 The promotion of sisterly unity by Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé, and their two younger sisters, Kendall and Kylie, in conjunction with Kim’s identification as a “sort-of” feminist, reported in an interview with *Time Magazine*, in which she revealed, “I guess people would call me a feminist […] I just do what makes me

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comfortable,”7 perpetuates the inconsistency of their market, one “tailored to insecurity and desire,”8 under the guise of female support.

I argue that reality television provides a platform for the Kardashians to form a superficial intimacy9 with their fans, which ultimately creates a virtual sisterhood. This inclusion creates a level of trust that relaxes viewers when they are watching, producing a fan base that is increasingly susceptible to the subconscious internalization of the attitudes and opinions expressed by the sisters. On the surface level this assimilation could be considered empowering: they are successful businesswomen, unafraid to speak their minds, and increasingly lauded for controlling their objectification. However, the highly problematic nature of this perception is exposed through the Kardashians’ expectation of traditional femininity, with products and endorsements catered exclusively to maintaining a level of unattainable attractiveness; these values create an expectation of heteronormativity and neo-liberal self-improvement, which includes anything from dangerous diet supplements to, increasingly common, plastic surgery procedures.

The first part of this paper reviews scholarship about reality television, particularly in relation to post-feminism. I will then consider the ways the Kardashians construct their sisterhood through reality television and social media platforms. Finally, I will end with an analysis of how the Kardashians use their bodies as a marketing tool for their products and endorsements, while simultaneously deliberating on the lasting, negative impact they are having upon women in society. This paper is based on viewing the first ten seasons of

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Keeping Up with the Kardashians and also analyzing the media coverage\(^\text{10}\) of them from 2007 to 2016, excluding the discourse about race that surrounds the Kardashians, as well as Bruce Jenner’s transition to Caitlyn Jenner.\(^\text{11}\)

**Reality Television, Social Media, and Post-Feminism**

A comparatively new genre of mediated entertainment coming to fruition in the “late 1980s,”\(^\text{12}\) reality shows have come to dominate television networks. A cost-effective undertaking, with significantly lower production costs than scripted shows,\(^\text{13}\) it is often “described as addictive, as crack TV, a guilty pleasure,”\(^\text{14}\) drawing viewers in with the promise of “real” drama, signified by the normality of the setting.

The arguably most important component of reality television is the claim to authenticity, despite manufactured storylines. Most shows do not deny the editing that shapes the final product; however, as media scholar June Deery explains, “RTV has put so much stress on the notion of reality that we may now be at the point of referring to ‘real reality.’”\(^\text{15}\) She contends that the awareness of fabrication is erased when reality television characters and their stories are consistently validated by media. Thus, after watching countless hours of these shows, viewers are hard-pressed to pinpoint fictitious moments, and will consider the decisions and statements made by a character as an integral part of their personality. Pozner

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10 I used *LexisNexis Broadcast Transcripts* for their television interviews, mainstream media news sources, such as *The New York Times, Forbes, MTV, ET, People Magazine*, etcetera, and followed all of their social media accounts (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat) to create a comprehensive knowledge base.

11 After encountering scholarship about race and the Kardashians towards the end of my research, I did not feel like I could accurately represent it into my paper. My decision to exclude it does not diminish the importance of racial implications in understanding the Kardashians. In regards to Bruce Jenner’s transition, I also did not feel that I could adequately cover this topic in my paper. Although interesting to study, I did not feel that I could adequately cover this topic in my paper.


14 Deery, *Reality TV*.

15 Ibid.
supports this idea, claiming, “form and content […] work to hide the constructed nature of
the program and thus presents subjects [as] eminently authentic and genuine.”

Scholars explain that the word “real” is contentious. Deery acknowledges “as a
concept ‘real’ can mean different things—actual, authentic, genuine, unexpected, raw,
autonomous,” and reality television employs many of these definitions. Overall, most
scholars of reality shows agree that, in modern society, there is a “nostalgic desire for the
authentic.” This longing for “the real,” arguably due to the detachment generated by a
society increasingly dependent on technological innovations and staying permanently
connected, also induces emotionality. This feeling of a legitimate and substantial relationship
creates what Deery terms an “affective reality,” the term used when “viewers react
emotionally because real people are expressing real emotions and it is this emotion that
creates a sense of authenticity.”

Reality television tends to organize its cast into recognizable types. The reality genre
sits in direct contrast to fictional programs, where “instead of trying to make characters seem
real, RTV turns people into characters.” These “characters” are subsequently regarded as
embodiments of their true self; as Pozner claims, “viewers tend to believe that the caricatures
they’ve seen on reality TV match (or at least resemble) participants’ real-life personalities.”
Dominant forms of media also lend support to this conception. For example, in an interview
she conducts with Kim Kardashian for Paper Magazine, author Amanda Fortini writes,
“she’s not performing, that is—at least not visibly. She is being. And being is her act. Her
appeal derives from her uncanny consistency as does that of her show.”

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16 Pozner, Reality Bites Back, 235.
17 Deery, Reality TV.
18 Ibid. Media scholars Misha Kavka, Jennifer Pozner, Alice Leppert, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and Laura Portwood-Stacer, to name a few, all address this “desire for the authentic.”
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Pozner, Reality Bites Back, 204.
Reality television uses “convergence” to stay relevant. According to media scholar Henry Jenkins, convergence culture is the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment they want.”

Reality television and social media perpetuate each other: audiences watch shows, which leads to a greater following on social media accounts, a flurry of sharing posts and “liking” ideas, which then generates a more expansive follower base. This engagement entices new fans and viewers, who then begin to watch because they are curious about the show (which triggers the cycle all over again). The intersection of reality TV and social media ensures that characters become celebrities.

Critics and fans also presume that RTV is mindless or frivolous. The impression suggests that RTV is politically neutral or lacks ideological force; however, many scholars have refuted this assumption. Feminist media critic, Brenda R. Weber claims, “the ideological content of reality programming often flies under the radar of popular political commentary, thus allowing for potential inculcation of values and norms largely free from scrutiny.” This possibility of assimilation is what is alarming about reality television: people absorb, and then imitate, value systems with only a slight awareness that this is happening because they have neglected a critical examination. Media scholar Beverly Skeggs supports this idea, alleging, “even though ‘reality’ television is highly edited […] some of the affect seeps beyond containment.” Therefore, many of the “lessons” of reality shows can be observed in the lives of viewers. For example, the reality show, What Not to Wear, on TLC, instructs viewers to shame their friends if they purchase or wear an item of clothing that is...

considered unflattering. This show teach viewers “valued techniques of self-governance,”26 including the need to police their own appearances, informed as they are with a “limited, advertiser-approved ‘idea’ of beauty,”27 framed “to amplify regressive values around gender.”28

The popularity of reality television coincides with the rise of post-feminist discourse. The “dominant form of mainstream feminism in the United States,” post-feminism legitimates the feminist ideal of women “as both powerful citizens and consumers […] offer[ing] what at times looks like a radical gesture in terms of disrupting dominant gender relations.”29 At the same time, post-feminism, according to scholars Shelley Budgeon and Angela McRobbie, dismisses organized feminism as unnecessary and old-fashioned. As Budgeon states, “popular perceptions of gender relations often suggest that feminism can now be safely relegated to the past.”30 Post-feminism ignores over-arching power relations, and declares that the power to succeed lies completely within the individual.31 Post-feminism celebrates the high-achieving woman who “has it all”; one who has the freedom to “choose a lifestyle from an endless range of options now available.”32 The primary emphasis, therefore, is on consumer choice and style. As feminist critic Diane Negra explains, “postfeminism attaches considerable importance to the formulation of an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it.”33 Thus, the woman who “has it all” is told that a great amount of her success lies in having a “sleek,

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26 Kavka, Reality TV, 135.
27 Pozner, Reality Bites Back, 63.
28 Ibid., 18.
31 Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, “‘I Just Want to Be Me Again!,’” 257.
toned, and controlled figure.”

Reality television has played a central role in instituting unattainable body standards, teaching “women how to display and perform the ‘right’ kind of femininity,” as well as popularizing body improvement techniques, particularly plastic surgery. Reality shows like *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and *Botched*, use “presenters, surgical experts, friends, relatives, and the person being made-over” to “position the body as both problematic in itself, and as troubling to the self.”

Cosmetic surgery offers a counter narrative of “legitimation of a particular idealized feminine beauty”; this restrictive definition of physical attractiveness is then framed as the “ultimate expression of an individual transformation and a kind of empowerment.” This empowerment is framed in terms of the “female body, which is where women’s empowerment is forced to live.” Kavka contends that this practice has become normative because “all failings of self can be resolved by making ‘corrections’ to the body.”

Post-feminism also encompasses celebrity feminism. Author Jessalyn Keller discovered, via blogger Renee, that celebrities tend to avoid the word feminist and, in many cases, completely renounce it. As high-powered, influential individuals, their stance could help, or hurt, the connotations associated with feminism. Blogger Renee explains the conundrum: “when you find out they are against feminism, your heart kind of sinks because inevitably they will say things like ‘Oh, I’m not a feminist, I love men, I think men and women should be equal and women shouldn’t try to take over. It’s like what?! It is so

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36 *Extreme Makeover*, although it ended in 2007, was a show centered around giving three people (per season) “the makeover of a lifetime, which includes: plastic surgery, lasik surgery, cosmetic dentistry, hair, makeup and fitness.” *The Swan*, is defined as “a reality show about an ugly duckling turned beautiful swan, only it’s a woman giving herself a physical makeover with plastic surgery, to complete in a beauty pageant.” *Botched*, is a show depicting “horrible plastic surgeries gone wrong,” which are then “looked at by two of California’s best plastic surgeon.” All of these information was taken from IMDB.com, or the Internet Movie Database.
38 Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, “I Just Want to Be Me Again!,” 261.
39 Ibid.
40 Tolentino, “How ‘Empowerment’ Became.”
41 Kavka, *Reality TV*, 130.
frustrating because they obviously have no idea about the subject.”

Feminism is generally “regarded ambivalently by those young women who must, in more public venues, stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition.”

We are increasingly asked to celebrate celebrities as feminist symbols, impressing a certain perception of feminism upon the girls or women who idolize them. On the other hand, there are outspoken feminists, like Beyoncé, who advocate for an individualist feminism, or a subset of feminism that focuses on liberation from hierarchical oppression. Thus, celebrity feminism includes both a denial of feminism and an individualist feminism.

Despite their celebrations of women’s power and success, reality television shows like Keeping Up with the Kardashians affirm a post-feminism outlook that is “deeply traditionalist,”

“femininity and ‘girliness’ in the name of enlightenment and female empowerment.”

The concept of sisterhood, or the idea that women “unite” through “a set of shared experiences,” appears to threaten this traditionalism. But upon further examination, the “stern disapproval” that accompanies the deviation from norms is inserted into the sisterhood; accordingly, it becomes a space where women can police each other, “reinforcing the traditional views of women and what makes women desirable.”

The Branding of Sisterhood

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44 Su Holmes and Diane Negra, In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011), 152.
47 Gilmore, Feminist Coalitions, viii.
48 Negra, What a Girl Wants?, 152.
The term *brand* is “most commonly used to stand for a distinct form of marketing practice intended to link products and services with resonant cultural meanings through the use of narrative and images.”\(^{50}\) Essential to the brand is the logo, or the “material form of the brand as an image,” which is the “first line of any marketing strategy.”\(^{51}\) In the case of the Kardashians, consumers recognize the letter “K” as the ultimate signifier of the family. However, the “K,” and more broadly, “Kardashian,” is never received at face value; it is a placeholder, meant to convey their lucrative business empire, their sex appeal, and opulent lifestyle, including high fashion and expensive travel. The Kardashian brand also signifies expert self-promotion under the veil of female empowerment.

Although each sister is highly visible on her own, the brand is about the sisters as a collective unit. The emphasis of the group over the individual is evident, particularly in season six, during *Kim’s Fairytale Wedding, Part 2*, when Kim contemplates changing her last name to Humphries, to accommodate her future husband. When Kim reveals this desire to her mother and her sisters, they talk her out of it, asserting their unified brand as more important. Kris Humphries, upon discovering this, angrily informs her, “This is not your family’s decision, this is your decision,” to which Kim replies, “People know me as Kim Kardashian. I don’t think it’s gonna resonate at all if all of a sudden it’s Kim Humphries.”\(^{52}\) The importance of their last name, signifying their family brand, is essential; as Kim recognizes at the end, “my last name has become my business.”\(^{53}\)

Similar to other successful branding strategies, this approach, “form[s] intimate relationships between the brand and the consumers.”\(^{54}\) To cultivate this emotional attachment, the sisters sell both their manufactured personae and their relationships with one

\(^{50}\) Alison Hearn, “‘Meat, Mask, Burden’: Probing the Contours of the Branded ‘Self,’” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (2008): 199.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 199.

\(^{52}\) *Keeping Up*, “Kim’s Fairytale Wedding, Part 2.”

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

another. They design their television shows and social media accounts to prove that, despite their wealth and beauty, they have the same concerns and insecurities as all other women—mostly in terms of professional success, family stress, and body image. This perception allows them to position themselves as allies to the viewers of their show, creating not just a sisterhood among themselves, but also a sisterly bond with viewers. Media scholars Frith, Klein, and Raisborough suggest that they build a “synthetic sisterhood,” or a “close-knit, intimate community of women with shared interests and concerns, and particular ways of interacting and being characterized by friendship and care.” Within this support system, the sisters are confidantes, meaning they share personal moments and bestow advice to their “friends” (i.e. fans), while sharing “secrets” with them.

The Kardashian brand extends to a variety of products. A New York Times article contends, “what Ms. Kardashian [Kim] and her sisters create and sell are products based on their own image.” They perform characters, claiming them as unconditionally authentic, selling their personalities, bodies, and products, while simultaneously positioning sisterhood as “vital to career success.” Although their endorsements are undisguised, and their primary objective “is profit,” Alice Leppert sees depth in the Kardashian sisterhood brand, arguing that viewers are inclined to identify “connections among women [as] valuable, emotionally and financially.”

At the center of the creation of sisterhood is their reality television show, Keeping Up with the Kardashians. The trajectory of almost every episode follows this pattern: the sisters fight, but, by the end, resolve it through a discussion about their need to prioritize their

55 Although I have only chosen to use episodic evidence from Keeping Up with the Kardashians, they have aired four other variations of reality shows. They are Kourtney and Khloé Take Miami (2009, 2010), Kourtney and Kim Take New York (2011, 2012), and Kourtney and Kim Take Miami (2009, 2010, 2013), and Khloé & Lamar (2011, 2012).
56 Frith, Klein, and Raisborough, “C’mon Girlfriend,” 479.
57 Tolentino, “How ‘Empowerment’ Became.”
59 Ibid., 217.
relationship as both sisters and friends. For example, in season two, the family arranges one of their affluent, jealousy-inducing vacations to Breckenridge Ski Resort. Although intended to be a respite from working “without a break [or] a day off,” as Kris once said in an interview with *Nightline*, Kim is reluctant to disconnect from her phone, preoccupied with speaking with her then-boyfriend, Reggie Bush. When Kourtney and Khloé criticize her, Kim exclaims, “the one thing that makes me happy is talking to my boyfriend!” and then elaborates that, because of her age, she must start thinking about marriage. This traditional view, although problematic because it seems to endorse the pressure on women to marry, is ignored during the ensuing argument between Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé. Kim decides to leave, but returns when Khloé leaves a heartfelt voicemail, telling Kim “I’m really worried about you, Kourtney and I, we’re really worried about you. We wanna make sure you’re okay.” They “talk through their personal lives [and] confess their emotions,” maturely resolving their disagreement, which, at its core, is about spending time with, and prioritizing, each other. These moments, scattered throughout every episode, work to make the audience “admire and covet the Kardashian family’s intimacy and affection.”

Sisterhood is not only constructed through intimate family moments; it is also built through situations revolving around their joint business enterprise. In season three, *New Wave Fragrances* wants to release a Kim Kardashian perfume called “Dashing,” a play on the name of their original clothing boutique DASH. In protest, Khloé yells at Kim, “This is our name

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61 Kim Kardashian dated American football player Reggie Bush on and off from 2007 to 2010, and it provided a main storyline about family and children, and Kim’s “biological clock.”
63 Ibid.
65 McClain, *Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand*, 218.
66 DASH is the fashion boutique created by the three eldest Kardashian sisters, Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé, as their first joint business venture. The original store was founded in 2006 in Calabasas, CA prior to the creation and filming of their first reality TV show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, but was moved to West
as a trio. We trademarked it.” Khloé later confesses to the audience, “My sisters and I have always said we’re going to do a clothing line together, a perfume line together, a makeup line together.” To make sure that the audience clearly understands the purpose of this episode, Kim says, “I don’t think this fight was about perfume, but about the connection that me and my sisters have.” The importance lies in Kim’s decision to chose “sister-entrepreneurship above all else,” directly opposing the post-feminist assertion of “individual empowerment over collective action.”

What makes the Kardashians so successful in branding is that they capitalize on the popularity of “girl power.” In their book *Kardashian Konfidential*, the sisters claim, “We work for what we have, and we believe in girl power,” a foundational concept that “remains mired in the hegemonic discourse of sisterhood.” However, they frame girl power primarily in terms of a beauty empire; it relies on fashion boutiques, fitness videos, credit cards, a best-selling fragrance, skin care products, and self-tanner, and has even expanded to include makeup lines, nail polish lines, perfume lines, clothing lines, and diet supplements. It also includes endorsements of “jewelry, shoes, candles, perfumes, Silly Bandz, Sugar Factory candy stores, Nivea skin creams, self-tanning lotion, and diet products, among others.” These products are all catered to self-improvement, particularly, for females. Most

Hollywood in 2012, to earn a greater profit. The next DASH store was opened in Miami Beach in 2009 in conjunction with the first season of the spinoff show, *Kourtney and Kim Take Miami*, while the last opened in the Soho district of Manhattan in New York City in 2010. In the summer of 2014, the sisters also opened a pop-up DASH store in Southampton, New York, as depicted on another one of their spinoff shows, *Kourtney and Khloé Take the Hamptons.*

keeping Up, “All for One and One for Kim.”
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Leppert, “Keeping Up […] Fame-Work,” 222.
71 Ibid., 218.
72 McClain, *Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand*, 218.
75 McClain, *Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand*, 97.
76 Ibid.
recently, the Kardashians have endorsed QuickTrim, the weight loss supplement, as well as a waist cincher, a product that recalls a more traditional time period (e.g. a corset).

The Kardashian sisters, and their branding of sisterhood, are only possible because of social media. The construction, “development, and maintenance of brand and celebrity has been immensely aided by astute social media use.” Their synthesis of various platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and more recently, Snapchat, has made them a ubiquitous presence, with their personal information flowing between the various media. As defined by Paper Magazine, social media creates a type of fame “whose hallmark is agreeable omnipresence, which resembles a kind of evenly spread absence, soothing, tranquil and unobjectionable.” They have an immense following on every platform. For example, each family member has a considerable number of Instagram followers: Kim currently has the most with 67.3 million (and counting), Kylie follows her with 58.1 million, with Kendall not far behind with 54.4 million. Khloé and Kourtney both also have a large following, with 46.7 million and 37.8 million, respectively. Even matriarch Kris Jenner has a following of 12.4 million and Caitlyn Jenner with 6.6 million. They also have 3 of the 5 most-liked pictures of all time on Instagram. As sisters, they command the largest following on any of the social media platforms, constantly posting pictures of all of them together to make sure

77 McClain, Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand, 237-38.
78 Fortini, “No Filter.”
79 Bruce Jenner, patriarch of the show for the first nine seasons, underwent full gender reassignment surgery, and is now known as Caitlyn Jenner. She is now lauded as a pioneer for the transgender community, and has her own show, I Am Cait, on the E! Network. (The decision to use a name beginning with a “C” rather than a “K” has been widely discussed in terms of branding.
80 These numbers were taken from Instagram on March 30, 2016.
81 The most-liked picture on Instagram spawns from Kendall’s account, posted on May 25, 2015, depicting her lying on the group with her hair elaborately arranged as hearts; this photo generated 3.3 million likes. The fourth most-liked picture on Instagram is a snapshot from Kim’s account commemorating her wedding to Kanye West; posted on May 27, 2014, this photo generated 2.4 million like. The Kardashian-Jenner clan also find themselves with the fifth most liked photo from Kylie Jenner, showing her high school diploma from Ojai, CA; Posted on July 23, 2015, this picture generated 2.3 million likes. Although the two other photos in the top five belong to Taylor Swift, the second most-liked picture is shows Taylor standing next to an elaborate flower display sent to her by Kanye West, thanking her for presenting him with the Video Vanguard Award at the 2015 MTV Music Awards; Kanye West has married into the Kardashian clan. Taylor Swift is also known to be good friends with both Kanye and Kim. (These pictures are still in the top five, but these numbers have changed since they were taken in December, 2015).
they are followed by the same people. Their accounts are a combination of product endorsements, everyday life, and shameless selfies.

Despite their Instagram prowess, Twitter is essential for the creation of sisterhood, as it provides a direct connection between the sisters and their fans. Although Snapchat has, in many ways, overtaken Twitter as the conveyer of everyday life,\(^82\) Twitter allows for a conversation: it is conducive to an easy back-and-forth, as fans are able to receive an answer from a Kardashian sister, establishing the fan “as another sister, who anticipates and experiences deeply personal moments along with the Kardashians.”\(^83\) Therefore, simply by “following a famous person’s tweets over a period of time” a follower may feel like they know them on a deeply personal level.\(^84\)

Their prolific social media presence has grown with the full inclusion of Kendall and Kylie Jenner into the sisterhood. Season eleven, arguably more than the previous ones, recognizes the youngest sisters as vital for the Kardashian brand. In a promotional video for the upcoming season, the sisters want their audience to know that they are back—and more united than ever. Within it, Khloé says, “we are sisters by blood, best friends by choice. I don’t know how I would live my life without my family. It’s the best support system in the world […] we are a united force.”\(^85\) Unlike mom Kris Jenner or any of the husbands or boyfriends, Kendall and Kylie were always going to be included in the sisterhood: they just had to reach an appropriate age first. If incorporation into the brand means adopting a sexualized image to sell beauty products, then they had to reach the age where they could not only partake in the dissemination of a “sexy Kardashian,” but also contribute their own ideas and unique personal brand to increase the celebrity of the entire family. Media scholar Alice

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\(^82\) As a new medium, relatively little scholarship has been written about Snapchat.

\(^83\) Leppert, “Keeping Up […] Fame-Work,” 226.

\(^84\) Hearn, “‘Meat, Mask, Burden,’” 201.

Leppert claims, this inclusion also allowed for “their branded sisterhood to [reach] an even broader audience.”

At first, the Jenner sisters were only occasionally incorporated into the sisterhood. In season five, Kourtney concocts a plan that uses Kendall to scare their mother out of her smoking habit. Kourtney, who has a passion for healthy living, is disgusted with this recent habit and decides, “if she’s not gonna stop, let’s force her to stop.” She tells Kendall to stand outside with a fake cigarette lit in her hand, and wait until her mom catches her. This moment is used to teach Kris, who, when she is called a hypocrite by Bruce, finally realizes that she is setting a bad example for her daughters. More importantly, this is an occasion where the sisters are united, albeit against their mother. It creates a moment of sisterly unity, where they work together to achieve a common goal.

The headline from a *Today Show* interview says, “If You Think Keeping Up with the Kardashians is Hard, Try Keeping Up with the Jenner Girls.” As they are younger, with a different demographic of fans, they arguably have more power to popularize the brand. Although all of the sisters are considered “brilliant when it comes to the art of the personal brand,” younger sisters Kylie and Kendall have proven themselves to be the most accessible to their followers. In an interview with *Harper’s Bazaar* in February of 2016, Kris Jenner praises their ability to genuinely relate to their fans. She says, “even Kendall and Kylie have 50 million followers on Instagram—apiece. That’s a hundred million people you have somehow touched emotionally enough to follow you on a social-media platform.”

Although, “even” may not be the word to use anymore: the younger sisters could soon

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86 Leppert, “Keeping Up […] Fame-Work,” 228.
overtake Kim as the reigning social media star of the family. This usurpation, however, is not detrimental for Kim, as it adds to the prosperity of the entire family. McClain claims, in order to succeed, “the family must join together to promote individual members, and thus, the family itself.”

The sisters are all archetypes. Defined as “the original pattern or model from which copies are made,” or “a prototype,” the word archetype is used to convey the tidiness of their characterizations. Kim is “shy, hardworking, dramatic, the most emotional of the three.” Unquestionably she is the “uptight perfectionist,” unable to accept anything not up to her standards. Kourtney, the “oldest, bossy sister,” is “calm, collected, rational, unemotional, the strongest of the three.” Khloé, the youngest of the trio, is “tough on the outside, but sensitive inside, generous, affectionate, the most fun of the three.” Within the opening credits, she also establishes herself as the “irreverent funny sister.” In a recent article with Vogue, Kendall is described as “calm and low-key in person.” Famous designer Karl Lagerfeld also notes that she is “a very sweet person,” and someone who is “very caring and not at all spoiled by those superficial successes.” Finally, Kylie self-defines in an interview with Time, saying “I’m always experimenting and trying to figure out who I am and exactly what I want to be.” Later she says, that she wants to be “an inspiration for young girls.”

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91 McClain, Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand, 104.
92 This definition was taken from the Oxford English Dictionary.
93 Kardashian, Kardashian Konfidential, 3.
95 McClain, Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand, 49.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 D’Addario, “Kylie Jenner.”
According to McClain, the creation of these archetypes is essential for their sisterhood brand. In order for the brand to thrive, each sister must “exhibit[s] similar qualities and follow the family directive: all must participate in various media, provocatively exposing themselves.” Therefore, they must be different, but similar. Different so that fans can identify with at least one of them and their prescribed set of traits, but similar enough so they can form one brand—with the central tenets of ambition and attractiveness. The Kardashian body has become the vehicle to relay these traits to fans. By unapologetically flaunting their enviable physiques, the sisters claim that they have control over their sexualization, in a social climate where “discourses surrounding female celebrity” are centered solely on “the body.”

Thus, it is no surprise that the sisters encourage each other to maintain their shape, “mutually control[ling] each other through policing networks,” while simultaneously monitoring their own appearance. On the show, the Kardashians, regularly make small comments related to maintaining a perfect physique, which are likely to go unnoticed by, or have little impact on, viewers who are accustomed to hearing these types of remarks. In the first episode of season one, for example, we are told Kim has a photo shoot the next day. Immediately, Khloé tells her to “Stop eating,” and the rest of the family agrees. Within minutes, Kris chimes in, confessing to Khloé, “I think she has a little junk in the trunk,” and turns to Kim to tell her to do “a little cardio.”

In season eleven, there is another photo shoot, this time for Kourtney. When she is convinced to do it naked, she justifies her decision, saying, “I work out every single day, so I

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103 McClain, *Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand*, 37.
104 Holmes and Negra, *In the Limelight*, 7.
105 Winch, “Catfight,” 142.
feel like, why not?” Later, when Kourtney shows Kim the pictures, she emphasizes that they “aren’t retouched or anything.” Kim is impressed by them, and immediately compliments her and tells viewers, “she’s back and she’s on fire.” Although not a quip, Kim’s positive affirmation of her weight loss perpetuates the idea of the “self as an entrepreneurial project that should be constantly worked upon.”

About six weeks ago, Kim posted a naked mirror selfie to Instagram (covering her breasts), with the caption, “When you’re like I have nothing to wear LOL.” This post incited backlash in the media-sphere with comments similar to the one from actress Chloe Grace Moretz, who tweeted, “I truly hope you realize how important setting goals are for young women, teaching them we have so much more to offer than just our bodies.” In response, Kim insisted that her Instagram was an act of “empowerment”; in a letter to her fans about this incident, she writes, “I am empowered by my body. I am empowered by my sexuality. I am empowered by feeling comfortable in my skin. I am empowered by showing the world my flaws and not being afraid of what anyone is going to say about me.” She ended this post with: “It’s 2016. The body shaming…it’s like, enough is enough. I will not live my life dictated by the issues you have with my sexuality.” The number of comments this post provoked, led to her “Instagramming” another selfie of the same nature with the caption “#liberated.” By marketing their bodies as a source of empowerment, the sisters

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107 Keeping Up with the Kardashians, “That Was Then, This Is Now,” directed by Chris Ray, written by Eliot Goldberg and Ryan Seacrest, Episode 1, Season 11, E! Entertainment Television, LLC, November 22, 2015.
108 Ibid.
110 Taken directly from Kim Kardashian’s official Instagram account.
113 Madeline Roth, “Kim Kardashian Writes.”
114 Taken directly from Kim Kardashian’s official Instagram account.
are regarded as “consciously flipping the script on media objectification of women.” Thus, although they are sexual stereotypes, they promote it as modern gender equality.

Other celebrities have responded favorably to the Kardashians’ idea of empowerment through exposure. Crystal Bell, for MTV, claims, “it’s hard to deny their positive cultural impact on American body standards,” a stance which is reiterated by popular, and curvy, singer Demi Lovato. In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres, she revealed that “it was Kim Kardashian and her highly publicized, curvaceous figure that helped her find the confidence to love herself, curves and all.” When Kim posts that controversial naked selfie, singer, and self-identified feminist, Lorde comes to her defense, saying, “If anything, I think she gets more beautiful and sexy all the time […] and of course has every right to showcase that.” All of these comments are echoed in a statement made by Joy Behar in 2010: “I think it’s great that you have basically gone beyond that look [the Hollywood ‘skinny’] to become the new look.” Indeed, the Kardashians affirm body-obsession, focused more on their curves (as long as it’s not a focus on overt slenderness). Khloé, the youngest Kardashian sister has recently completely transformed her body, writing a book about her experience, called *Strong Looks Better Naked*. An excerpt of her book synopsis reads, “In a culture that worships skinny, Kardashian writes with passion about the power of strength: a strong body lays the foundation for a strong mind, which leads to strength of heart, character, and

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115 Alter and Steinmetz, “Kim Kardashian Talks Hillary Clinton.”
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Lorde has said many times that she is a feminist. For example, she critiqued Selena Gomez’s hit, “Come and Get It,” saying, “‘I’m a feminist and the theme of her song is, ‘When you’re ready come and get it from me.’ I’m sick of women being portrayed this way.’” (Simon, Rachel, “Why the Confident, Feminist Lorde is the Perfect Role Model for Girls,” *Bustle*, November 6, 2013, http://www.bustle.com/articles/8347-why-the-confident-feminist-lorde-is-the-perfect-role-model-for-girls.)
ultimately spirit.” The Kardashians also “pay lip service to the complexities of different body shapes, yet the discourse bolsters standard body norms, which typically results in family member unhappiness.” This critical mindset causes a normalization of procedures to fix “what is wrong,” subsequently resulting in an endorsement of plastic surgery. They have all had work done, and are not shy about saying it. In an interview on Nightline with Cynthia McFadden, Kourtney acknowledges, “I’ve had breast implants. But it’s so funny because it’s not a secret. I could care less.” In an interview on Piers Morgan a year later, Kim confirms, “No [to surgery]. I’ve tried Botox before.” And Kris Jenner has also had part of an episode devoted to her “neck-lift” because, as she claims, “I’ve always been really self-conscious of my neck…and my body.” When she comes back from the surgery, Khloé reinforces this act, telling her, “your neck doesn’t look like leather anymore.”

Thus, if the Kardashians have become “the new look,” what does that mean for women around the country, who are constantly looking at pictures of the Kardashian body? For one, although it is lauded as positive because it offers an alternative to “skinny,” it is simply a new set of guidelines on how the female form should look—with just as many restrictions as before, hidden within empowerment and the idea that everyone should be happy with their body. These “mass mediated ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own.” And because “women and girls look to their peers to secure appropriate behavior and looks,” “individuals merely see their non-attainment of beauty norms as personal obstacles to overcome.”

122 Kardashian and Jenner, “Sex Appeals; Family Affair.”
125 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 2.
126 Winch, 231.
127 Banet-Weiser and Stacer, 264.
They have also transformed plastic surgery into empowerment by claiming that honest disclosure of surgery is somehow a political act. Their transparency about their surgical procedures seems daring because they suggest that they have nothing to hide. For example, in season ten, there is an entire episode devoted to Kylie’s lip injections; her sisters tell her she must own up to the work she has had done, but understands the procedure as necessary if she is insecure about it. Kim says, “Kylie’s been so insecure about her lips, since she was a little girl. And I get that. I mean, we all have insecurities.” When her older sisters support her, it makes this act seem normal for an eighteen-year-old. At the end of the episode Kylie says, “Having older sisters with some of the same insecurities as me helps me a lot and makes me feel like it’s okay,” echoing the sentiment of the extended sisterhood, who try to emulate Kylie’s recently modified lips. Dubbed the “Kylie Jenner (Lip) Challenge,” Kylie’s fans were so desperate to mimic her new look that they used shot glasses and other unfit items to disastrous results. However, Kylie was able to turn this into profit, debuting Kylie Cosmetics, and creating makeup “lip kits” that always completely sell out. Time Magazine reports that “the third release of her lip kit sold out in minutes.” For the Kardashians, looks and business are so closely linked, that appearance has become the “normatively essential” way to portray “success.”

**Momager**

The key figure in the creation and maintenance of the sisterhood brand is momager, Kris Jenner. She is considered the “epitome of Hollywood momager, turning her attractive

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129 Ibid.
130 D’Addario, “Kylie Jenner.”
131 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 2.
brood first into TV, and then into advertising gold.”132 Her status as mom and manager, in itself, is a problem; media scholar Shelley Cobb contends that mothers who actively work to make their children famous, and then become famous as an adjacent, have created an overt disdain that “has become a regular feature in the consumption of celebrity news,”133 primarily due to this idea that a “woman’s identity as a mother and as a working person are perceived to be mutually exclusive.”134 Despite this controversy, the Kardashian family have emerged “as legitimate businesspeople” with Kris the powerful “mother-leader of them all.”135

Kris’s status as “mother” incriminates her. Although Kris is more than essential in all of the deals inked for her daughters, she is never allowed to breach the sisterhood, excluded because of how she profits from her children. Scholars Bishop and Hall claim, “we have been so conditioned by our cultural expectations regarding motherhood—there is only one way to think of a mother and that is favorably, a ‘natural’ outgrowth of our connection to the maternal.”136 Kim, Kourtney, and Khloé are young, beautiful women who have been “empowered” by a “quintessentially postfeminist combination of commercial enterprise and frank sex talk”; thus, they are allowed to do sexy photo shoots and rely on the marketing of their physical appearance to sell products. Even though Kris is also attractive, she exists outside of the highly sexualized sisterhood.

134 Ibid., 128.
136 Mardia J. Bishop and Ann C. Hall, introduction to Mommy Angst: Motherhood in American Popular Culture (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009), xii.
In an attempt to join the sisterhood, Kris, in season six, contemplates changing her surname back to Kardashian. At an elite Hollywood event, a reporter mistakenly refers to Kris as Kris Kardashian—an apparently frequent mix-up. After, Kris insists that changing her name would not be “unusual. I’m developing their brand. I’m making new Kardashian products. My life, all day long, is pretty much a Kardashian world.” Although Kris is thinking of it in terms of brand consolidation, her daughters subsequently reject the idea. Kim and Kendall articulate their objections, but the ramifications do not truly sink in for Kris until Khloé expresses Bruce’s hurt feelings. To the audience, Khloé says, “She’s so caught up in work and so lost sight of what’s important. What’s important is your husband of twenty years, not the brand that we have right now.”

By rejecting her from their sisterhood, Khloé, along with all of her sisters, are enforcing the double standard of “selfishness.” This is a common dichotomy associated with motherhood: mothers must choose between “being self-less and selfish,” an ultimatum that “leaves little room for self.” However, when they choose “selfishness,” as Kris appears to be doing, as she wants to benefit from the lucrative sisterhood, it is a “sign of bad motherhood and transgressive femininity.” One example of female unity seems to depend on the exclusion of the old and suspect mother. Both the media and her family dismiss Kris; most of the time, her attempts to include herself are portrayed as humorous, a chance to laugh at her seemingly desperate attempts for admission. For example, in season nine, Kim and her friend Larsa Pippen (who is married to retired Chicago Bulls basketball player, Scottie Pippen) decide to take a pole dancing class for fun. Larsa invites Kris to go with them, who

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138 Kris Jenner and Robert Kardashian Sr. had been divorced since March 1991, amidst rumors of a Kris affair with Todd Waterman. Their falling out was prior to the O.J. Simpson trial; the first time the name Kardashian had been heard nationally.
140 Ibid.
142 Cobb, “Mother of the Year,” 128.
enthusiastically agrees, much to Kim’s overt displeasure. On the ride over, Larsa Pippen says, “Get ready, bitches, to pretend you are strippers,” to which Kris jokingly replies, “That’s not a far stretch for me.” Annoyed, Kim snaps: “Mom, a comment like that is not a good look.”

Although the show depicts love and mutual respect amongst the Kardashian sisters and their mother, there are many times where it appears that Kris does not “have [her] daughters’ ‘love and respect,’ which is seen in the “cases when the female celebrities make public statements about their mothers.” When the sisters are insulting each other, they are simply having a slight disagreement, which is expected from children; for their mother, who is not protected by the sisterhood to the same extent, by either her own children or the media, the attacks carry more weight. They come from the idea proposed by media scholars, Bishop and Hall, who claim, “media and culture” stringently create a “singular definition and representation of motherhood.”

Kris is constantly chided by the media, and her daughters, who do not believe a mom should be partaking in such actions. For example, in season seven, Kourtney tells her, “you’re just so inappropriate and embarrassing,” berating her mother for doing a racy photo shoot. In this case, Kourtney is using a standard arbitrarily created by the media and policed in society through both thought and action, which mandates, “older women” (i.e. women in their 40s, 50s, and 60s), are unfit to be sexual beings.

Although Kris is a very intelligent and capable woman (and still looks very good), the sisters cannot allow their mom to do these things. Because of their disapproval, we as a society “cannot underestimate the power and influence these new media have over our

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144 Ibid., 130.
145 Bishop and Hall, Mommy Angst, x.
perceptions and expectations about motherhood.”¹⁴⁶ The sisters reprimand Kris, so the fans feel like they can make fun of her as well, setting the precedent for the general admonishment of her actions. Media and feminist scholars Jennifer Jones and Brenda R. Weber address this idea, claiming, “mothers who actively work for celebrity thus signal a form of unhealthy, even pathological narcissism, and a coding of identity that works against imperatives for both humility and authenticity.”¹⁴⁷ Kris’ “extreme” inward focus, especially as a mother, make the sisters seem more “normal”; therefore, when compared to their mother, they appear to exhibit an appropriate level of self-focus.

The tension between sisterly support, business success, and maternal care becomes obvious in season one and never dissipates. “The stage management and commodification […] code her as too calculating a manager to be a good mother.”¹⁴⁸ As the executive producer of the show, Kris has the ultimate editing power; thus, she can choose what content is left in or removed in order to protect the brand. Her power combined with her maternal role leads to controversy. For instance, in season one, Kim poses for Playboy, incurring only a slight backlash from the public. She receives positive affirmation of her decision, for the most part, which then helps to build the celebrity of her entire family. Kris, who is obviously aware of the repercussions, is forced to shoulder the negative responses because she is seen actively persuading her daughter. This “wrongness” is doubled by the fact that Kim’s notoriety at the time was a direct result of a recently released sex tape with B-list celebrity singer, Ray J.¹⁴⁹ (The release of Kim’s sex tape “gave Kris’s show the household name it needed.”)¹⁵⁰ Kris is reprimanded by the media, despite Kim’s disclosure that she is “totally

¹⁴⁶ Bishop and Hall, Mommy Angst, xiii.
¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.
¹⁴⁹ Currently, there is speculation that Kim and “her mother Kris Jenner were themselves responsible for the leaking of Kardashian’s sex tape,” and perhaps “orchestrated a deal with Vivid Entertainment to distribute the video.” (Alexandra Sastre, “Hottentot in the Age of Reality TV: Sexuality, Race and Kim Kardashian’s Visible Body,” Celebrity Studies 5 no. 1-2 (2014): 135.)
¹⁵⁰ Tafty Brodesser-Akner, “Where Would the Kardashians.”
comfortable being nude if [I’m] draped in diamonds and pearls,” as well as her admission at the end that posing was “a huge challenge,” but she was “extremely happy that [she] did it.”\(^{151}\) During the episode, Kris tells Kim she should consider the opportunity because “it’s a ton of money,”\(^{152}\) which comes back to haunt her in an interview with \textit{Nightline} in 2010, when television journalist Cynthia McFadden says, “I have to tell you that I was flabbergasted that you encouraged her to pose for \textit{Playboy}. Because a lot of people would have said, the last thing this girl needs to do right now is take her clothes off. I mean she should be wearing turtlenecks and going to church.”\(^{153}\) The media helps make “examples of those mothers who are perceived not to be prioritizing their children”\(^{154}\)—or simply prioritizing them in the wrong way. Society wants a “‘mom’ definition of motherhood. A nurturing, accepting, easy definition,”\(^{155}\) not one in which a mom can be sexy or offer business advice to her children.

Kris also faces backlash during season one for including footage of Kendall and Kylie playing on a stripper pole. Again, television journalist Cynthia McFadden on \textit{Nightline} shames Kris as a mother. She says that it’s “worse than crazy, Kris. I mean, irresponsible. I mean you look at that episode and you go, what parent, number one, would permit this to happen and, number two, would put it on national television.”\(^{156}\) By dredging up an incident from three years ago, McFadden reinforces Kris as a mother gone wrong—as “public enemy number one.”\(^{157}\)

Undeterred, Kris continues to seek inclusion in the youthful club of “sexualized, individualistic, external-oriented consumerist”\(^{158}\) sisters. Kris tries to extend it to the middle

\(^{152}\) Ibid.
\(^{153}\) Kardashian and Jenner, “Sex Appeals; Family Affair.”
\(^{154}\) Cobb, “Mother of the Year,” 131.
\(^{155}\) Bishop and Hall, \textit{Mommy Angst}, ix.
\(^{156}\) Kardashian and Jenner, “Sex Appeals; Family Affair.
\(^{158}\) Bae, “Interrogating Girl Power,” 28.
age, expressing that she just wants to “show [her] girls when you’re in your fifties, you don’t just curl up and disappear.”\textsuperscript{159} She’s undermining an age limit on sexuality and contradictions about motherhood, and is berated because she is “challeng[ing] the conviction that motherhood is inherently self-fulfilling and an essentialized form of subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{160}

**The Neutralization of Masculinity**

The sisterhood does not just marginalize Kris; it also sidelines all of the men in the show—their step-father, their husbands, and their brother. There are the male mainstays: Bruce, the step-father, Scott, Kourtney’s boyfriend, who has been on the show since season one, and Rob, the sole Kardashian brother, who struggles with an inability to assert himself in a family of opinionated females. Bruce, Kris’s husband and Kylie and Kendall’s father, is hardly a powerful figure. Once the icon of ultimate masculinity as an Olympian champion, he is portrayed as incompetent, unable to control the “indecency” of his step-daughters and daughters, and forced to defer all family and business decisions to Kris, the headstrong matriarch. When we first encounter Bruce, he explains his role in the family: “I’m a pushover for my family. Up to a point.”\textsuperscript{161} The series follows this pattern many times. Kris and the Kardashian sisters continuously push him to the side. For example, when Kim decides to pose for *Playboy* in season one, Bruce argues against it, ultimately conceding defeat: “I don’t know why I bring this up because it’s not gonna make any difference.”\textsuperscript{162} Bruce can perhaps persuade Kris or Kim or Khloé when he is conversing with them alone. However, when all of the Kardashian women are together, he does not stand a chance. In season one, the three eldest decide to pose for a *Girls Gone Wild* photo shoot, a fact they hide from him because,


\textsuperscript{160} Cobb, “Mother of the Year,” 131.

\textsuperscript{161} *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, “I’m Watching You.”

\textsuperscript{162} *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, “Birthday Suit.”
as Kris says, “He’s really conservative and he’s gonna have a problem that you guys are posing in bikinis.” Together, they decide they are willing to subvert his traditionalism and keep the secret.

Bruce may not get the final say in family decisions, but he appears to be the rational, stable one, in contrast to the “volatile” women in his family. When Khloé is getting married to Lamar Odom, Bruce asserts that the future son-in-law must “prove himself to me,” perceiving that Khloé is misguided, as she has only known Lamar for about a month. This idea that Khloé is unreasonable is strengthened when Bruce says, “I’ve always questioned her judgment when it comes to men.” Kourtney is also portrayed as unreasonable, when her relationship with Scott is called into question. In an interview on Larry King Live, with guest host George Lopez, Bruce is asked to comment on Scott’s immaturity and inability to step up as a father. George Lopez asks, “Have you had those discussions, man to man?,” to which Bruce authoritatively replies, “Oh, yes.” Lopez continues, saying, “Have you taken him outside?” Bruce responds, “I said hey, come on, you’ve got to get your act together here.” Here, we see Bruce attempting to reassert his superiority in different ways, despite being sidelined.

Scott, the obnoxious, alcoholic boyfriend to eldest, Kourtney, is disliked by every family member at one point in the series. He is continuously portrayed as immature and unable to take care of himself, despite having separate business prospects from the Kardashian family. His incompetence culminates in season four when Kourtney is about to have their child and, with the encouragement of her sisters, tells Scott, “I’m gonna be a mom

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165 Ibid.
now, I don’t need to be your mom.” Kris completely supports Kourtney’s attitude toward Scott, asserting, “There’s just no place for Scott in our family anymore.” Kourtney, in this moment, is simultaneously empowered by her sisters and the fact that she is about to have a child. Despite talking about it, she ultimately decides to take him back.

Like Bruce, Scott also uses emotionality, particularly Kourtney’s “unreasonable” emotions, as a way to reassert his masculinity. When the family travels to New York for the opening of Scott’s restaurant in season seven, Kourtney and Scott get into an argument. Kourtney is angry because Scott partied, while she was forced to be the responsible one. She says, “You have a girlfriend who’s pregnant and home with your son. You don’t need to be running out ‘til 5 o’clock in the morning,” to which he responds, “You’re very emotional and you’re very hormonal, and it’s hard to be around you for me.”

Rob, the lone male Kardashian, is unable to measure up to the business talents of his father. He attempts to start a sock line, afraid that his masculinity will be called into question if he does not generate revenue. He tells Scott, “I was frustrated that my sock line kind of got delayed, and you’re actually doing something great for our family.” Rob is eager to assert himself on his own, proving that he does not need help from the women in his life.

While at USC, Rob rejects offers from his sisters to get him an internship. He considers them to be unintelligent and their brand to be frivolous, dismissing their lucrative business because of its place within a traditionally feminine market. However, he changes his mind in season seven, when they are thriving, and he is not. In a family therapy session, Rob says, “It just frustrates me that, like, we’re supposed to be a family and a team,” wanting to be included in the family business. He is subsequently rejected from the sisterhood, and

168 Keeping Up with the Kardashians, “Delivering Baby Mason.”
therefore, the brand, by Kim, who says, “a lot of the things we do together are like our makeup line and our nail polish and that stuff isn’t appropriate for you.”

Instead of asserting himself as the “rational one,” like Bruce and Scott, Rob begins to emotionally deteriorate, which is illuminated by his physical weight gain. This change does not go unnoticed by his body-conscious sisters. Khloé expresses her alarm at the fact that he has “gained at least thirty pounds,” and urges him to “admit [he] has a binging problem and can’t control [him]self.” Therefore, the discourse about his weight gain is much more nuanced than it first appears; it is the fact that he can no longer discipline himself. In this episode, he is compared to Lamar, a hyper-masculine, professional athlete, who condescends to him, saying “I think he’s a porky pig.” Rob’s further decline is revealed in season eight, when Khloé tells Kourtney and Kim that “He’s gained fifty pounds,” and does not think she has “ever seen anyone cry so much.” By stressing his emotionality, Rob is aligned with his sisters and contrasted to Bruce and Scott, who distance themselves as a way to assert their masculinity. Thus, Rob is not accepted into the sisterhood or affiliated with Bruce and Scott.

In comparison to Bruce, Scott, and Rob, basketball players, Lamar Odom and Kris Humphries, both marry into the Kardashian family, and move in and out of the show. Although opposites in demeanor, Lamar and Kris are linked by their imposing bodies; large, strong professional athletes, they are regarded as hyper-masculine, a visible contrast to the femininity of the Kardashians. At first, they seem equipped to survive within the family, as they have their own careers entirely outside of the sisterhood brand. However, Lamar’s physical decline and Kris’s eviction from the family suggest a neutralization of the physical

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170 *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, “Kardashian Therapy: Part 1.”
171 *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, “Kim’s Fairytale Wedding, Part 1.”
172 Ibid.
power of men, as initially revealed by the “rational” strategy that is adopted by the male mainstays, albeit in a smaller, less obvious way.

In the beginning, Lamar appears to be calm and capable in the face of the crazy antics of the family. He marries Khloé a month after meeting her and begins to depend on her to do everything for him. This reliance incites criticism from Kim, who says, “Khloé’s just trying to make Lamar’s world so perfect,” recognizing Khloé’s subordination. However, over the course of the show, both Lamar’s basketball skill and competency decline. He goes missing, forcing Khloé to reveal that they have ended their relationship due to Lamar’s drug use and infidelity. The viewers’ perception of Lamar is shattered when Khloé says, “No one knew until forever, well until he got sloppy and started messing with all those girls and all those girls want to do is get their ten seconds of fame.” During this time, the media presented a concise timeline of Lamar’s deterioration. In 2013, Lamar was arrested on “DUI charges before being sentenced to three years’ probation with rehab.” Then, “after months of alleged drug use and infidelity on his part, [Khloé] Kardashian filed for divorce.” At the end of 2015, he was “reportedly barely holding onto life after he was found unconscious at a legal Nevada brothel, The Love Ranch, where he had apparently partied for three days.”

This pattern is repeated in Kim’s marriage to Kris. Although more arrogant than Lamar and lacking charisma, Kris has a strong, controlling personality. When he is first introduced, the sisters are excited that Kim has found someone. As their wedding approaches at the end of season six, the sisters become wary of him. Khloé reveals, “I am worried about

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Kris Humphries. I do not know where his intentions lie […] Kim has so many amazing things and Kris has nothing to lose if he marries Kim.”

Like Khloé and her subordination to Lamar, Kim initially appears to conform to Kris’ desires. For instance, she contemplates changing her last name to appease his traditionalism. Furthermore, she asks her sisters to be nicer to him when they are together, blind to his lack of respect. She says, “I feel like you guys are kind of being mean to Kris, and he’s new to the family and doesn’t really get how you guys play around.” As they get closer to the wedding, Kim becomes increasingly bothered by his attitude. Although Kris expresses his irritation at being left out of wedding plans, he says, “I really don’t want to do anything right now,” when they are looking at the seating chart. Kim expresses her frustration to viewers because she is “dealing with so many other things, he should at least be able to step up and take care of a few things.”

Kim’s growing resentment and a conversation between Bruce, Rob, and Scott, foreshadows Kris’ inevitable removal from the family. Waiting at the golf course, Scott reveals that, if Kris wants to be in the family, he cannot be late. Bruce then turns to Scott and says, “He’s very controlling. You can’t be that in this family.” When Kris finally appears, with no regard for the time, the men are offended by his apathy. As a response to the situation, Scott says, “I actually had to surgically remove my penis. I have a lot of advice for Kris. First and foremost: shut your mouth.” With all of these initial problems, viewers are not surprised by the announcement of the end of their 72-day marriage.

178 Keeping Up with the Kardashians, “Kim’s Fairytale Wedding, Part 1.”
179 Ibid.
181 Keeping Up with the Kardashians, “Kim’s Fairytale Wedding, Part 1.”
182 Ibid.
Conclusion

It might seem easy to dismiss the Kardashian family. However, we should take them seriously because they espouse a powerful, yet contradictory, gender ideology. The sisters encourage women through a virtual sisterhood, while simultaneously promoting individualized, self-focused, beauty projects. As self-improvement is increasingly tied to notions of success, the post-feminist woman who seemingly “has it all,” is controlled by strict, regressive beauty standards. By embodying this post-feminist ideal, the Kardashians create a lucrative business steeped in an “authentic realness.” Centering on reality television, and extending to various social media platforms, the sisters have manufactured an imagined relationship with their fans, under a false sense of empowerment, indicated by sisterhood and sexuality.

In her recent New York Times article, “How ‘Empowerment Became Something for Women to Buy,” writer Jia Tolentino argues that this “empowerment,” “invokes power while signifying the lack of it.” Within, she questions the foundation of modern female empowerment, particularly, the pervasive, yet common, misconception that this word represents a substantial progression. Instead, she perceives that the “intent of this new empowerment is always to sell.” This article exposes the underlying problem of the Kardashians. Without critically examining the words or actions of the family, we perceive them as too trivial to contribute to the larger societal discourse about gender and consumerism. If we continue to dismiss the influence of powerful cultural icons simply because they are associated with an empty fame (“famous for being famous”), then we allow regressive values to assimilate back into societal norms, under the pretense of authenticity and equality.
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