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The New Profits of Pleasure: Reality Television and Affective Exploitation in Post-Pandemic Neoliberalism

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by

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Abstract

This thesis uses reality television and the parasocial relationships it cultivates as a microcosm to better understand the current form of neoliberalism as well as the implications it has for democracy. I extend the preexisting scholarship surrounding neoliberalism and reality television by emphasizing the importance of social media in understanding that link. By conducting a case study of Netflix's *Love is Blind*, I demonstrate how both reality television content and the reality-television-participant-to-influencer pipeline serve to reinforce neoliberal values by constructing powerful cultural imaginaries such as a model of care and self-sufficiency that centers marriage and the household. I argue that the pandemic increased the commercial and social value of affective bonds as well as the role reality television has in producing them. Despite the anti-democratic and exploitative nature of formal reality television production, an active and critical viewing practice by viewers has the potential to foster non-statist democratic cultures and creative modes of affective resistance. These paradoxical possibilities demonstrate the powerful contradictions and double binds that define neoliberalism post-pandemic.

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Chapter I: Introduction

A. Background

The 21st century has seen a significant rise in reality television consumption around the world. In the early 2000s, the success of franchises such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and *The Bachelor* caught critics by surprise. These shows were billed as unscripted documentations of events without a designed plot or the need for writers. Television and documentaries had been rising in popularity globally for decades, but the explosion of this new genre introduced something novel. The Writers Guild of America strike that began in late 2007 and concluded in early 2008 inadvertently resulted in a boon to the genre as networks sought to bypass labor unions in order to continue pumping out content for viewers. Then, in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic served as a second key inflection point for reality television due to a confluence of factors, including a general rise in media intake, especially reality television with its more light-hearted and escapist tone. Additionally, the restriction of physical gatherings resulted in increased reliance on social television viewing, i.e. watching television for the primary purpose of discussing it with others (Kim et al. 2021). In addition to fostering closeness between viewers, reality television often rouses one-way, unreciprocated feelings of intimacy—or parasocial relationships—toward the participants themselves because they are not characters or traditional celebrities, they are seemingly ordinary and relatable people who just so happen to be on display (Turner 2010).

Despite record-setting profits and higher-than-average margins, reality television workers are the least likely to be unionized out of those in the television industry, or, relatedly, to receive employer-sponsored benefits including but not limited to health

insurance, pensions, overtime pay, and job security (Redden 2018). This thesis examines those material conditions, but with a broader understanding of what constitutes labor and a more integrated perspective on the traditional division between production, consumption, and circulation. I argue that these boundaries are constantly in a state of flux, breaking down and reformulating in order to construct new modes of value and power as well as new methods of exploitation. A closer examination of reality television is therefore highly valuable for Political Science scholarship as it elucidates changing modes of power under post-pandemic neoliberalism.

As Williams (1991) notes, all popular film (and television) genres "address persistent problems in our culture." Reality television is one of the most accessible and engrossing mediums, an omnipresent and powerful force that can serve to normalize behavior, shift culture, and create and harness emotional attachments. As a medium that uniquely serves to take the central elements of our culture — norms, preferences, taboos, hierarchies — and reflect their extremes back to us, it stands to reason that much can be gleaned from studying this pervasive genre. As the literature review below demonstrates, scholars appeared to have almost immediately recognized the paradigm shifting potential of this new genre that walked the line between drama, journalism, documentary, and art form as well as the power it has to make sense of complex social forces and illuminate everyday experience. Political Science, however, has not historically been as willing to engage with reality television as disciplines such as Sociology, Media Studies, Communication, and Gender Studies have been.

B. Literature Review

Most scholarly work on reality television analyzes its content, style, or production, in order to elucidate how the genre impacts its viewers and shapes and reflects society at large. The literature reveals a particular interest among researchers in studying the ways in which reality television programming changes viewers as watchers of the news, participants in the public sphere, civically engaged citizens (i.e. voters), and as neoliberal consumers. A common concern is that reality television programming trains viewers to value pseudo-events over substantive news. The demands of the 24/7 news cycle, emboldened by the ubiquity of reality television, has shifted journalistic standards and resulted in a rise of programming that serves as entertainment just as much as it seeks to inform viewers. Some scholars have dubbed the current status quo in news media "infotainment," to represent networks' willingness to emulate stylistic techniques present in reality television in an effort to maximize profitability (Bennett 2005). This trend has been well-documented and researched by scholars who note the emergence of a reality news standard that favors a dramatic, easy-to-follow narrative by minimizing facts and evidence that might support more complex conclusions and frameworks (Bennett 2005; Kroes 2019). Scholars like Cole and Shulman (2018) use reality television to contextualize Trump's campaign and presidency, offering a concrete example of the impact a shifting media landscape that increasingly pursues spectacle for its own sake has on the political realm. Audiences seek amusement, networks seek to maximize profits, and successful political figures like Trump are able to serve to both ends.

Other scholars are more concerned with how reality television changes the way we think about each other. They argue that watching reality television isn't a passive

experience, rather, it impacts how viewers engage with the public sphere (Williams 2005; Couldry and Markham 2007; Ouellette 2010; Walsh and Lee 2017; Redden 2018). Early in the reality television craze, political theorists like Juliet Williams (2005) questioned whether a genre that ostensibly revolves around marveling at the stupidity of our fellow citizens and often expresses disdain for common people might erode social solidarity and intensify othering. More recently, Walsh and Lee (2017) explored the way that reality television's portrayal of borders, surveillance, and policing — such as National Geographic's highly rated show *Border Wars* — manifests allegorical figurations that center harmful stereotypes and an us versus them binary. Such programming reinforces nationalistic ideology and carceral logic by positioning immigrants and racialized people as outside of the demos. Along those same lines, reality television also imparts norms about new technologies and modes of surveillance, as well as expectations regarding privacy and social control (Lindemann 2022). Unscripted television has long been at the vanguard when it comes to incorporating new technologies and modes of surveillance into narratives. Dating show contestants in particular are often scrutinized for their authenticity, or lack thereof, and are deemed worthy of love if, and only if, they successfully portray themselves as completely transparent and open, with nothing to hide (Psarras et al. 2021). The tremendous popularity of such shows indicates that their content reveals a lot about the stereotypes that serve to inform and perpetuate American ideology and perceptions of worthiness. Thus, scholars like Laurie Ouellette (2010) argue that because reality television reflects cultural norms and reinforces societal expectations through the characters and situations it portrays, it is intimately linked with civic engagement.

As a medium that uniquely serves to shape perceptions of the demos, it stands to reason that reality television impacts the way in which private people collectively voice their concerns about society to the state. Political theorists like Williams (2005) have observed that the preponderance of shows that rely on voting as plot and functional device, a trend that *Survivor* helped usher in, serve to reinforce the foundational importance of voting in civic life. This observation helps illuminate the origins of the prevailing emphasis on voting over other, more communal, forms of political engagement such as organizing, mobilizing, or community involvement. Williams also expressed concern that the primacy of voting is a uniquely 21st century phenomenon that seeks to pacify and atomize, rather than empower and unify, citizens. Kroes (2019) argues that reality television helps explain why viewers, and, by extension, voters, seem to care more about the name, brand, and television personality of their favorite politicians than their ideology or policy positions. Viewers often gravitate toward reality show participants, politicians, and news anchors for similar reasons. Rather than taking people at their word, most viewers tend to trust those who make them feel a particular way (Psarras et al. 2021). The popularity of reality television reinforced the importance of trust and emotion for media producers. Bennett (2005) notes that for political elections, the media representation effectively is the election, as voters respond to performances rather than wonky proposals. In this way, truth is constructed through emotion rather than articulation, and the primary question for voters isn't, does this person represent my interests, but instead: do I trust this person?

Increasingly, viewers in search of trusted representation by civic leaders are turning away from formal politics and elections toward celebrity culture and social

media. Certainly, elected officials in the United States don't accurately represent their constituents, with wealthy white men significantly overrepresented. In fact, reality television participants, a significantly more diverse population, might be able to supplement more formal modes of democratic representation by speaking on behalf of and advocating for the marginalized groups that they belong to (Klein and Coleman 2021; Lindemann 2022). It has been suggested by scholars that politically disengaged citizens aren't actually uninterested or lazy, rather, they recognize that their perspectives likely won't be considered through formal modes of representation and so they make a conscious choice to turn to celebrities who they feel will better represent their interests (Klein and Coleman 2021). Furthermore, due in part to the infotainment turn within the news media, traditional journalism is increasingly viewed as discredited by the modern social media user who opts instead to turn to their digital community and trusted celebrities for information on current events (Turner 2010).

There is a new sense that anybody can now penetrate the celebrity facade. With the increasing visibility of ordinary people, their opinions, and their experiences, it's tempting to assume that ordinary people are being celebrated and valued in a way that could serve to undermine concentrations of power. Social media networks seemingly offer alternative routes to fame, bypassing mass media gatekeepers and reinforcing displays of demoticism, or closeness to ordinary people. As the "work of being watched" (Turner 2010) has become a new method of earning a — potentially lucrative — living, reality television helps elevate ordinary people to celebrity status depending on how well they perform relatability and openness (Psarras et al. 2021). This "demotic turn" fosters the formation of parasocial relationships and indicates that reality television plays an

important role in modern community building, or at least the simulacrum of community (Bonsu et al. 2010), for its viewers. The demotic turn also signifies a shift in conceptualizations of the political from one that is analytical and policy oriented to one that centers emotion and belonging (Turner 2010).

The emphasis on performance within the literature on demoticism helps demonstrate another way of studying reality television: one focused not so much on its impact on viewers, or the subliminal messaging present in programming content, but instead on the material conditions of its production. As was noted in the introduction, behind-the-camera reality television workers are the least likely to be unionized within the television industry. And, unlike traditional actors, the participants themselves are rarely compensated or even acknowledged as workers, with only a small percentage reaping financial rewards through brand endorsement and sponsorship deals after airing (Redden 2018). These exploitative conditions coupled with a dangling carrot result in formal and informal workers alike approaching their experience as a steppingstone to more lucrative future work. In order to leverage their reality television experience, creators and participants must deliver emotional, dramatic performances that capture viewers' emotional energies and foster the formation of parasocial relationships. In this way, reality television is uniquely positioned to be able to manufacture new micro-celebrities in a sort of assembly line, directly informed by viewers' expressed preferences and emotional attachments (Matusitz and Simi 2021). The rise of social media networks in the 2010s enabled media industries to successfully manufacture celebrities by encouraging, enabling, and shaping feelings of intimacy.

A small body of work highlights the reality-show-participant-to-influencer pipeline and analyzes social media content creation of former participants in order to better understand this transition (Matusitz and Simi 2021; Psarras et al. 2021). Extending beyond the formal workers, or the participants, networks also harness and appropriate the audience's immaterial labor and emotions for their own profit. For example, tasks like casting are often outsourced by encouraging viewers to nominate friends without offering compensation (Bonsu et al. 2010). The process of production is, therefore, no longer concentrated. Reality television has led to the co-creation of value, a blurring of the lines between consumption and production, and a shift in perception of audiences as passive consumers to more active "prosumers" who shoulder certain creative and emotional responsibilities (Bonsu et al. 2010).

This thesis picks up on the link between reality television and neoliberalism, suggested in different ways both by literature on the complex interactions between reality television production and consumption, and by studies of the genre's impact on viewers' political attitudes and behaviors. The rise of reality television has coincided with other shifting norms regarding the increased primacy of commercial forces and the market imperative (Ouellette 2010; Redden 2018; Lindeman 2022). In short, reality television's emphasis on individualism and entrepreneurialism reflects a shifting figuration of the good neoliberal citizen. A link between individualistic, neoliberal values and reality television programming has been explicitly drawn by several scholars (Ouellette 2010; Walsh and Lee 2017; Redden 2018; Matusitz and Simi 2021). The narratives are overly focused on the individual, emphasizing personal choice rather than examining the social structures and conditions. Through an emphasis on individualization, state powers are

outsourced, and personal responsibility and consumer choice are emphasized as expectations of good citizens (Ouellette 2010). Reality television helps validate this shift by constructing images of the worthy poor and the benevolent rich, ultimately validating and reinforcing economic inequality and distorting the systemic causes of poverty. Meanwhile, other scholarship argues that not only the narrative patterns of reality television, but also the material conditions of its production, are uniquely neoliberal (Redden 2018). Although reality television stars allegedly have more agency and autonomy on social media because they aren't edited according to the whims of producers, they are still required to promote the show per their contracts (Psarras et al. 2021). Social media influencers legitimize neoliberal fantasies by promoting individualized solutions such as entrepreneurial empowerment, self-care, and family formation to structural problems like economic precarity and exploitation.

C. Theoretical Frameworks and Contribution: Transformations of Capitalism and Contemporary Politics

Scholars have variously diagnosed a profound restructuring of the global economy in the 1970s in terms of late capitalism, globalization, financialization, and marketization. While informed by these schools of scholarship, I approach that transformation in terms of a turn to neoliberalism, marked by a dynamic and flexible relationship between labor and capital (Dean 2016). The onset of neoliberalism centered on the dismantlement of the welfare state through the privatization of formerly public goods in response to the Keynesian social-democratic big-government redistributive economic policies of the post-war era (Brown 2015; Dean 2008; Redden 2018). The late

1960s and early 1970s were a time in which the business class consolidated political power, while political actors across the ideological spectrum became increasingly focused on the fight for personal freedoms, individuality, and the right to self-expression (Dean 2005). As Berlant (2011) argues, their approach grounded in affect theory, the first indications of these changes were *felt* rather than known by residents of the United States, manifesting primarily as a loss of belonging. Though fantasies of upward mobility, financial security, meritocracy, and loyalty (both from one's employer and personal relationships) gave way to rampant inequality, instability, fragility, and the reframing of success as survival, the myth of the American dream and the possibility of "the good life" endured, albeit increasingly disconnected from reality. The installation of competitive markets into all areas of life replaced non-market norms such as fairness, equality, and rights with the prioritization of profit. No longer fixed to specific sites or modes of production, the pursuit of profit isn't limited to traditional wage labor, becoming both less regulated and more shielded from democratic norms (Lazzarato 1996; Brown 2017). Thus, scholars like Wendy Brown have prolifically documented neoliberalism — understood not just as the self-ascribed label of a few mid-century economists but rather as a broader political and governmental rationality — as a key contributor to democratic decline.

As this thesis will demonstrate, the affective energies and communicative activities surrounding the production, consumption, and circulation of reality television can be used to better understand the new modes of value and power that conceptualize the post-pandemic political and economic formulation under which we live today. Affect can be understood as analogous to emotion, though it is a much larger and more public

experience, one that shifts and transfers from groups of people to create powerful, contagious, and creative social forces. An affect is not a personal, or even a conscious, experience, rather, it is an unformed and unstructured intensity that doesn't necessarily correspond to a nameable emotion. For much of human history, affect has been spread through face-to-face or small group interactions. However, the transformative impact technology has had on communication, and, as a result, on the capacity for affective contagion has created forms of media that are able to effectively disperse images, symbols, and figurations into the subconscious of groups of people, creating new forms of affective memories on a mass scale (Ross 2014).

Exacerbated by covid-induced social isolation, online engagement with celebrities and influencers often arises out of an attempt to fill social voids and fulfill the need for community and belonging. Firms are well aware of this and often profit off of the parasocial relationships between reality show stars and their fans. Corporate interests actively seek to conceal the value of affective energy, and the information and communications they generate, because they are making significant profits off the unpaid immaterial labor that results. Thus, as I will demonstrate through a case study of *Love is Blind* participants, parasocial relationships function as capitalist instruments, consciously mobilized by firms to maximize profits and power.

I use Dean's schema of communicative capitalism (2005) to explore reality television as a microcosm of neoliberalism and to demonstrate that what we are experiencing now hasn't emerged out of the blue, rather, there is continuity and the origins of the present lie in longstanding practices of neoliberal exploitation through networked communications. According to her framework, networked communications

have become utterly commodified to the point where they are an essential part of the production cycle. Their former role as conduits of self-expression, connection, and belonging has been replaced by their current economic form, rendering the actual messages that are communicated irrelevant. Instead, it's the circulation of content itself that generates value. This leads to a situation in which individuals believe that they are contributing to a conversation, or voicing an opinion, while they are inadvertently generating value for corporate interests who use data and the establishment of patterns to guide targeted marketing strategies. This process neutralizes the people's ability to speak out against injustice as any attempt to use social media networks to speak truth to power is ironically used in service of power. In 2016, Dean updated and expanded her initial framework to address big data more specifically and to elucidate the Obama administration's discursive trick of individualizing the problem by centering the conversation around online privacy. She frames this development as a further escalation of mass surveillance culture and capital's war on labor.

I revise and extend the framework of communicative capitalism to incorporate a post-pandemic understanding of current modes of power, one that relies heavily on affective energy. While Dean maintains that the content of communications no longer matters, I point to the formation of parasocial relationships and emotional attachments within the context of reality television and conclude otherwise. In this case, messages do mean something, and the emotion attached to them in particular is what generates value. Though it may appear that corporations are profiting off of something that is freely being offered to them, Dean and I both identify this as an act of dispossession in which

corporations expropriate our ability to be in conversation together, or to be present and in communion with one another.

If communicative capitalism explains why corporations are invested in the reality television model of a production, consumption, and circulation circuit, Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" can be used to shed light on the profound grip that the medium of reality television has on individuals, and why so many turned to it as a source of comfort during the peak of the pandemic. As they demonstrate in their 2011 book by the same name, cruel optimism describes what happens when the image of the good life becomes less and less tenable under neoliberal post-war restructuring. It describes an unwillingness to let go of the fantasy, even if it is no longer achievable, and even if the fantasy itself becomes the obstacle to its realization.

For Berlant, the ultimate cruelty of cruel optimism is that neoliberal divestment has resulted in a lack of common space or public goods that serve to generate feelings of belonging and attachment to a larger community. They argue that due to the nature of our current economic system, attachments constantly betray us, whether they be to upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, or durable intimacy. However, we cannot help ourselves, we remain committed to them. The alternative, according to Berlant, is facing the insurmountable reality that there is no public to belong to, no shared sense of meaning and belonging, and no guarantee that policymakers will prioritize your health and wellbeing over the pursuit of profits. This helps explain why parasocial relationships, and the fantasies of postfeminist nirvana and empowered individualism that so many reality-stars-turned-influencers promote, are so alluring (Psarras et al. 2021). Turner's concept of the "demotic turn" — or the increasing ordinariness of celebrities —

can be further used to elucidate this phenomenon and illustrate why parasocial relationships formed from reality television feel so much more personalized, more meaningful, and harder to differentiate from two-sided relationships than traditional celebrity (i.e. actors, singers, performers) fandoms. The demotic turn also offers a particularly compelling reason why reality television and the assembly line of new microcelebrities and influencers that it manufactures are especially lucrative for corporations. Ultimately, both Berlant and Turner use their concepts to dispel any notions of social media as a democratizing agent that ushers in a new age of freedom and choice.

A close examination of the consumption, production, and distribution of reality television programming and the social media ecosystems that each step of the circuit depends upon presents powerful contradictions that epitomize the tensions of post-pandemic neoliberalism. The acts of building a community, whether it be on or offline, expressing yourself, educating yourself, and creatively engaging with your interests are all meaning-bringing and worthwhile activities. Freely offering your personal data and emotional energy to a corporation, however, is not. And yet, under our current economic system, both courses of action are often inextricable from one another. Likewise, the divide between work and leisure has effectively ceased to exist as even pleasurable activities become capital's tool. Scholars like Lazzaretto, Dean, Berlant, and Brown all identify the emergence of a new mode of power — neoliberalism — in the 1970s in which people are encouraged to produce, contribute, and become subjects of communication. My thesis relies on their collective understandings of new modes of power following the 1970s coupled with the concepts of communicative capitalism, cruel

optimism, and the demotic turn, to illuminate a post-2008, and post-pandemic mode of power centered around emotional recruitment and investment in fandom.

D. Upcoming Chapters

In the next chapter, I conduct a case study examining the first season of Netflix's *Love is Blind* and the social media content creation patterns of former participants in order to demonstrate how both reality television and the parasocial relationships it so effectively engenders serve to collectively and affectively endorse the values of neoliberalism. I argue that neoliberal values and parasociality are connected because performances of intimacy are framed in neoliberal terms as risky but necessary investments. This is true for participants while they date one another on the show, and even more so when they transition to social media and begin their new roles as influencers with followers who expect displays of trustworthiness, relatability, continuity, transparency, and openness. This case study employs a mixed methods approach in order to examine how the convergence of passive reality television and interactive social media amplifies affective and parasocial energies through the perpetuation of neoliberal fantasies.

As 28-year-old participant Barnett declares in the opening sequence of the first episode, the pursuit of marriage is informed by a desire to know that someone will be "holding your hand on your deathbed." There was no way he or the producers could have known it at the time, but his statement likely tapped into the fear of dying alone that was circulating during March 2020. Likewise, Barnett expressed a desire for marriage during a time in which those legally recognized familial relationships were structurally

privileged even more than they normally are. No matter how strict government-imposed restrictions might become, there was a sense of certainty that spouses and children would be considered one household and therefore permitted to isolate together. This serves as an example of the historically specific nature of parasocial modes of attachment.

The case study serves as the first step in demonstrating how and why parasociality and affective energies have become increasingly central to neoliberal modes of power since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the third chapter, I delve into the broader reception and development of reality television, specifically the role of the viewer who performs valuable immaterial labor on behalf of the show, guided by their parasocial and emotional attachments. I use affect theory, relying primarily on Berlant and Cvetkovich, to complicate Dean's framework of communicative capitalism and pursue potential avenues for joy and resistance. In the fourth and final chapter, I turn to the more formal sphere of electoral politics and democracy to demonstrate the corrosive effect reality television and parasociality have on both institutions by examining Trump's presidency and the increasing prominence of demoticism in place of democracy. I use Berlant to explore the possibility of a democratic culture that isn't tied to the state and argue that reality television and the online fandoms and affective energies it engenders have the potential to translate into non-statist democratic bodies so long as viewers don't attempt to outsmart the reality television complex by engaging in hate-watching and anti-fandom, or by seeking empowerment from the shows and participants themselves.

Chapter II: Case Study, *Love is Blind* Season 1

A. Introduction and Research Purpose:

In this chapter, I conduct a case study of Netflix's *Love is Blind* that consists of an analysis of programming content as well as social media use of former participants. Through a critical discourse analysis, I identify and examine specific language and discourse patterns within the programming content itself that both reinforce the ideology of neoliberalism and foster affective bonds between reality television participants and viewers. By conducting a social media content analysis, I demonstrate how former participants go on to use social media to deepen those bonds with viewers and further legitimize neoliberal values.

Although this chapter primarily serves to supply evidence for an existing hypothesis within the literature — that reality television is neoliberal — it extends the scholarly conversation by emphasizing the importance of social media and parasociality in understanding that link. This case study is designed to develop a better understanding of how parasocial relationships are fostered by reality television programming and how, once formed, they function as capitalist instruments through social media networks. Through my research, I demonstrate that the process of converting social capital to financial capital results in influencer content that constructs and reinforces neoliberal understandings of individuals, marriage, families, and societies. By documenting strategies and tactics that are used to encourage the creation of parasocial relationships, these findings can be used to elucidate the impact affective energies have on the creation, shaping, and directing of desires. In the following two chapters, I develop a new perspective about reality television as a case of a heretofore underappreciated shift in

neoliberalism following the coronavirus pandemic, developed through dialogue with critical theorists like Brown, Turner, Berlant, and Dean. Collectively, this thesis uses reality television as a microcosm to better understand the most current, post-pandemic, form of neoliberal capitalism as well as the implications it has for democracy and exploitation.

According to Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is primarily a governing rationality through which market values are installed into all areas of life, whether they are directly monetized or not. By her telling, these values supplant political and social norms such as fairness, equality, and rights, giving precedence to the unfettered pursuit of profit. Brown cautions that conceptualizing neoliberalism as an ideology —which, informed by Michel Foucault, she defines as "a distortion or mystification of reality" —would obfuscate its "productive" and "world-making" role (Brown 2018). Jodi Dean on the other hand, informed by Slavoj Žižek, theorizes neoliberalism as an ideology perpetuated through imagination and fantasy that influences beliefs, social relations, and behaviors. By Dean's analysis, ideology does not just impart a "false consciousness that dupes people into participating in their own oppression," (Dean 2018, 7) rather, it results in the materialization of fantasy through "everyday actions, practices, technologies, and institutions" (Dean 2018, 8). In other words, Dean argues that "actions and belief go together. They stand apart from knowledge" (Dean 2018, 5). Although Brown rejects Dean's ideological framework, their work collectively suggest that neoliberalism is a pervasive and enduring force that shapes contemporary society at multiple levels. Informed by both Brown and Dean, I identify the economization of the social and the self as a central tenet of the neoliberal project.

Both theorists depict neoliberalism as a cultural force, with Brown noting that neoliberal rationalities can be found in "every human domain" including popular culture and media narratives (Brown 2015, 10) and Dean similarly describing neoliberal ideology as "a larger cultural practice" that informs action (Dean 2018, 7). This aligns with Berlant's stance that in order to examine political power, theorists must look beyond the state (Galloway et al. 2022). In other words, although it is rare for theorists of neoliberalism to embark on detailed engagement with media texts, even unconventional spaces like reality television are political and should be studied as such. With Whitehead's observation that "the term 'rationality' often obscures the role of emotion" (2011) in mind, this chapter relies primarily on Dean's understanding of ideology to examine the role of reality television in the capitalist production and exploitation of affective energies. I rely especially on Brown's account of the anti-democratic nature of neoliberalism in the later chapters.

I define reality television as a form of character-driven entertainment that purports to present unscripted, real-life scenarios and is designed to be consumed over multiple platforms. The convergence of passive television with active and participatory social media is an identifying characteristic of reality television as I define it, distinguishing reality television from adjacent genres such as the docu-soap. This convergence has proven to be highly lucrative for both tech and media companies (L'Hoiry 2019). Since the rise of social media marketing in the 2010s, celebrity and consumption have become increasingly intertwined (Matusitz and Simi 2021) and demand for influencers has developed into an industry in and of itself (Turner 2010). Rating systems like the Davie-Brown Index (DBI) are used by brands to quantify the marketing power of individuals on

social media and though traditional celebrities perform well in categories such as recognition and appeal, they often score significantly lower when it comes to trust (Creswell 2008). Social media influencers, however, have been found more likely to be perceived as both similar and trustworthy to consumers (Hudders et al. 2021; Schouten et al. 2020). With its low production costs, reality television offers a highly effective method of elevating seemingly ordinary people to microcelebrity, or influencer, status. Each new season and series function like an assembly-line style manufacturing process with planned obsolescence functionally built in (Turner 2010).

There is some scholarly work that analyzes social media content creation patterns of former reality television participants to shed light on the strategies that inform the reality-tv-to-influencer figure (Bonsu et al. 2010; Matusitz and Simi 2021; Psarras et al. 2021). However, further investigation is needed to gain a better understanding of the influence of social media networks on the production and consumption of reality television, particularly in light of the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Research indicates that parasocial feelings of closeness increased in both intensity and meaning during the height of mandatory social isolation measures (Bond 2021). Media personas were heavily relied on as sources of comfort for isolated people, becoming important components of people's social worlds. In this way, the pandemic increased both the emotional and commercial value of parasocial relationships.

In addition to and alongside the emphasis on cultivating valuable emotional connections, much reality television content reinforces neoliberal values through individualistic fantasies of the good life. Though neoliberalism is not explicitly named in *Love is Blind*, (the term is generally considered overly academic and derogatory in

nature) neoliberal values are tacitly endorsed, as they are in most reality television programming (Ouellette 2010; Walsh and Lee 2017; Redden 2018; Matusitz and Simi 2021). Reality television narratives in general tend to portray individuals as masters of their own destiny, rarely acknowledging systemic causes of poverty and hardship (Redden 2018). These unattainable representations of success encourage Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" in which the belief and pursuit of neoliberal fantasies, especially "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy," functions as an obstacle that prevents them from being realized (Berlant 2011, 3).

Scholars have noted that the aspirational content shared by former reality television participants on social media continues to engender the artificial egalitarianism and sense of empowered individualism promoted by the television programming (Matusitz and Simi 2021). Psarras et al. (2021) conducted a content analysis of former *Bachelor/ette* participants turned high-earning Instagram influencers and found that all six women they studied used social media to legitimize fantasies of "neoliberal postfeminist nirvana," in which women balance high-earning careers, a high-maintenance, ultra-feminized aesthetic, and loving reproductive marriages. Relatedly, in her ethnographic study of the same-sex marriage movement, Whitehead (2011) identifies the pursuit of marriage by gay and lesbian activists as reflective of "a neoliberal ethic of care" which emphasizes the importance of the nuclear family over the welfare state "according to a risk-based political rationality." As I demonstrate, this rationality is on display throughout *Love is Blind*, endorsed by the plot, dialogue, and social media presence of former participants —particularly those who married their partners from the show.

Reality television stars turned social media influencers often appear wealthy, entrepreneurial, and in-control, but they are disadvantaged by a power structure that is significantly more weighted against their interests than is the case for more conventional celebrities and performers (Turner 2010). Typically, participants in these shows receive little to no payment for their involvement. Labor isn't provided with "expectation of fair recompense, but in the hope of attaining extraordinary rewards" through media exposure that might eventually translate to lucrative sponsorship deals (Redden 2018). Additionally, monetary gains through social media are positively correlated with approval ratings from the series and participants are contractually obligated to promote the show (Psarras et al. 2021). Although there is significant overlap between success for the show and success for the participants, both entities have different motives, and they are not always aligned.

B. Hypotheses

Reality television tends to be character-driven, meaning the plot or story is emphasized less than the personal lives and personalities of its participants. Former show participants are encouraged by media networks to perform likeability, relatability, and authenticity to build a fanbase and increase the show's popularity. The success of those efforts during and after filming are rewarded through lucrative brand endorsements and sponsorship deals (Redden 2018). On dating shows like *Love is Blind*, those with nothing to hide are presented as being the most deserving of love (Siddiquee 2021), perpetuating the well-known trope that complete transparency is a prerequisite to romantic partnership.

Thus, both dating shows and influencer culture reward convincing performances of authenticity and openness.

With that in mind, my suspicion was that those who successfully found a match on the show and remain coupled afterward evoke greater trust from viewers, translating to a higher number of followers on social media and more likes on posts that feature their partner from the show. Psarras et al. found that former *Bachelor/ette* participants are incentivized to "align their image on social media with their portrayal on the series" (2021) and to embody the same values that were endorsed by the show. I therefore expected to find similar results regarding continuity in presentation as well as the endorsement of neoliberal ideology perpetuated by the show.

The credibility of a former reality show participant depends largely on their ability to present believable continuity between their depiction on the show and their presentation on social media. Inconsistencies tend to be viewed as a suspicious disconnect and a lack of authenticity. Therefore, even if the production company assigned them a negative archetype, it won't be in the former participants' best interest to entirely reject that image. The former reality television participant and newly minted influencer owes their platform to the show; therefore, their success is inextricably tied together and mutually reinforcing. Additionally, reality television productions are notorious for imposing arduous and prohibitive contractual obligations that may require participants to promote the show for years following its airing or threaten them with hefty fines if they break non-disclosure agreements (Mast 2016).

Reality dating shows like *Love is Blind* tend to be marketed toward women and feminized people, reinforcing the idea that marriage and partnership are aspirational and

desirable for women. Additionally, the relational nature of reality television participation invokes forms of emotional labor, or the work of managing and producing particular feelings, that have traditionally been feminized (Hochschild 2003). The un- and under-paid nature of the work also intersects with traditionally feminized demands of undervalued and discounted care work. Thus, women are likely better socialized to perform the work demanded by reality television producers. Psychology research has consistently found traits such as trustworthiness, morality, and authenticity to be stereotyped as female rather than male in capitalist cultures (Sczesny et al. 2019) suggesting that women should also have an advantage when it comes to creating a personal brand based on how convincingly they are able to evoke transparency and openness. Therefore, regardless of other techniques and factors, I expected to find a gendered element to social media success, with the six women in my study outperforming the men in terms of follower counts.

Parasocial relationships and the affective energy that surrounds them are highly valuable resources for corporations and aspiring influencers alike and I expected to find content creation patterns that evoke a two-way relationship. This may include strategies such as addressing the audience directly, asking for feedback or opinions, and creating content that is relatable and emotionally resonant. By fostering a sense of connection and engagement with their audience, content creators can build a loyal following that can be leveraged for promotional purposes or to increase their influence and reach.

With these foundational assumptions in mind, I began my analysis with nine specific hypotheses:

H1: The show will prominently feature dialogue that indicates whether participants trust one another and are convincingly opening up and performing vulnerability.

H2: Former participants who are partnered with other former participants will have more followers than their single peers.

H3: Instagram posts that feature a partner from the show will garner more likes, on average, than posts without them.

H4: Former participants won't speak out against the show or the network.

H5: Former participants won't contest or deny their depictions on the show, even if they are negative.

H6: The plot and dialogue depicted within the television show will include both subliminal and explicit endorsements of neoliberal ideology.

H7: The endorsements of neoliberal ideology by the show will be continued through social media usage of former participants.

H8: Influencer success is gendered, and women are more likely to successfully transition from reality television. Thus, the six women in my case study will have more followers and more average likes than their male counterparts.

H9: Social media content creation patterns by former participants will frequently encourage engagement and evoke two-way relationships. This could be done by posing

questions in captions that prompt more comments, or by using words like “community” or “family” to describe followers.

C. Research Methods:

a. Case Study

A case study is an intensive investigation of a single unit of analysis that yields broad insights that can be widely applied (Gerring 2004). As Berlant (2007) notes, a case offers a recognizable account that “points to something bigger” about the world we live in. Case studies are perhaps best suited for exploratory research, or pilot studies, whereas multiple unit studies — which test fewer hypotheses with a greater degree of confidence — tend to work better for confirmatory research (Gerring 2004). As such, a case study approach is highly beneficial for the purposes of this research, as it allows for the testing of many hypotheses in a provisional manner. Additionally, the case study, and exploratory research in general, requires less resources to conduct, as most projects can be carried out by one researcher alone, a factor that was critical for the feasibility of this thesis. The primary goal of this research methodology is to describe a process, however, that doesn’t mean this is only a descriptive study, as the formulation of explicit hypotheses are the foundation upon which the analysis proceeds.

I use the first season of Netflix’s reality dating television series *Love is Blind* as my case study. Having just completed its fourth season and already renewed for season five, *Love is Blind* is a popular, Emmy-nominated show about young singles who date without seeing each other, communicating through speakers, while separated into rooms known as pods. The goal is for participants to fall in love with and get engaged to

someone based purely on emotional, rather than physical, attraction. According to Netflix's reporting, over 30 million subscribers watched the series within four weeks of its premiere (Jacobs and Stevens 2023).

Though season one was filmed before coronavirus was declared a global pandemic, I chose it as my case study because the final episode of the season aired in March 2020, which is also when participants were able to share real-time updates on their lives and begin their new roles as social media personalities. March 2020 marked the beginning of social distancing restrictions in the United States as well as the emergence of a new affective energy marred by social isolation, existential immobility, and loneliness. Thus, fandom and parasocial relationships gained new prominence in the coping strategies of so many, resulting in a historically specific mode of attachment. What's more, the *Love is Blind* contestants mimicked the situation so many people found themselves in: putting their normal lives on hold, socially isolating, and unable to interact with loved ones face-to-face.

I also chose *Love is Blind* as my case study because it was streamed on Netflix, a company that especially embodies the media convergence that guides modern content creation. Netflix's membership model and video streaming format offer unprecedented access to viewer data. Reality television shows streamed on Netflix serve the reality-tv-participant-to-influencer pipeline by manufacturing new microcelebrities following the release of every season. Netflix operates under what Hadida et al. (2020) refer to as the increasingly hegemonic "convenience logic" of streaming services which seeks to reach a wide range of viewers in their homes with customized, micro-segmented offerings informed by data analytics. The subscription business model has given rise to new

viewing experiences —such as binge-watching —which incentivize streaming services like Netflix to present the illusion of variety and novelty within its digital library. This results in a prioritization of hastily produced, low-cost content over the complex and intricate multi-season arcs of broadcast television shows like *The Sopranos* that were emblematic of the most recent golden age of television.

i. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis can refer to a range of approaches concerned with systematically uncovering power relations and ideologies embedded in various media discourse. This is done by combining a model of textual analysis with critical theories of societies and institutions (Gee 2004). CDA operates under the assumption that language and discourse are used to construct and reinforce social practices (Fairclough 1995, Van Leeuwen 2008). In other words, CDA explores the situated meanings of words and phrases and the biases they express. I seek to demonstrate how reality television content guides behavior by shaping, reinforcing, and giving expression to a broader system of ideas, therefore a CDA is best suited to for my goals. In advance, I identified two primary themes that I expected to find within the programming content: 1) endorsements of neoliberal ideology and 2) performances or depictions of participants that foster emotional and affective bonds.

I found transcripts of each episode online and, using a random number generator, selected three episodes to watch, doing a close read of the transcripts at the same time. Limiting the data to three randomly selected episodes ensured that this project remained feasible. It also served to mimic consumption patterns of many binge-watchers and social

viewers who don't necessarily sit down and closely watch the full season from start to finish as they would a plot-centric scripted show. *Love is Blind* opens each episode by replaying earlier scenes to retain distracted viewers and facilitate social viewing by filling in those who are skipping episodes to catch up with friends. Reality television in general tends to rely more heavily on short-term replays, at the beginning of episodes as well as between commercial breaks, than scripted television (Mittell 2011). These short-term replays function as a method of emphasizing the significance of particular events and they allow for a more distracted, non-linear viewing practice.

1) Endorsements of Neoliberal Ideology

I rely on episode transcripts to identify specific language and themes that reinforce neoliberal ideology. Ideologies are often characterized by rhetoric and shaped by discourse (Maynard 2017, Van Dijk 2006; Norval 2000). Analyzed through a critical theory lens, discourse that might otherwise seem neutral or even commonsense can be revealed to reinforce economic inequities and other power disparities. For example, the promotion of marriage, something that *Love is Blind* does consistently, can reflect neoliberal ideology by justifying the dismantlement of the welfare state (Randles and Woodward 2018) as well as the creation of familial debt (Cooper 2017).

2) Fostering Emotional Bonds

I focus primarily on what participants say during confessionals and how they relate to and connect with one another. As scholars like Turner (2010) have pointed out, ordinary people can be elevated to celebrity status depending on how well they perform relatability, openness, and authenticity. In this way, the affective bonds formed between

viewer and participant likely mimic those formed between participants. I pay particular attention to discourse and performances that evoke trustworthiness and sincerity, including displays of emotion and comments that acknowledge how absurd the premise of the show is (even as they seemingly play along and feel genuine feelings of love and care toward their chosen romantic partners).

ii. Social Media Content Analysis

For the social media content analysis, I examined Instagram posts during the six months following the airing of the finale. While previous research (Psarras et al. 2021) focused only on successful female reality-show-stars-turned-influencers with millions of followers, my research looks at the social media content creation patterns of all 12 main participants of *Love is Blind* season 1, regardless of follower count. This allows for more understanding of the techniques and traits used by a range of individuals, rather than just those who have achieved a certain level of fame or influence.

The primary goal of this step is to clarify the activity carried out on Instagram in order to establish the reality-television-to-influencer-figure and determine whether there are common characteristics to their profiles. I evaluate how former contestants present on Instagram, paying especially close attention to content that reinforces neoliberal values such as individualism, fantasies of the good life, consumerism, and entrepreneurialism. I also note the creation of digital intimacy through captions that disclose personal information or "behind the scenes" looks at their lives, paying especially close attention to content that performs intimacy, closeness, and community.

Through the free online platform Apify, I used a premade no-code Instagram tool to scrape data from all content posted by the 12 former *Love is Blind* participants between

March 1, 2020, and September 1, 2020. Borrowing and revising Marwick's (2015) collection methods, I recorded account names and follower counts for each profile, and captions, hashtags, and number of likes and comments for each post. I then categorized posts according to a revised combination of Saldaña (2013) and Psarras et al.'s (2021) methods of thematic pattern coding. I determined thirteen primary categories that help classify each post, depict their objectives, and identify patterns in content creation among participants. These thirteen categories each fell under one of three primary themes: parasocial relationship building, digital labor, and reinforcements of neoliberal ideology.

Table 1: Social Media Content Analysis

	Category	**Examples**
	Parasocial relationship building	
1	Intimate self	Content that includes personal opinions, childhood photos, or intimate relationships outside of coupledom
2	Selfies	Self-explanatory
3	Features a romantic partner	Photos and captions that feature significant others
4	Self-promotion	Links to or promotes personal businesses, podcasts, youtube channels, etc
5	References online community	Poses questions, encourages comments, refers to followers as family
	Digital labor	
6	References *Love is Blind* or Netflix	Uses #LoveIsBlind hashtags, discusses the show in caption, tags Netflix
7	Sponsored posts	Properly disclosed, according to the Federal Trade Commission

8	Posts that promote brands	Not explicitly sponsored, but tags or promotes other brands
	Neoliberal ideology	
10	Neoliberal individualism	Celebrates uniqueness, belief in meritocracy, absence of structural
11	Neoliberal fantasies of the good life	Aspirational, postfeminist, postracial, love conquers all
12	Neoliberal consumerism	Consumption as a path to happiness
13	Neoliberal entrepreneurialism	The self is a commodity to be marketed, long work hours are a virtue

D. Findings and Discussion:

a. Programming Content

Through the use of CDA, I was able to analyze occurrences when neoliberal ideology was endorsed by the show's programming content as well as instances when participants projected authenticity, transparency, and relatability. I found significant support for both Hypothesis 1 as well as Hypothesis 6. The two are connected as performances of intimacy are framed in neoliberal terms as individual investments of scarce assets in the context of risk.

By my analysis, the pilot immediately subscribes to a hegemonic understanding of the nuclear family as the most natural and desirable family form. Expectations are set that marriage results in the merging of two lives, and the creation of a new distinct entity: the family unit. The show consistently demonstrates a rarely acknowledged —yet pervasive and implicit— gendered understanding of marriage and romantic relationships. For women, particularly those over the age of 30, marriage is portrayed as an aspirational

status symbol while men are portrayed as natural providers, offering economic security in exchange for care and affection. Throughout the three episodes I analyzed, the show's hosts and participants alike consistently portray marriage and the reproductive nuclear family as an important component of upward mobility and the entrepreneurial self. In order to advance in the dating process, participants absorb and endorse the notion that romantic partnership and financial stability are virtues. They emphasize the importance of trustworthiness, use emotional displays to demonstrate their own vulnerability, and perform relatability to the audience.

i. Endorsements of Neoliberal Ideology

For participants of all genders, marriage was frequently portrayed as the only path to love in a capitalist society. This portrayal likely aligns with the way many viewers already feel. In recent years, scholarship has begun to examine the psychological impact of neoliberalism, finding that, regardless of one's social class, the neoliberal emphasis on competition and individualism serves to increase feelings of loneliness that are detrimental to well-being (Becker et al. 2021). Many *Love is Blind* participants emphasize their desire to not "be alone" at the end of a long workday and the sadness they feel when there's "no one to come home" to. As participant LC asserts, feeling loved is "a basic human necessity" and the show portrays domestic partnerships like marriage as the only acceptable way to experience that love as a working adult. Other living arrangements and community formations are acknowledged, but the text makes it clear that they are less desirable. When she finds out that her 24-year-old fiancé Mark lives with roommates in an apartment, for example, Jessica — a proud homeowner — notes

that she "could never have roommates again." Relatedly, Amber briefly notes that her current residence "isn't really even mine" as justification for not showing it to her new fiancé Barnett. This dialogue serves to disparage communal living arrangements as juvenile and immature while constructing marriage, and the single-family property ownership that it implies, as the ideal.

The show doesn't depict entrepreneurialism as inherently gendered, as both male and female contestants define themselves by their careers, but it does portray the roles of husbands and wives differently, with men portrayed as natural providers and women as natural caregivers. This is most blatantly on display by Carlton, a bisexual man who ascribes his decision to seek a wife to a desire for "a certain nurturing love and affection that I don't get from a guy," but is reinforced by others numerous times. Mark becomes enamored with Jessica after she tells him that she can cook, referencing that exchange several times throughout the show as justification for why he proposed. His friends joke with her that she'll be expected to do his laundry (to which she responds "I will never do his laundry. I don't even do my own laundry.").

The parents of participants are also explicit about their gendered expectations of marriage. When meeting Barnett, Amber's mother asks him whether he's stable and employed, noting that she wants to "make sure [her daughter is] taken care of." Similarly, Lauren's father asks Cameron "what kind of life do you intend to give my daughter?" indicating that he sees Cameron's role in Lauren's life as that of provider, rather than equal partner. Barnett more subtly reinforces gendered understandings of men as providers when he expresses feelings of inadequacy and shame about the small size of his house, into which Amber plans on moving. Relatedly, Cameron purchases a three-

bedroom home with the explicit goal of moving his eventual wife — who he hasn't even met yet — in.

The show's dialogue genders marriage as an accomplishment for women and an inevitability for men. LC, who ultimately didn't get engaged on the show, insists that "every girl grows up waiting for their Prince Charming" and Lauren notes that getting proposed to "feels like a fairy tale." This discourse emphasizes the view of marriage as a happy ending within the American cultural imaginary and validates the experiences of reality dating show participants by connecting them with broader myths and stories. In much the same way that Dean argues that fantasy serves to organize enjoyment under neoliberalism, the cultural fable of marriage as a happy ending is crucial to "ensure acceptance of the basic framework of domination" (2008).

Numerous female participants note how rare it is to encounter men who are looking for marriage and romantic commitment, demonstrating their understanding of marriage as an institution that is primarily marketed toward women. The oldest contestant, 34-year-old-Jessica, constantly reminds viewers and dates alike of her age, opining that, because of it, she "may not find someone based on the criteria that I've put in place." One of her love interests perpetuates this urgency, noting that he doesn't "understand how she could be single at 34" concluding that "there's got to be something wrong" which suggests that because all women aspire to marriage, singledom is a sign of personal failure. 32-year-old Lauren humorously acknowledges societal and familial pressure to both marry *and* reproduce when she tells viewers that her "mom calls [her] at least once a week and reminds [her] that [her] eggs are shriveling up." Other women also allude to external pressure and even 26-year-old Amber notes how much her mom wants

her to find a partner. On the other hand, male contestants speak of "a time in every man's life when he has to settle down" and of their feelings of finally being "ready to find a wife." These examples demonstrate how marriage is encouraged as an aspirational status symbol for women and a sign of maturity for men.

Perhaps because of their ten-year age difference, or perhaps because she is established in her career whereas he is just beginning, Mark and Jessica's relationship almost serves to subvert gendered expectations. Unsurprisingly, their relationship is also portrayed by the show as doomed from the very beginning, with other participants openly questioning her commitment to Mark. Their interactions demonstrate how abnormal and uncomfortable it is for these entrenched gender roles to be reversed. For example, Jessica complains about Mark being "very emotionally available" deeming it a "red flag, because no guy is that emotionally available." She describes her usual type as "the unassuming, laid-back guy that's not, like, talking about emotions with girls" which serves to police his gender expression by accusing him of being too feminine, or too much of a caretaker and not enough of a provider, for her liking. Jessica asks Mark directly what his thoughts are on "gender roles and how they play into managing finances" and tells him that were they to get married she would "definitely want to put, like, a prenup in place." This is in direct contrast with the men of the show, none of whom express a desire to keep their assets to themselves. Instead, they tend to operate under the assumption that they will be financially providing for their wives, as demonstrated by Cameron and Barnett's display of home ownership. Jessica and Mark's relationship, as well as the shows depiction of both men and women who are defined by their careers, also serves to reinforce the notion of a neoliberal postfeminist understanding of partnership (Psarras et al. 2021), where

women aren't structurally disadvantaged — in fact, they are just as capable of earning a living as men — but their essential qualities make them more likely to seek out roles of homemaking and caregiving than their male counterparts who are naturally more ambitious and career-driven.

In the pursuit of marriage, the absence of generational wealth is portrayed as a personal lack of responsibility as well as a burden that must be borne by future partners. When Amber reveals she has outstanding student loans to her fiancé, the subtext suggests that her debt is a personal failing. Amber also confesses that she recently spent $200 on beauty products, a scene which is immediately followed by a confessional in which she describes herself as "less responsible than Barnett in terms of my assets" to the audience. This chronology reinforces the notion that Amber's financial struggles are self-inflicted, caused by frivolous purchases rather than societal forces, and that financial stability generally is a matter of individual responsibility. Barnett laments that Amber's inability to make loan payments makes the situation "worse and worse." Though he may come across as callous, Barnett demonstrates an understanding of modern "poor laws" as described by Cooper (2017), in which marriage and kinship relations ultimately function to impose debt obligations under neoliberalism. Additionally, the show articulates what Whitehead refers to as a "model of disciplined personhood" that has been historically used by neoliberal states to justify the exclusion of certain populations, like lesbians and gays, from the institution of marriage by implying that they haven't "convincingly demonstrated" that they are capable of "taking on the responsibilities" that come with marriage (Whitehead 2011).

My findings indicate a significant tension between individualism and domestic or marital codependence that is at odds with the focus on individualism in much of the literature on neoliberalism. For example, although living with roommates is disparaged and portrayed as immature, when Lauren asks how Cameron would feel if she kept her apartment, he is visibly uncomfortable. This serves to remind the viewer of the assumption of financial codependency within a married unit. Another newly formed couple, Kenny and Kelly, demonstrate cultural expectations of social codependency within households when they lament the difficulties of "being alone" after just five days of cohabitation. When Kelly has to go to San Diego on a brief work trip, Kenny confesses that it "feels a little weird" for him to be "without Kelly in the apartment" and notes that her presence brings him "a sense of comfort." Without confirming her feelings, he assumes that she will struggle to "fall asleep" without him. These exchanges reinforce what Brown refers to as the "family-individual conundrum" in which the basic unit of analysis according to neoliberal logic is "not yet resolved" (Brown 2015, 103). She notes that both individual and family cannot function as the "ultimate operative unit" simultaneously, and that this lack of clarity historically benefits the male head of household who emerges as "the perspective from which we judge social arrangements" (Brown 2015, 100). Informed by postfeminist neoliberal logic, the show obfuscates these gendered power relations and constructs married couples and nuclear families as one autonomous unit: the household. This portrayal aligns with Brown's observation that the "neoliberal breakdown of the demos" results in atomization "rather than group solidarities" (Celikates and Yolande 2013).

The primacy of the nuclear family within neoliberal society is demonstrated when hosts Nick and Vanessa Lachey assert that the choice of who to propose to is "the biggest decision you will ever make in life" early in the first episode. While dating in the pods, participants often inquire about families before anything else, reinforcing the notion that one's family is the most important signifier of marriageability and that understanding the family is the easiest path to getting to know a person. For example, Mark and Jessica instantly connect over their love of their families and Lauren and Cameron both cry together while discussing their families during their second date. In later episodes, Giannina chalks up her incompatibility with her fiancé to familial norms, noting that "I come from a loud family. We fight a lot. When we fight, we yell. We all yell, so it's normal. It's not normal to Damian." She expresses chagrin about Damian's parents' skepticism and lack of support for their relationship and potential marriage to which he asserts "it's still my family at the end of the day" and tells her "I feel like you're jabbing at my family, and I don't appreciate that" making it clear that to do so would be crossing a line.

These examples serve to reinforce the importance of the nuclear family as a mechanism for socialization. The work of scholars like Cynthia Weber emphasizes the primary role of the neoliberal family as the production of good "neoliberal citizens," or patriotic, agentic, consumers (Weber 2016, 16). She argues that the family has an earlier and more foundational influence than either mass media or schooling do. Her work argues that figurations of both the home (family) and the homeland (nation), though vastly different in size and scope, ensure the endurance of social systems as they currently exit. Both units are depicted as possessing the inextricable right to defend

themselves, to keep others out, and to hoard resources. In other words, as the *Love is Blind* contestants demonstrate while dating and getting to know one another, family background can illuminate the norms and values that guide the actions of individuals.

The family can also serve as a powerful indicator of an individual's socioeconomic status, revealing their relative position within society. Amber's mother points to the passing of Amber's father when she was a young girl as the source of the family's financial hardships, noting that "…she had it tough because it was just me and them." This reinforces the central role played by the nuclear family in neoliberal visions of upward mobility and security as well as the implicit assumption that a functioning family unit consists of two self-sufficient married adults with shared children (Brettschneider 2011). However, Amber's socioeconomic status is no longer excused by her upbringing once she transitions to adulthood. Amber's mother's comment reinforces work by scholars like Melinda Cooper (2017) that demonstrates how neoliberalism fuels the notion of familial responsibility and shifts the responsibility of care from the state onto the individual. According to Cooper's analysis, the state defines and restructures kinship to minimize its own costs. Genetic relations are often emphasized, such as when the onus for economic care is determined through child support laws which incentivize single mothers to track down their child's father and demand financial support rather than seek welfare assistance from the state.

ii. Laying the Foundation for Parasociality

As expected, in addition to and alongside the endorsement of neoliberal themes, I also found numerous examples of dialogue that depicts participants as they open up to

one another and to the audience. In particular, I noted that participants often perform vulnerability, trustworthiness, and relatability. This aligns with other research that identifies "self-disclosure, authenticity, and similarity" as key characteristics of microcelebrities who effectively cultivate parasocial relationships with viewers (Miller and Bond 2022).

Regarding vulnerability and relatability, I found that fan favorites and successful influencers Lauren and Cameron shed more on-camera tears than any other participants. These displays coincide with psychology research that indicates that tears can perform "helplessness" (Vingerhoets 2016) and send "emotional signals" (Hasson 2009) to viewers that "resolve ambiguity" (Provine et al. 2009). In other words, so long as they are perceived to be genuine, the display of emotional tears serves to portray people as relatable, human, and worthy of empathy. Lauren appears to endorse this understanding early in the first episode, while first getting to know Cameron, when she asks him about the last time he cried.

Lauren and Cameron were also more likely to be shown admitting feelings of anxiety and fear than their counterparts. Lauren was the first contestant to say, "I love you" and, after she is shown doing so, she cries and is shown speaking directly to the audience, confessing that the process feels "terrifying" and "scary as fuck" and describing the way she's feeling as "like I'm jumping out of a plane." Cameron demonstrates similar feelings when he tearfully says "I love you" back to Lauren, telling her that those words feels both "scary" and "amazing" to him. In contrast to Lauren, the show doesn't show Diamond shedding visible tears at any point. Though she self-identifies as vulnerable, telling viewers "I have been vulnerable" during a confessional,

she quickly follows that proclamation up with another: “I don’t want to be embarrassed.” This contradictory monologue immediately follows Lauren and Cameron’s tearful display, signaling to viewers that Diamond is not as vulnerable or emotionally honest as Lauren and Cameron. As the only two black women featured on the show, Lauren and Diamond are contrasted and positioned as foils of one another.

In general, the standards for male vulnerability are set lower by the show and the participants. Barnett admits it is “hard for him to open up” but in the first episode, before he proposes to Amber, three girls identify him as a viable prospective husband and pursue him regardless. Following Lauren and Cameron, Damian and Giannina are a close second when it comes to the frequency of displaying tears and, in response to his ability to display emotion, Giannina tells the audience that she has never experienced “a man so willing to show me how much he loves me.” Similarly, Diamond notes how much she appreciates when Carlton “opens up” to her and, rather than identify that as a prerequisite to any healthy relationship, she sees it as an indication of a once-in-a-lifetime display of true love. Carlton, pushes back against gender essentialism when he discusses the societal messages that told him that he shouldn’t cry or “be sensitive and emotional and vulnerable.” He argues for both a racialized and a gendered understanding of perceptions of emotionality, telling Diamond: “It's like, ‘boys don't cry!’ Like, that's constantly conditioned in black men's heads since we were boys.”

Because of their perceived vulnerability deficit, male participants are more likely to describe themselves as having undergone significant emotional growth than their female counterparts. For example, Mark notes that “it took this experience to really just break down any kind of wall that I thought I had about my heart.” And Barnett, though

initially portrayed as a shallow jokester, finally displays some vulnerability and fear when he decides to propose to Amber. Speaking directly to the audience, he admits that he is "afraid of opening up and losing that connection" and "nervous about being myself and getting hurt." Another male participant —one who doesn't end up getting engaged — reflects on the dating process in a conversation with Barnett, musing that "this has made me so open."

In addition to vulnerability, trust is a common theme and indicator of participant's romantic success and worthiness. Diamond emphasizes the primacy of trust in a partnership when she says "that's the thing with relationships, you have to be able to trust" while on an early date with Carlton. Cameron is often shown simultaneously expressing both his love for and his trust in Lauren, repeating for emphasis "I trust you. I trust you." Kelly's mother expresses "trust" in her daughter's "judgment" upon meeting Kenny and learning of their engagement. Though Mark is shown asking Jessica to trust him numerous times, she remains skeptical, which serves to foreshadow the eventual demise of their relationship.

Participants regularly project openness and transparency as well, which is one way in which the show normalizes and validates surveillance culture. Dean's concept of communicative capitalism can be used to better understand how an "intensification of surveillance" ultimately benefits the neoliberal system wherein personal data, often willingly offered up by social media users, is privatized and commodified (2016). Kenny offers his fiancé Kelly "full access" to his digital devices, telling her that she is permitted to "see who's texting or direct messaging" him. This serves to reinforce the notion that transparency and openness are valuable traits according to neoliberal dating logic,

dismissing and minimizing the harms caused by data harvesting. In contrast to Kenny's transparency, which is portrayed as a positive attribute, Carlton's bisexuality is framed as a "big secret," that he doesn't want to reveal to his fiancé Diamond. As a result, his character comes off as both untrustworthy and inauthentic. When he ultimately does reveal his identity to Diamond, it results in a screaming fight that marks the demise of their relationship.

In addition to vulnerability, transparency, and trust, scholars like Shariffadeen and Manaf (2017) find that "being relatable to viewers" is a crucial aspect of building and maintaining parasocial relationships and feelings of closeness. Thus, although none of the participants were famous or especially powerful during the show's filming (all appeared to depend on relatively traditional, full-time jobs for their livelihood) relatability and perceived authenticity still needed to be cultivated by producers and editors. Comments that acknowledge the absurdity of the show's premise can be used to evoke relatability for many viewers and Lauren, the most popular of these former participants, is most frequently portrayed making such comments. Though the other contestants may not have found as compatible of partners, or, ultimately, relationships with as much endurance, they were significantly less likely to be shown expressing reservations, or even seriously acknowledging the drawbacks of the expedited engagement process. Right after telling Cameron that she loved him, Lauren admitted that "Part of me does think, 'Are you being rash?'" After they become engaged, she is shown laughing, and tells the audience "Oh, my God, I've had meals in my refrigerator for longer than that. Like, that's crazy." Both examples likely reflect the thoughts of many viewers, depicting Lauren as just as baffled by her unlikely romance as they are. Importantly, both scenes are also confessionals, or

scenes in which the viewer appears to be addressed directly, a technique that scholars like Cummins and Cui have found more likely to "trigger empathetic processes that facilitate bonds between media performers and viewers" (2014) than more traditional interpersonal dialogue.

b. Use of Social Media

For over a year, until the *Love is Blind* season 1 finale aired in March 2020, participants weren't legally permitted to post any revealing information about their personal lives, much less information about their participation in the show. The details of these agreements aren't made publicly available, but what is known is that immediately following the finale, millions of viewers began following former participants on social media, in an effort to extend the entertainment experience and gain additional insight into the personal lives of these 12 individuals who had once been subjected to near constant observation. Two couples chose to say yes at the altar, and they remain married at the time of writing this thesis: Lauren and Cameron, and Amber and Barnett. Giannina and Damian said no at the altar but continued dating for several years following the show. Mark and Jessica, and Kenny and Kelly both decided not to get married in the finale, and Diamond and Carlton broke up during an explosive fight in episode 4 after which they both left the show and were no longer depicted until the reunion episode, following the finale.

i. Data

Table 2: Rankings by Follower Count

Name	Follower count	Gender
Lauren	2.5 million	F
Cameron	2.1 million	M
Giannina	2.0 million	F
Amber	1.3 million	F
Barnett	1.2 million	M
Damian	792,000	M
Mark	781,000	M
Jessica	632,000	F
Kenny	462,000	M
Kelly	398,000	F
Diamond	277,000	F
Carlton	9,850	M

As the ranking by follower count indicates, women do have a slightly higher follower count than their male counterparts, although the results are less significant than I had expected (see Hypothesis 8). As of February 2023, the women have a collective 7.107 million followers, whereas the men have 5.344 collectively. This aligns with Psarras et al.'s (2021) findings that women's digital labor is featured prominently in reality dating shows as it typically benefits franchises and serves to reinforce the postfeminist neoliberal ideals promoted by the show. Additionally, the top five accounts by follower account, all of which have over a million followers, contain both still-married

couples as well as one half of the only couple that was still together (though not married) following the 2020 finale. Notably, Diamond and Carlton, the only couple who broke up before the finale, have the lowest follower counts. Carlton's account appears to have been deleted in the time since, which somewhat explains his low follower account and lack of data for analysis. However, according to his own telling, he had 110k followers at the time, which still would have ranked him last in terms of follower count compared to the rest of the season 1 cohort. This supports Hypothesis 2 as well as Psarras et al.'s (2021) findings that public romantic relationships can increase social and economic capital for influencers, particularly those whose platforms came from reality dating shows.

Table 3: Average Likes Featuring Posts with Partners

Name	**Average likes for posts featuring partner**	**Average likes for other posts**	**Posts featuring partner have more likes, y/n**
Lauren	196,551	128,649	y
Cameron	165,564	91,678	y
Giannina	212,907	100,830	y
Amber	130,897	64,630	y
Barnett	90,748	54,157	y
Damian	86,413	37,865	y

In support of Hypothesis 3, each of the six contestants who remained with their partner from the show during the six-month period following the airing of the finale garnered significantly more likes on posts that featured their partner than those that didn't. These results suggest that viewers develop strong emotional attachments to

couples when they feel they were privy to the early stages of the relationship. Findings also underscore the complementary nature of perceived continuity and trustworthiness for the reality-television-turned-influencer figure. Emotional investments by viewers often lead to potent affective energies, or online fandoms, directed at one or both members of the couple. The resulting "simulacrum of community" is harnessed by corporate interests and used to incentivize immaterial labor (such as casting, market research, promotion, or recapping) that creates value for media companies (Bonsu et al. 2010) much the same way that big data does for tech companies (Dean 2016). Ultimately, both forms of exploitation serve corporate interests generally, as they enable advertisers to "get closer and closer to the consumers" who, in turn, become more easily influenced (Dean 2016). Media companies are adept at eliciting and commodifying these emotional investments from viewers, as evidenced by Netflix's prioritization of these couples. During the promotional media circuit for *Love is Blind*, only the enduring couples were featured on prominent national shows like *Ellen*. Thus, coupledom and continuity are rewarded by the industry and the viewers alike, resulting in a self-reinforcing upward-spiral of success that leaves both single and dynamic former participants behind.

Table 4: Endorsing Neoliberal Values								
Jessica	Mark	Damian	Barnett	Amber	Giannina	Cameron	Lauren	**Name**
632 k	781 k	792 k	1.2 M	1.3 M	2.0 M	2.1 M	2.5 M	**Follower count**
18%	11%	25%	6%	13%	10%	6%	23%	**Total neoliberal posts**
18%	7%	15%	4%	6%	8%	4%	15%	**Neoliberal: individualism**
18%	8%	5%	4%	8%	6%	4%	16%	**Neoliberal: aspirational**
9%	6%	13%	4%	5%	3%	3%	8%	**Neoliberal: consumerism**
9%	7%	15%	6%	3%	4%	0%	15%	**Neoliberal: entrepreneurial**

Table 4: Endorsing Neoliberal Values				
Carlton	Diamond	Kelly	Kenny	**Name**
9.85 k	277 k	398 k	462 k	**Follower count**
N/A	31%	83%	42%	**Total neoliberal posts**
N/A	19%	68%	11%	**Neoliberal: individualism**
N/A	3%	13%	11%	**Neoliberal: aspirational**
N/A	19%	12%	18%	**Neoliberal: consumerism**
N/A	24%	71%	18%	**Neoliberal: entrepreneurial**

These findings indicate that participants do endorse neoliberal ideology through social media usage following the show, which offers support for Hypothesis 7. However, the results were lower than I had expected overall, and didn't necessarily correlate with influencer success. Disaggregating the data further complicates findings but can help illuminate gendered divisions reminiscent of those depicted by the show. For example, Kelly's posts were the most likely to reinforce neoliberal values, especially entrepreneurialism, and she ranks tenth in terms of follower count. By contrast, Cameron ranks second in terms of follower count, but he is the least likely to endorse neoliberal values through his Instagram activity. Additionally, Cameron didn't post any content endorsing neoliberal entrepreneurialism during the six-month period I examined. However, I did find that overall, the men were slightly more likely to post neoliberal content that endorsed individualism and entrepreneurialism than their female counterparts which further reinforces the gender roles depicted on the show.

Lauren and Amber, the two women who ended up marrying their *Love is Blind* partners, were found to be the most likely to post aspirational content when endorsing neoliberal values. In contrast, and in line with their position as two of the least popular former participants, I found that Kelly and Diamond were both significantly less likely to present aspirational visions of postfeminist nirvana. These results reinforce persistent themes from the show that construct marriage as an aspirational status symbol for women as well as findings from Psarras et al (2021) about the commercial and affective value of coupledom.

Kelly and Diamond were also both much more likely to post about entrepreneurialism and their own journey as entrepreneurs. Kelly's content explicitly

targets single women over the age of 30 and she often uses her captions to discuss her own battles with debt, self-esteem issues, and loneliness as a means of promoting her life coach business. This offers additional support for Hypothesis 5 which posits that former participants are incentivized to display continuity between their depictions on the show, even if they are negative. Finally, I think it's worth noting that none of the former participants were found to be most likely to endorse consumerism when reinforcing neoliberal ideology. This supports Brown's Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism as a definitional shift in the concept of citizenship from passive consumers and welfare recipients to active, agentic participants in the economy.

Table 5: Online Community Building

Name	**Follower count**	**Percent of posts categorized as referencing online community**
Lauren	2.5 million	24%
Cameron	2.1 million	20%
Giannina	2.0 million	30%
Amber	1.3 million	8%
Barnett	1.2 million	13%
Damian	792,000	74%
Mark	781,000	27%
Jessica	632,000	19%
Kenny	462,000	21%
Kelly	398,000	89%
Diamond	277,000	49%
Carlton	9,850	N/A

In support of Hypothesis 9, former *Love is Blind* participants regularly post content that encourages engagement from followers, discursively evoking an intimate two-way relationship despite a lack of real reciprocity. Additionally, interactivity can help fuel feelings of digital democratization, where the follower is made to feel as if their endorsement and engagement is directly responsible for the influencer's platform. This suggests that these reality-television-turned-Instagram-influencer figures are aware of what Hair describes as "relational expectations" not only of authenticity but also of "constant digital access" and a form of "real-time intimacy" that necessitates at least the illusion of interactivity (Hair 2021). However, in this case, the frequency of such posts doesn't correlate with the popularity of the account, as is especially evidenced by Kelly and Diamond. This is likely due to the fact that Kelly and Diamond are the least likely to disguise the economic nature of their digital presences. Both women explicitly engage in the labor of sales, treating followers as potential customers and encouraging them to purchase their products. The other former participants rarely, if ever, push their own products, relying much more on product endorsements, paid partnerships, and/or the promotion of freely available self-referential content such as podcasts. The former participant found least likely to use the strategy of discursive community building is Amber, who has over a million followers, and the former participant who was found most likely to use this strategy is Kelly, who falls near the end of the list according to follower count. Evidently, this approach can be used in a variety of ways, with a highly variable degree of effectiveness, depending on how well the labor of what Hair (2021) calls "parasocial relational work," or, the construction of imaginary relations, is performed.

ii. Coding Process

A consistent approach to coding across all 12 accounts was critical. I opted for a more inclusive set of guidelines, occasionally going back and recoding as I expanded the defining features of the category. For example, I categorized all posts that mentioned the poster's childhood or adolescence, close relationships other than romantic partners, and banal inner thoughts such as dreams and the expression of preferences under the "intimate self" label. Other categories of classification were easier to discern, and consistency was more straightforward. For example, it was clear when *Love is Blind* or Netflix were referenced, when a romantic partner was prominently featured, when a post was properly disclosed as a sponsored post, when an image was a selfie, and when the online community was referenced and engaged with. Each post could be coded according to as many classifications were applicable.

Inspired by Brown and related scholarship on neoliberalism as a cultural force, as well as primary themes found in the programming content, I chose to disaggregate the initially singular category of neoliberal ideology into four sub-categories: individualism, aspirational/fantasy, consumerism, and the entrepreneurial self. The pervasive nature of neoliberalism prompted me to initially note a small justification each time I classified a post as neoliberal in an attempt to remain consistent and avoid coding everything as neoliberalism. Though an argument could have been made for almost every post to be classified as depicting neoliberalism, I was careful to only identify posts that offered uncritical endorsements of neoliberal ideology, as I did for the programming content. Eventually I used those notes to disaggregate and identify these four primary —though often overlapping and intersecting —sub-categories. For example, posts related to self-

care or manifestation generally fit under individualism, but they could also be classified as aspirational or consumeristic; posts valorizing home ownership could be aspirational, or they could be classified as entrepreneurial or consumeristic; a post about love conquering all could be a representation of neoliberal individualism or fantasy. Not all aspirational posts endorsed neoliberal values, some merely depicted a tone of generic positivity which is distinct from neoliberal fantasies of the good life as envisioned by Berlant.

Other categories that were regularly identified but not considered useful for this particular research were posts with religious themes, posts that evoked temporality in different ways (although there were several instances of posts that endorsed entrepreneurialism by referencing productive Mondays), and thirst traps, or posts that are designed to attract sexual attention. Religious identity could likely function as an asset in the formation of parasocial connections, but that is outside the scope of this particular project. I found that the temporality evoked in posts (which include naming the day of the week, for example wishing followers a happy Friday) primarily served to situate influencers and followers alike, emphasizing their similar locations in space in time, especially during the height of the pandemic lockdown. Regarding thirst traps, research conducted by Bhattacharya (2023) found that perceived physical attractiveness makes the ability to cultivate emotional attachments from followers significantly easier. However, the same study also determined that social attractiveness is an even stronger indicator of ability to develop intimacy at a distance, therefore, I don't think that including thirst traps would add valuable insight to my findings. Additionally, despite the premise of the show,

I consider all featured participants to be marketably and conventionally attractive according to hegemonic beauty standards.

iii. Discussion

As I demonstrated in the previous section, I found strong support for Hypotheses 2 and 3 whereas I only found some support for others. Hypotheses 4 anticipated that former participants won't speak out about the show or network, largely due to the legal machinery they would have to go up against to do so, as well as the inextricability of the show's success with that of former participants. No such posts were found during the six-month time period chosen for analysis; therefore Hypotheses 4 was supported by this research. However, although outside the scope of this design, it is worth noting that more than two years after the span of this analysis, Lauren did publicly criticize the show, accusing producers of cutting black women and asserting that they manufacture the formation of certain couples for entertainment purposes (Jacobs and Stevens 2023). This unexpected public break (from allegiance, if not character) suggests that she felt less restrained, whether legally or financially, from speaking her mind, and that she no longer saw her own success as being tied to the success of the show. In fact, she may have identified an undermining effect in which the later seasons, which came under increasing scrutiny by critics and viewers alike, actually served to diminish the value of her personal brand and credibility as an influencer, microcelebrity, and public figure.

Hypothesis 5, which theorizes that former participants are disincentivized from publicly speaking out against their depiction on the show, even they perceive it to be inaccurate or negative, is largely supported by my findings. Jessica was portrayed as the antagonist of the show by producers and online fandoms alike. She was simultaneously

depicted as pitiful and conniving, with her biggest offense apparently being that she didn't want to commit to her fiancé Mark and that she was, by her own admission, physically attracted to Barnett. Though she captions the first post shared after the airing of the finale with "this is reality" which could be interpretated as a subtle refute of her depiction on the show, the message isn't explicit enough to disprove this hypothesis. Diamond and Carlton weren't far ahead of Jessica in terms of likability on the show, and both have discussed the death threats they received after the show aired. However, likely because of their premature departure, neither of them was consistently portrayed by producers as the antagonist of the show, nor have they gone on to refute the way they were portrayed on the show. To contest one's portrayal could inadvertently come off as a lack of integrity and emotional honesty, further damaging one's reputation and capacity to capitalize on the reality television experience. Thus, instead of explicitly denying the accuracy of her portrayal by making accusations of selective editing or disputing the show's version of events, Jessica employs another strategy: hardly ever mentioning either *Love is Blind* or Netflix in her posts. Only one of her posts was found to reference the show, significantly less than anyone else in her cohort, and the one that does simply used a #LoveIsBlind hashtag.

As noted in the precious section, Hypotheses 7 and 9 are supported by my findings, but neither the endorsement of neoliberal ideology, nor the use of interactive language were correlated with follower counts. In fact, Kelly and Diamond, two of the least successful influencers as indicated by follower count, had a high percentage of posts that endorsed neoliberal ideology and evoked two-way relationships and parasociality. However, they were less likely to function as aspirational figures and less likely to

obscure the transactional nature of their digital presence. Thus, although the hypotheses that both of these themes will be evoked through former participant's content creation patterns is supported, it's not clear whether those are strategies that strengthen affective bonds. On the other hand, fan favorite Lauren was found to regularly refer to her followers as "fam" or "family" and to share content that was classified as neoliberal fantasies of the good life.

Additionally, the endorsements of neoliberal ideology expressed on social media aligned well with those that I identified in the show, particularly the neoliberal vision of marriage "as a morally superior practice of self-responsibilization" (Whitehead 2011). Contestants also use social media to reinforce gender roles within marriages, such as when Cameron and Lauren both share several posts about Cameron giving Lauren the gift of a new jeep. Lauren describes her life as "living out my housewife fantasies" despite appearing to continue to work full time for a wage. These examples reinforce the show's depiction of men as neoliberal individuals whereas women are more likely to function as either aspirational or cautionary tales. Diamond demonstrates continuity with the show's depiction of coupledom as affectively valuable, especially for women, when she says, "sorry to disappoint our fans but Carlton and myself have not been seeing eye to eye." Kelly likewise consistently reinforces the show's depiction of single women over 30 as failures desperate for romantic partnership, the only acceptable path to companionship for a working adult. She explicitly says things like "I want a boyfriend" and "There are days, lots of them, when I am exhausted from working all day and all I want to do is have someone rub my feet, cook me dinner, hold me, love me." She relies on tropes in an attempt to resonate with other single women saying things like "to all my

single ladies spending this holiday alone, I feel you" and "to all the single ladies in the 30+ club, this message is for you." According to both the programming content of the show and the social media content posted by former participants, singledom is not a choice for women as it is for men.

E. Conclusion

a. Summary of Findings

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates how both reality television and the parasocial relationships it fosters serve to reinforce the values of neoliberalism. Through a critical discourse analysis of *Love is Blind*, I demonstrate that the show endorses a postfeminist understanding of gender roles, emphasizes the primacy of the individual (or the nuclear family) over the collective, and reinforces norms about the entrepreneurial self. Most of all, this particular show propagates a neoliberal model of care that centers the household over the state in which the married dyad or nuclear family is seen as a distinct entity that can retreat from group life. In fact, the show perpetuates a common view of marriage as not only an essential component of upward mobility (through the division of labor and the pooling of resources) but also as the only path to communion and love under neoliberal atomization. This is linked to widespread mythologies and fables about finding true love that construct powerful and productive cultural imaginaries and fantasies. In other words, the show depicts and encourages a linear progression for the good neoliberal citizen: first, demonstrate that you have reached economic self-sufficiency, then, get rewarded with a balm to the loneliness caused by neoliberal individualism through coupledom.

The show is also an example of the commercialization of affective bonds through parasociality. By encouraging viewers to identify with the contestants and their personal struggles, the show fosters a sense of trust and relatability that is central to parasocial relationships. These affective bonds are then leveraged for commercial gains, creating a feedback loop between viewers, producers, participants, and advertisers. The labor of cultivating digital intimacies is found to be most successfully performed by women and feminized people who are able to portray aspirational fantasies of the neoliberal good life. However, this association is a double-edged sword as women who fail to meet the standard of aspirational are significantly likely to be typecast as either pitiful or manipulative than their male counterparts. Show producers and viewers alike tend to reward participants of all genders for displays of openness (which normalizes surveillance culture), vulnerability (displayed through the formation of romantic partnerships), worthiness (demonstrated through financial stability), and trust (which is built by projecting relatability as well as integrity and continuity).

Overall, this chapter contributes the perspective that reality television shows, and the affective energies they induce, are political forces that are shaped by and reinforcing of neoliberal ideologies. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the value of these affective bonds as well as the role reality television has in producing them and heightens the importance of studying reality television and parasociality as significant modes of power and control.

b. Limitations and Future Research

This research serves as the first step in understanding how parasocial relationships function as capitalist instruments. In order to develop a conceptual framework that

explains how and why emotional recruitment has become central to neoliberal modes of power since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I will use the remaining chapters to revise, extend, and connect several key theoretical frameworks, primarily Jodi Dean's communicative capitalism, Wendy Brown's anti-democratic neoliberalism, and Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism.

Additionally, this research points to many potential areas for fruitful future study. For example, a more thorough critical discourse analysis, conducted by a researcher with more resources than I have, should be multimodal and go beyond narrative interpretation. This could include examining music, sound effects, camera work, graphics, and/or editing. As Connolly notes, "it is the intersection between technique and story which is critical" for bringing the micropolitics that "saturate cultural life" to light (Connolly 2002).

Another potential limitation of this study is the use of CDA by just one researcher. CDA often suffers from interpretation bias, requiring the researcher to be familiar with the sociocultural context in which the CDA is mobilized. In this case, the researcher is an urban, American, millennial, quite familiar with the sociocultural context of *Love is Blind*. However, for a future study with more resources, CDA would ideally be offset by coupling the research method with audience interviews or focus groups. A more in-depth study could also incorporate interviews with producers, staff, show participants, or even market research into the reality television industry. Further research should consider aggregating all of these methodological perspectives.

Regarding the social media content analysis, I was not able to examine social media content as it was posted, but nearly three years later which means that if former

participants deleted any posts between then and now, they wouldn't be incorporated into these findings. For example, Carlton's account allegedly was hacked and deleted, and, as a result, I wasn't able to incorporate his content creation patterns into my findings at all. Further study would benefit from paid services that allow researchers to see deleted posts, as well as from conducting content analyses closer to the time of posting. Additionally, future research might consider incorporating an analysis of comment valence (positive vs negative) in addition to expand definitions of success beyond follower count by incorporating degrees of enthusiasm and loyalty from online fandoms.

Chapter III: The Role of the Audience

A. Introduction

This chapter builds on and moves beyond the specific analysis of *Love is Blind* that I conducted in the previous chapter to consider the broader reception and development of reality television. Whereas the previous chapter focused on the neoliberal and parasocial fantasies that reality television like *Love is Blind* perpetuates, here I focus primarily on the role and experience of the active reality television viewer who both absorbs and contests these fantasies. Like reality show participants, viewers can be seen as either unwitting victims of an exploitative system or as shrewd and empowered co-creators. I begin by tracing recent technological and cultural shifts to demonstrate that the affective investment of parasociality is a historically specific mode of attachment that can and should be contextualized. Then I use Dean's (2005) concept of communicative capitalism as a guide to explore the digital labor performed by fans and anti-fans alike, noting that this enclosure reinforces her argument that the digital message doesn't matter, just the circulation of content. I conclude by using affect theory, namely Berlant and Cvetkovich's writings on fantasy and creativity, to revise and extend Dean's analysis and offer a new perspective on this conversation in political theory. While digital messages may no longer matter to tech and media companies, they still have the potential to make a significant impact on the individuals who are writing, thinking, sharing, and communicating them.

B. Historically Specific Modes of Attachment

The nature and power of parasocial relationships and affective energies are culturally and historically specific modes of attachment. Parasociality isn't a new

concept, but I argue that both the introduction of the internet and the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed how these relationships function. Ultimately, these two landmarks had the effect of strengthening and spreading these affective investments in different ways. The rising synergy between television and digital media, as demonstrated by reality television, created the illusion of a digital democracy in which viewers and followers were able to grant someone fame based on perceived worthiness. However, as Turner (2010) notes, although much of the appeal for consumers lies with the perceived authenticity and relatability of these figures, access to the spotlight remains tightly controlled by tech and media companies. The interactive style of engagement and sense of ownership that resulted from the internet-fueled demotic turn helped bolster "a massive expansion of data collection practices by giants such as Facebook" (L'Hoiry 2019) which provides insights into consumer behavior and preferences that can be used to further segment and target marketing campaigns. According to Dean, big data is a highly sought-after and valuable resource that can also be used to augment the value of other resources which helps explain why it inspires so much dedicated industry and has been dubbed "the new oil" (2016). The COVID-19 pandemic and the social isolation that resulted functioned as the second key historical inflection point that I will explore. Though the outcomes were similar, the pandemic caused significant growth in the power and commercial value of affective energies because of increased loneliness and fear rather than technological change.

a. The Rise of the Internet and Interactivity

The concept of parasociality was first introduced into the literature by Horton and Wohl (1956) who were studying the effects of mass media on spectators. They observed

a phenomenon in which audience members were able to develop feelings of closeness toward media figures "as if they were in the circle of one's peers." Despite a lack of reciprocity, these emotional connections were found to be so strong that they felt "analogous to those in a primary group." These relationships offered a "simulacrum of conversation," but they were not actually susceptible to feedback from audience members or media consumers (Horton and Wohl 1956). Horton and Wohl identified the inability of viewers to interact or make their feelings known as a defining feature of parasociality. Unlike interpersonal relationships, the only mechanism available to audience members, according to their analysis, was to withdraw from the relationship entirely. At the time of their writing, there was no internet, and relationships between celebrities and fans were primarily experienced through passive, non-interactive mediums such as television or radio.

Horton and Wohl's concept of parasociality remains widely used by scholars to this day. However, the desires and expectations of the audience changed significantly as we entered the digital age. The introduction of the internet and social media networks led to an expectation of "self-disclosure and real-time interaction" that further bolstered feelings of closeness (Hair 2021). In the late 20th century, celebrities like Paris Hilton were able to expand their reach first through tabloids, then reality television, and finally interactive digital spaces, like social media (Leavey 2023). Hilton became one of the first social media stars and her status of "famous for being famous" served as a template for a generation of influencers. Her former assistant, Kim Kardashian, deployed similar tactics in the early 21st century and was dubbed "the most important and powerful influencer in the world" (Carder 2018). Contrary to frequent assertions from media critics and

commentators that their fame would be short-lived, the continued relevance of both women after more than two decades in the spotlight demonstrates the potential strength and longevity of parasocial attachments formed through social media.

The convergence of television and social media, a convergence that I identify as a key component of reality television, is a highly effective mechanism for the formation of parasocial relationships. Unlike traditional scripted television, characters — or contestants — live on after a show's finale and continue to share their lives on social media. The transition from reality television to social media stardom requires the ability to mobilize fan's affective investments through "parasocial relational work" (Hair 2021) or the construction of artificial relationships over multiple mediums. In other words, no longer do audience members feel like their voices aren't heard, and that the only recourse available to them is withdrawal. Rather than being passive spectators, today's average viewer provides valuable immaterial labor ranging from casting to promotion to market research (Bonsu et al. 2010). This labor contributes to the show's success, influences its direction, and results in a sense of investment and ownership by the viewer. In this way, reality television doesn't just benefit from online engagement, it is specifically designed to be consumed over multiple mediums.

For media figures, the commercialization of parasociality presents the audience or followers as a mass, or a number on a screen, rather than a collection of individuals, emphasizing the demotic, rather than democratic, nature of parasociality. Because the algorithmic nature of hegemonic social media platforms encourages virality, fledgling influencers can experience seismic surges in follower counts from one day to the next, following a popular post or high-profile mention. A similar occurrence happens when

influencers are publicly shamed and experience mass unfollowings as a result. Metrics like follower counts are critical data points for influencer marketing campaigns and a noticeable decrease threatens influencers' earning power (Hudder et al. 2021). Affective contagions like mass unfollowings often result in public apologies which has constructed new norms surrounding parasocial relationship dynamics and expectations. Followers are increasingly aware of the transactional nature of the relationship, and, rather than feeling put off by it, they attempt to wield it as best they can.

Today, parasocial relationships are so valuable because they can function as both forces that influence consumption habits *and* that inform, shape, and direct public opinion (Hudders et al. 2021). The success of influencer marketing and the role of parasociality as a "vehicle for advertising and brand building" (Bhattacherya 2023) is well documented and often seen as the primary role of influencers among the scholarly literature. However, less examined is the role that influencers play in changing norms and shaping opinions. Tukachinsky and Stever's model of the four stages of parasocial relationships development argues that during the third stage, known as intensification, "parasocial relationships begin to affect attitudes and beliefs" (Tukachinsky and Stever 2019). This means that once a follower or fan establishes that they generally agree with a media figure's opinions and values, the impact of parasocial relationships can override other forms of judgment. Parasocial relationships have the potential to be doubly neoliberal, both as direct means of monetizing affective energy and as a force that changes opinions and influences people to be more receptive to neoliberal logic.

More work is needed that studies how influencers function as the living embodiments of neoliberalism, endorsing and reinforcing neoliberal fantasies and

ideologies, whether they are consciously aware of doing so or not (Ashman et al. 2021). While this mechanism is evident with the figure of the reality-television-participant-turned-influencer due to the neoliberal narratives embedded within most reality television programming and the importance of projecting continuity as a means of gaining trust (as demonstrated in the previous chapter), influencers of all origins benefit from and bolster neoliberal figurations of the entrepreneurial self (Leavey 2023). Their rising prominence results in changing social norms, for example, it is increasingly seen as appropriate and acceptable for influencers to present themselves as entrepreneurs performing digital labor. This is on display through the commonplace video sign off on YouTube in which creators ask viewers to like and subscribe (Ashman et al. 2018).

b. **The Pandemic and Social Isolation as an Inflection Point**

Pandemic-induced social isolation measures caused an increase in people experiencing relational vulnerability which elevated the importance of parasociality as a coping mechanism. As Honig notes in her article “Differences, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home" long before the pandemic, a “defining feature of family life” was the necessity of collaborating and cooperating with those who are statistically the most likely to cause you harm or even “kill you” (1994). However, all around the world, the pandemic significantly increased these odds, with social isolation measures found to increase rates of intimate partner violence and child abuse in the home, both in terms of the severity of preexisting abusive relationships as well as the introduction of violence and abuse into relationships that previously had none (Peitzmeier et al. 2022; Usher et al.

2020). This created a condition in which people were more likely to turn to parasociality as a safe and reliable means of human connection.

Contrary to common assumptions, the literature doesn't support the notion that parasocial relationships are formed by people who lack social skills and therefore struggle to connect and empathize with others in traditional two-way relationships. In fact, the opposite appears to be true, with sociable individuals who already enjoy "strong real-life interpersonal bonds" found to be more easily able to develop parasocial relationships (Bond 2018). Although scant evidence indicates that loneliness or isolation alone increases one's capacity for parasociality, Bond (2018) has found that "relationally vulnerable" populations, such as queer and racialized minorities who are more likely to sustain emotional and material harm within relational or social contexts, rely more on parasocial relationships than members of dominant groups who are less susceptible to harm or violence on account of their identities. Relationally vulnerable populations are also more likely to develop emotional connections with reality television participants who reflect their identities and experiences (Myrick and Erlich 2020). This suggests that, despite the one-sided nature of parasocial relationships, they serve important functions and are especially meaningful for people who find themselves unable to form interpersonal social networks due to structural forces rather than personality traits.

Producers often exploit participants' vulnerabilities for the sake of entertainment, resulting in relational vulnerabilities that may resonate with empathetic viewers, despite the absurdity of their circumstances. Many reality television shows deliberately isolate contestants by removing them from their homes and usual environments, confiscating their communication devices, prohibiting them from having contact with the outside

world, and thrusting them into competitive environments with strangers. A recent lawsuit filed by Jeremy Hartwell, a former *Love is Blind* participant, claims that "the very first thing [producers] did was isolate us in our rooms for about 24 hours straight." The lawsuit goes on to allege that participants were deprived of food and water, encouraged to consume alcohol on empty stomachs, forced to hand over their passports and wallets in addition to their phones, and subjected to thorough searches of all personal belongings (Garvey 2022). Other former participants have spoken out about mental health challenges, accusing the show's producers of imposing a $50,000 fine on anyone who leaves prematurely, without completing filming (Mead 2023). Danielle Ruhl, a participant from season 2, claims that she was suffering from panic attacks and suicidal thoughts during filming. She alleges that she informed producers but wasn't offered assistance, empathy, or even a reprieve from filming. Her former husband Nick, another season 2 participant, claims that he "literally begged for help" to no avail (Chung 2023). Cases like these suggest producers use psychological screenings to seek out potential participants who are more likely to suffer mental and emotional breakdowns on camera.

These tactics serve to maximize emotional intensity and encourage participants to be consumed by the task at hand, be it dating, competing, or simply stirring up drama. The deliberate construction of emotionally charged environments also increases the likelihood that participants will rely on one another for support, which can lead to the rapid formation of intense bonds and connections that often result in more compelling and entertaining television. However, these attachments can be quickly shattered by the nature of the programming or by producer manipulation. Producers and editors ultimately determine how participants are treated on set and how they are portrayed on the show,

resulting in a highly imbalanced relationship that exacerbates the likelihood of negative or harmful consequences for participants. In addition, participants are often required to reveal personal information or engage in intimate behavior on camera, which can make them feel exposed and vulnerable. Thus, most reality television subjects participants to relational vulnerability in ways that might have appeared especially relatable and sympathetic to viewers during the height of social isolation measures.

In addition to the increased risk of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence spurred by social isolation measures, COVID-19 lockdown measures made everyday interactions with strangers and acquaintances impossible. No longer was one able to enjoy a brief conversation with a barista in the morning, a shared smile with a regular commuter on the bus, or even a knowing glance at a coworker during a work meeting. These everyday micro interactions, a critical part of democratic culture (Turner 2010; Kateb 2001), were effectively erased. Without them, media relations and parasocial relations fill in the gap. Because of the perceived demoticism within reality television (Turner 2010) as opposed to more traditional, scripted, medias and genres, its social value became significantly stronger for viewers.

C. The Enclosure of (Anti-) Fan Labor

The previous chapter helped demonstrate how relationships that evoke feelings of friendship from viewers who genuinely like the participants they see on television can be commodified. When viewers like and trust a figure, to the extent that they feel emotional attachment, they are more susceptible to endorsements (Chung and Cho 2014). Fans are also found to be more inclined to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of reality-television-

turned-influencer-figures who they feel affection toward (Myrick and Erlich 2020), which includes the endorsement of neoliberal values highlighted in the case study. Whereas fans identify with reality television participants, often finding themselves drawn toward people with similar characteristics and identities as themselves, anti-fans instead gravitate toward those with whom they explicitly don't identify. The anti-fan revels in the opportunity to identify participants who exhibit "idiotic, arrogant, or self-destructive behaviors" in order to orient themselves in opposition and feel a sense of superiority that arises from the perceived contrast (Douglas 2013). Some scholarship has found that when viewers form negative parasocial relationships with participants, they are less malleable to persuasive messages by these figures (Cohen et al. 2021). This suggests that adopting an orientation of hate-watching, the "practice of taking pleasure in the failures, absurdities, or annoying characteristics of a show or its characters" (Cohen et al. 2021) might shield viewers from some of the forces that seek to capitalize from affective energies.

However, though this approach might protect the viewer from some forms of psychological control, the behavior of fandoms and anti-fandoms online aren't necessarily so different. Both categories of active reality television viewers —fans and anti-fans—are engaged in cognitively demanding activities, and both tend to hold fairly low opinions of the shows themselves, fixating instead on the participants. Rather than passive spectators, both fans and anti-fans can be active participants who contribute to the show's success, influence its direction, and feel a sense of ownership. Regardless of their personal feeling about the show's participants, active viewers engage in immaterial labor that benefits producers (Bonsu et al. 2010). All engagement can be seen as good

engagement, and, indeed, this appears to be the common understanding that informs reality television producers. According to Dean's (2005) framework of communicative capitalism, all networked online communication, regardless of whether complimentary or critical, results in exposure for the topic of discussion and direct profits for the social media company.

In the case of reality television, Dean's framework can elucidate how, rather than empowered co-creators, reality television audiences are unwittingly serving as unpaid laborers whose work benefits corporate interests. Whether they love, hate, or feel ambivalent about the show, active viewers are engaged in close analyses of the show and its participants, performing valuable digital labor that contributes to the show's success. Ironic viewing or hate watching both manifest regularly in recaps, for example (McAlister 2021). Additionally, whether criticizing or praising the show, viewers who seek to connect via social media networks are likely to use specific hashtags that are encouraged by the networks themselves.

Dean's (2005) argument that all online engagement serves to generates value for corporate interests aligns with L'Hoiry's description of the deliberate use of social media to "elicit a feedback loop whereby television and social media content feed back onto each other in a cycle, driving audiences to engage with the show across multiple platforms" (L'Hoiry 2019). This leads to a situation in which individuals believe that they are contributing to a conversation, or voicing an opinion, while in fact they are inadvertently generating value for corporate interests who use data and the establishment of patterns to guide their targeted marketing strategies. Reality television can be seen as a

prime example of how media convergence enables traditional media to adapt and evolve in response to new digital communication channels and affective energies.

D. Reality Television, Belief, and Fantasy

Reality television has a legacy of broken trust (L'Hoiry 2019) that can be traced back to the aughts when high profile stars of shows like *The Hills* and *Laguna Beach* shocked critics and viewers alike by revealing that much of what audiences saw wasn't real. More recently, former participants of shows like *Love is Blind* have described their experiences as exploitative and abusive, detailing the tactics used by producers to maximize shock value and generate bigger audiences. Rather than mark the end of this genre, however, these revelations have collectively changed audience's viewing practices to be more alert to perceived inauthenticity, manipulation, and injustice. Viewers often engage in active viewing practices in order to both contest the claims of "reality" and bring to light harmful subliminal messaging and practices that the programming perpetuates. Scholars have argued that these critical viewing practices increase the enjoyment of watching reality television (Andrejevic 2008) because engaging in a critical viewing practice allows one to be part of a larger "knowledge community" (McAlister 2021) and "shared critical culture" (Turner 2010, 43) of like-minded thinkers. They may not expect reality from the producers, but I argue that viewers find a thrill in hunting for small, genuine moments of authenticity from the participants. This search is a key aspect of the modern reality television experience, and it helps foster parasocial bonds and affective investments from even the savviest of viewers.

Dean maintains that action ultimately materializes in beliefs, even when the actor doesn't integrally agree with it, rendering internal opinions irrelevant. She notes that rather than functioning as a private and individual force, "belief is exteriorized in larger cultural practices and technologies" to the point where "no one really has to believe" as the action of upholding neoliberal institutions allows for these systems to proceed as if they are believed in and supported by the demos (Dean 2018, 6). In other words, the impact of the fantasies perpetuated by reality television are reflected primarily in what viewers do, rather than how viewers think. The frequent use of social media networks renders the critical, savvy viewer indistinguishable from the gullible, pollyannaish viewer, according to Dean, as both become data producers whose activity benefits corporate interests. Both stances subscribe to the fantasy that "the truth is out there" something that Dean warns "informs desires to click, link, search, and surf cyberia's networks" (Dean 2018, 8). This understanding contrasts with Brown (2015), who argues that the pervasive nature of neoliberalism eventually infiltrates our inner worlds, changing the way we think and feel, especially about ourselves. She maintains that there is little one individual can do to avoid being mentally shaped in this way because neoliberalism is present everywhere, even in so-called escapist entertainment like reality television. Although Brown suggests that viewers are being manipulated by producers and influencers into thinking a certain (neoliberal) way, Dean's analysis posits that "people know very well what they are doing, but they do it nevertheless" (Dean 2018, 5). Both Dean and Brown raise significant doubts about the ability of the viewer to escape neoliberal influence—whether they originate through thoughts or actions—suggesting that the mechanisms of neoliberalism will persist.

Rather than pose a binary of action/disbelief vs belief as the primary cause for neoliberalism's endurance, I propose an either/and approach informed by Kareem's (2016) depiction of the practice of experiencing both belief and disbelief simultaneously. Kareem traces this mode of orientation back to 18th century philosophers like Hume and echoes Cloud's (2010) analysis that reality television viewers adopt positions of "earnest investment and ironic reflexivity" simultaneously. Like Kareem, I identity this double orientation as a deliberate and voluntary choice, rather than an act of manipulation or control inflicted by powerful external forces. Relying on Berlant (2011) and Cvetkovich (2012), I argue that reality television viewers knowingly suspend some degree of disbelief in a rational attempt to maintain mental and emotional stability. Additionally, the digital labor performed by viewers that is exploited by corporate interests might foster creative problem-solving skills that serve viewers seeking to cope with the increasing demands of a neoliberal society.

Dean argues that fantasy and ideology are closely intertwined, with fantasy "materialized through everyday actions, practices, technologies, and institutions" resulting in "a bunch of inconsistencies" that ultimately comprise an ideology (Dean 2018, 8). This understanding explains her lack of faith in knowledge to combat dogmatic ideologies or inform effective ideology critique, for belief, fantasy, action, and ideology are all disconnected from knowledge according to her framework. Berlant, largely aligned with Dean's schema, also identifies fantasy as a powerful force that structures reality and informs countless political relations, from ideologies to institutions (Galloway et al. 2022). Berlant notes that fantasy can play a role in forestalling reparative futures and that the mode of "being-in-the-imaginary" can "end up destroying us" (Berlant 2011,

25). Indeed, much of their 2011 book *Cruel Optimism* is about the betrayal of collective fantasies that have become affordances of neoliberal systems of oppression. However, they are also adamant that fantasy has the potential to foment reparative futures, serve as both "an opening and a defense," (Berlant 2011, 49) and "create spaces of hope and action" (Galloway et al. 2022). Unlearning fantasies of the neoliberal good life and emotionally detaching oneself from corrosive neoliberal logic remains "the hardest problem" (Berlant 2011, 184) but also the only pedagogy that offers a solution, by Berlant's analysis.

As was noted in the previous section, participating in active and engaged online reality television fandoms provides corporate interests with immaterial labor which they can use to generate profits and better inform advertising and marketing campaigns. This is especially apparent with Dean's communicative capitalism schema as a theoretical framework. However, Cvetkovich (2012) and Berlant (2011), while not refuting Dean's analysis, offer a more nuanced approach, grounded in affect theory, that identifies the revolutionary potential of engaging in active creativity to move through depression or impasse as well as the more modest, but still worthwhile, potential outcome of coping and surviving. As Cvetkovich (2012) observes, depression keeps people small and hopeless in a state that is too numb, too silent, and too weary to be able to work toward a better future or engage in the difficult work of unlearning harmful attachments and replacing them with new fantasies. She argues that the cure to this stuckness or impasse might lie in "forms of flexibility or creativity" that "encompasses different ways of being able to move: to solve problems, have ideas, be joyful about the present, make things" (Cvetkovich 2012, 21). Rather than attempting to outsmart the network or show by

adopting a stance of hate-watching or anti-fandom, fans engaged in immaterial labor founded in practices of community and creativity might benefit significantly from their work and involvement, despite the exploitation of their pleasure by tech and media companies. As Andrejevic (2008) notes, active viewership can foster critical thinking skills, creativity, and media literacy. Additionally, more specific forms of digital labor such as the creation of recaps can help viewers strengthen their writing and communication skills and develop awareness of their own schematic reliance on cliches and stereotypes. Andrejevic (2008) argues that the immaterial labor performed by reality television viewers is often "more creative and interesting that the story lines produced by the culture industry" and McAlister (2021) similarly notes that reality television recaps are often "so entertaining that they drive people to watch the show, to enhance enjoyment of the recaps." Thus, the creative energies afforded through reality television fandoms might not just provide a balm that helps make an unbearable world slightly more tenable, but they might actually loosen the grip that neoliberalism has on all social relations. Dean relatedly notes that fantasy often enables an escape from "a certain problem, trauma, or deadlock" (Dean 2018, 8). Although in that case, she is referring to the fantasy and ideology of neoliberalism, Cvetkovich and Berlant demonstrate that by slightly extending and revising her analysis, it can be equally applied to modes of resistance and alternative ways of conceptualizing the world and the people in it.

E. Conclusion

In this chapter I kept the findings of my case study in mind while expanding my focus from the participants of reality television productions toward the viewers.

Parasociality isn't a new phenomenon, but it is a historically specific mode of attachment which I demonstrate by tracing its development in the academic literature from the genesis of the concept to the introduction of the internet, and, finally, to this new form of attachment that has taken shape post-pandemic. Much the way that reality television programming content was revealed to be overwhelmingly neoliberal, these parasocial relationships and the influencers who they feature function as embodied neoliberalism, both because of the transactional nature of the relationships as well as the enclosed social media sites on which they tend to operate. The interactive and engaging nature of reality television is designed to effectively form these bonds through television as well as social media so that they can ultimately function as capitalist instruments that influence both consumption patterns and opinions.

Reality television fans and anti-fans alike perform an incredible amount of free labor on behalf of various media and tech companies as well as the networks that feature their show of choice. This immaterial labor is extracted and dispossessed, indicative of the ever-shifting nature of exploitation under neoliberalism in which value is never fixed and resistance seems futile. Nevertheless, a critical and creative social viewing practice can be greatly beneficial for viewers who are able to connect with like-minded individuals or old friends and stimulate their minds and creative energies in ways that can theoretically be used for other projects. Though certainly effective as an affordance for the pursuit of profit thus far, media convergence upends traditional relationships and binaries to the point where even powerful media producers can't ensure their creation of affectively charged, well-organized online communities won't backfire and damage their

mechanisms of monetization and social control. These paradoxical roles and perceptions demonstrate how powerful contradictions and double binds are endemic to neoliberalism.

Chapter IV: Electoral Politics

A. Introduction

Throughout this thesis, I've highlighted multiple political dimensions of reality television. My *Love is Blind* case study contributed to a growing body of scholarly work that illuminates the common narratives and themes within reality television programming content that reinforce neoliberal values such as individualism, entrepreneurialism, and the marketization of social relations. Informed especially by Dean and L'Hoiry, I argued that the convergence of television and social media functions as a highly effective mechanism for data collection with vast potential for monetization and social control (Dean 2016; L'Hoiry 2019). Other scholars have demonstrated the extent to which reality television takes advantage of low wage workers by bypassing union labor and classifying participants as independent contractors (Redden 2018; Mast 2016) and in the previous chapter I emphasized the unpaid role of the active and creative viewer as well. These fans and anti-fans alike provide immaterial labor that reality television production relies heavily on and exploits egregiously. I have also reviewed media theory literature that posits the widespread popularity of reality television and adjacent genres, such as talk shows and docu-soaps, as contributing factors to the proliferation of "infotainment." This trend not only undermines journalistic standards and erodes trust in news media but also renders viewers more vulnerable to political misinformation (Bennett 2005, Kroes 2019). Finally, and, I argue, most impactfully, the affective attachments that reality television constructs function as a powerful affordance of neoliberal exploitation, informing neoliberal marketing campaigns and endorsing neoliberal ideologies and fantasies of the good life.

In this chapter, I will turn to the more formal sphere of electoral politics and democracy to demonstrate how they relate to the mechanisms and affective investments central to reality television production. For voters, much like reality television viewers, emotion and performance are paramount. Politicians and political parties construct publics in much the same that reality television producers construct audiences. Both entities are motivated to create passionate followings with strong affective attachments as a means of retaining power and control. Reality television constructs itself as a populist, demotic genre that has the potential to prime audiences for demagoguery. The reality-television-to-influencer-figure also emphasizes the importance of parasociality in political campaigns and especially highlights the importance of projecting trustworthiness, relatability, authenticity, and continuity between performances on various mediums. As a genre steeped in neoliberal ideology, Brown's thorough analysis of the antidemocratic nature of neoliberalism indicates that reality television would foster an anti-democratic rationality and culture as well. Turner (2010) and Kateb (2001) both note that the demotic nature of reality television is affectively similar to that of democratic culture, which poses the risk that a rise in the demotic coupled with democratic decline may not initially *feel* significantly different and therefore wouldn't be met with appropriate alarm and mobilization. However, without rebuffing their substantial concerns, I argue that reality television does have the potential to construct feelings of solidarity and unity, both among viewers and fandoms, mediated through online spaces and in person interactions, as well as between viewers and participants, mediated through online parasocial interactions.

B. Reality Television and Donald Trump

The election and presidency of Donald Trump demonstrated the importance of addressing parasociality and contemporary shifts within celebrity culture for political science (Meyers and Leppert 2018). The findings of my *Love is Blind* case study help demonstrate why trust and relatability were so important for Trump's ascent to political power. Research suggests that people who were more exposed to Trump before his presidential campaign were more likely to feel parasocial bonds with him, believe his campaign promises, and eventually vote for him as president (Gabriel et al. 2018). Just like interpersonal relationships, parasocial relationships develop and strengthen over time. As Trump's inconsistent and contradictory communication style suggests, the cultivation of trust is not a result of honesty or integrity, rather, an ability to steadily make people feel as if they know you. Trump was initially known as a colorful businessman and then, like Kardashian, Hilton, and other celebrities who command longstanding parasocial followings, he pivoted to reality television and social media. He starred in *The Apprentice* for fourteen seasons and became known for his active Twitter account in the 2010s, giving the demos decades and multiple platforms to form strong parasocial attachments to him (Kelly et al. 2020). According to Tukachinsky and Stever's (2019) four stages of parasocial relationship development, the final and most powerful stage in parasocial relationship formation is integration, or bonding, in which the media consumer views the relationships as part of their identity, one that they desire to be recognized by others. Tukachinsky and Stevers argue that in 2016, millions of Americans reached this final stage of affective attachment with Trump which overrode previous political ideologies and opinions.

Critics labeled Trump the "Kardashian of politics" (Meyers and Leppert 2018) as an indication of their low opinion of the reality television genre as well as the celebrities who emerge from it. Though the comparison was frequently levied by Trump oppositionists as a pejorative, it has been echoed in scholarly findings from various disciplinary and methodological perspectives (Kelly et al. 2020; Kroes 2019; Cole and Shulman 2018; Gabriel et al. 2018; Meyers and Leppert 2018). Cole and Shulman (2019) use the scholarship of late political theorist Michael Rogin to contextualize Trump as a representation of shifting media and cultural norms and trends. By comparing Trump to Rogin's analysis of Reagan, they demonstrate how, much like the way that Reagan's Hollywood background allowed him to be successful in a media climate in which mythology and narratives informed voting behavior, Trump was able to use his reality television background to appeal to a new cultural politic informed by reality television. Whereas Reagan blurred the lines between truth and fiction, Cole and Shulman argue that Trump purposefully disregards the truth to appeal to audiences invested in "social media, celebrity, and spectacle" (2019). In line with the findings of my *Love is Blind* case study, Reagan and Trump both benefited from projecting continuity between their on-screen performances and their political selves, with Reagan repeating lines from movies and Trump famously firing or threatening to fire subordinates for a lack of fealty (Cole and Shulman 2019). Dunn (2020) also demonstrates that Trump extended the persona developed through his years on *The Apprentice* by analyzing his tweets for nearly two years following his inauguration. She notes that he relies on the logic of reality television, and *The Apprentice* in particular, to perform authenticity and portray himself as the antagonist by creating his own drama, promoting upcoming events, refusing to adhere to

tradition, and even using typos and improper grammar (Dunn 2020). Though —at the time of his election in 2016—such communication styles were out of the norm of political rhetoric, they were predictable in the context of reality television and denoted a critical shift in political performance standards.

Kroes (2019) places the primary onus for Trump's meteoric political rise on the news media for emulating reality television conventions that give primacy to the role of fantasy, rendering truth irrelevant and entertainment as the sole service provided. He argues that Trump was especially skilled at manufacturing publicity through pseudo-events and was able to capitalize on the public's vulnerability to political and emotional manipulation as well as the news industry's insatiable pursuit of profit (Kroes 2019). Kelly et al. (2020) focus on Trump as a brand, rather than a uniquely skilled media manipulator, suggesting that his political success can be better explained by emotion than technique. This manifests behaviorally in numerous ways, for example, Trump's assertion that the COVID-19 pandemic wasn't a big deal in March 2020, immediately following the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, alleviated anxieties and reduced information seeking behavior on behalf of people occupying the fourth stage of parasocial relationship formation with him (Kelly et al. 2020; Tukachinsky and Stever 2019). In this example, identification with Trump was found to function like a system of belief in which contradictory voices were seen as threats. To that point, I argue that the presence of anti-fandoms, or negative parasocial relationships, served to construct self-sustaining emotional contagions that surrounded Trump and bolstered his political power.

Trump's connection to reality television extends beyond his time on *The Apprentice* and includes a shared reliance on iconoclastic, anti-establishment posturing to appeal to publics who are skeptical about "elites, media, and authority" (Cole and Shulman 2019). Both Trump's political and reality television career offer cynical audiences the illusion of subversion, while actually serving to uphold and further entrench hegemonic systems of power and control. As Turner argues, the creators of reality television have successfully leveraged the interactivity of fans and the demoticism of participants to position their programming content as the "populist politics of media consumption" in contrast to broadcast television where the producer is all powerful (Turner 2010, 45). Turner maintains that much of the appeal of reality television lies with its potential to "provoke and defy authority" (Turner 2010, 55). I add that widespread feelings of powerlessness and insecurity fueled by the increasing stratification of wealth and power distributions (especially on display during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic) offer pre-existing affective contagions that reality television can serve to tap into, much the way Trump did and does. For populist political leaders, affect can be used to stir up hate mobs and construct a base who expects regular doses of vitriol. Affective contagions like these often harness pre-existing energies, such as resentment or fear. Once created, they require regular feedback and media attention as replenishment and direction, and though the elite forces that manufacture and harness these energies can exert some control, they cannot ensure that they won't ultimately turn against them.

C. Reality Television and Democracy

The link between neoliberalism and reality television can be used to illuminate reality television's nuanced, but ultimately corrosive, impact on democracy. According to

Wendy Brown, neoliberalism's rationality dismantles democratic institutions by prioritizing market values and individualism over civic or collective wellbeing. Under neoliberalism, policy is no longer proposed or pursued on the basis of need, rather, it is subjected to profitability tests. Formerly autonomous institutions like markets, laws, and elections, are merged and linked by the same logic. As she argues in her book *Undoing the Demos* (2015) the primacy of economic logic, the atomization of the demos, and the commodification of the self all serve to break down the barrier between public and private, or government and industry, rendering non-market values and ideals illegitimate. The emphasis on the individual, and on all action being an investment in the self, reconstructs humans as either a drain or a contribution to the economy, rather than lives with inherent value. Brown's analysis is reflected in my *Love is Blind* case study in which I found ample evidence that the show subscribes to a neoliberal logic in which dating is discussed in market terms, single people are expected to invest in themselves to be worthy of love and care, and potential partners are either constructed as financial drains or providers. Brown's conceptualization of anti-democratic neoliberalism goes beyond Marx's depiction of capitalist exploitation, it constructs a new reality that reality television helps to manifest.

However, Brown's framework doesn't mean that all mention of democracy will be erased under neoliberalism. Instead, democracy becomes a discursive tool, hollowed out but still evoked in order to legitimate and validate the neoliberal order. For example, Brown notes that the idea of spreading democracy is used to justify the invasion of sovereign nations, as was the case when the U.S. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan (Brown 2003). In other words, rather than denote a specific political system, the meaning of

democracy under neoliberalism becomes performance, or an ideal that's used to justify power imbalances and profit-seeking. Turner's (2010) concept of the "demotic turn" in media, or the increasing depiction of so-called ordinary people, which is exemplified by reality television, can be used to demonstrate the power of evoking democracy discursively as well as affectively. Turner maintains that though the demotic and the democratic are distinct, they often evoke similar emotions or affective energies. According to Kateb (2001) "democratic culture encourages easy contact with strangers" with leads to greater acceptance and tolerance of other human beings. The demoticism that Turner (2010) identifies as intrinsic to reality television is also designed to foster the experiences of "quick, easy, and rarely remembered intimacy" which Kateb (2001) argues "almost every democratic person engages in." However, rather than a sign of a healthy democratic culture, the one-way, or parasocial, nature of these interactions serves to create a democratic affect rather than a true democratic culture.

Due to its interactive nature, reality television viewership also results in an increased sense of ownership among viewers that can affectively register as empowerment. Reality television formats have long been designed to foster a conflation of interactivity and agency that centers the participatory and supposedly influential role of the viewer through promotional campaigns like *Big Brother*'s "you decide!" or *Pop Idol*'s "but this time you choose!" (Holmes 2004). The continued convergence with interactive digital spaces has bolstered both the feeling, and the reality, of the active viewer. However, as I argued in the previous chapter, rather than indicate empowerment on behalf of the viewers, the interactivity of reality television and social media networks is designed to fuel the illusion of digital democracy, while actually serving corporate

interests. This is not a result of viewers being ill equipped to engage with producers and one another according to democratic norms, rather, it is caused by the hegemonic nature of media and tech companies that unilaterally gatekeep representation and control digital spaces (Turner 2010). Turner (2010) notes that the interactivity of viewers does have a political dimension, but the unavoidable power imbalance negates the possibility of it being a democratic one. Andrejevic (2008) similarly identifies the "implicit message of reality TV" to be one of "increasingly shared control" and argues that audience participation should be understood as a form of labor, rather than a mode of citizenship. This aligns with my discussion in the previous chapter regarding the potential benefits of engagement and creativity from reality television audiences and serves as an important emphasis that the process is still fundamentally an asymmetrical and exploitative one, regardless of the potential for creative or communal benefits.

Despite Kateb's insistence on distinguishing between the demotic and the democratic, and his warnings about the "danger of the demotic" which functions as a "pseudo-democratic" force, he acknowledges that "talk shows grow out of democratic culture" (2001). Writing before reality television became fully entrenched in the media ecosystem, and in spite of his primary message, Kateb's observation suggests that the norms and values propagated by reality television may not all fall under a unilateral classification of antidemocratic after all. Instead, the distinction between demotic and democratic might be better understand as a temporal one, in which demoticism is simply a necessary pre-requisite for political democracy, not an inherent negation of it. A culture in transition from valuing the democratic to the demotic might make the emergence of authoritarianism more likely, but it doesn't inherently guarantee it. Instead, some scholars

have argued that, despite the powerful market and commercial forces at work, the hybridization of reality television viewer and producer results in "a new kind of cultural power" (Bird 2021) that creates "a viewing community" and deepens "affective engagement" (McAlister 2021) between viewers. In other words, being an active viewer can heighten feelings of solidarity, strengthen critical thinking skills, and foster creativity, (L'Hoiry 2019; Andrejevic 2008) outcomes that can translate to a culture of democracy in the offline world.

Berlant's work can help show us that democratic culture need not be tethered to the state, rather, it can manifest anywhere, such as in movement spaces or online forums (Galloway et al. 2023). Despite their lack of connection to formal political institutions, these bodies can still be understood as democratic. Whether they ultimately return to address and contest the state or not, many non-statist spaces and collectives in which community members join forces to collectively solve problems and establish governing frameworks exhibit and encourage participatory democracy. In other words, reality television might contribute to democratic decline from a statist perspective, while simultaneously fostering a democratic culture that exits outside of the state, guiding behavior and exerting collective power.

D. Conclusion

This thesis argues that the social, commercial, and political value of parasocial relationships has increased significantly since 2020, and that reality television viewers are particularly prone to forming them. Rather than a stand-alone event that produced unforeseen outcomes, the pandemic accelerated preexisting trends that were already

underway due to neoliberalism. For example, social isolation fueled an affective sense of loneliness, insecurity, and fear. The sudden reduction of the social world meant there was effectively no space for micro-interactions with strangers or networks of casual acquaintances, two key aspects of a healthy democratic public. People found themselves spending significantly more time at home, watching television, and potentially stuck in vulnerable domestic arrangements. Reality television became more popular than ever during the height of lockdown restrictions due to its light-hearted, low-stakes narratives, capacity for social viewing, and the sheer volume of content available. I argue that it offers an especially revealing and explicit example of the microcelebrity production process, a metaphorical conveyer belt from which a new group of fresh influencers emerge following the conclusion of each season. As a prime example of media convergence, in which passive television and interactive social media combine forces for the benefit of corporate interests, the flexibility and adaptability of reality television also serves as an emblematic example of current neoliberal forces at work.

In the first chapter, I reviewed the literature on reality television and demonstrated how the reality television production process embodies neoliberalism by maximizing profits, encroaching on labor rights, and blurring the boundaries between producers and consumers. Formal staff are low-paid and rarely offered sufficient benefits. Participants are frequently abused and financially exploited. They are unpaid or compensated with a stipend, which is legally permissible because they aren't classified as workers. Additionally, they are often subject to harsh monetary fines that prevent them from being able to leave, and non-disclosure agreements that prevent them from speaking out about their experiences.

Through my case study in chapter 2, I demonstrated strong support for the hypothesis that reality shows like *Love is Blind* both subliminally and explicitly endorse neoliberalism. I found that the show emphasized the primacy of marriage, connecting it to widespread mythology and fables that tap into the cultural imaginaries of viewers and reinforce neoliberal models of care and self-sufficiency. Marriage was gendered as a status symbol for women, and a sign of maturity for men. For all genders, marriage was presented as a sign of upward mobility and financial independence. I also discovered that following the transition from reality television participant to influencer, couples benefited. The show's dialogue frequently reinforced the importance of trustworthiness, vulnerability, openness, and relatability which I argue is a mechanism to facilitate parasocial attachments. I found the participants who were edited to present as possessing those traits, and those who exhibited continuity following the transition to social media, had more followers. Once they began interacting with fans through social media, they typically continued endorsing similar neoliberal fantasies and values as the show. Coupled women tended to perform best and post more aspirational content, while women who were more entrepreneurial or transactional in their online presence were found to have the least numbers of followers. Interactivity and intimacy with followers were encouraged and evoked through Instagram posts.

As I argued in chapter 3, viewers form valuable parasocial attachments to participants that can be used to effect consumer behavior and predict increased viewership. These affective attachments encourage viewers to function as co-creators of value, performing immaterial labor that benefits corporate interests but can also be quite enjoyable for the viewers themselves. They perform unpaid work such as marketing (on

and off-line) and can be called upon to help with production tasks like casting or location finding. They also offer free market research for show creators. Some viewers engage in hate-watching, and many are active, critical viewers, but using Dean's framework of communicative capitalism, I argued that their digital labor benefits the show, as well as tech and media companies generally, regardless of the content of their messages. Therefore, both Dean and Brown are skeptical at best about the possibilities for resistance against neoliberalism. However, I use Berlant and Cvetkovich to demonstrate that even though the viewers are being exploited, they can construct new fantasies through this immaterial labor that can inspire and create new possibilities for loosening the grip of neoliberalism.

In this chapter, I turned the attention back to electoral politics and used Trump to demonstrate how parasociality and reality television both inform political performance and norms today. Reality television presents itself as populist and politicians like Trump are increasingly aligning themselves with reality television standards in order to construct similar affective contagions. I also used Brown, Kateb, and Turner to demonstrate that reality television is not only neoliberal, but also anti-democratic. However, I argue that online fandoms and fan's immaterial labor has the potential to foster solidarity, unity, creativity, and critical thinking practice, all of which lends itself well to the formation of democratic cultures outside of statism.

This thesis functions as an exploratory, or pilot, study on the role reality television and parasociality have in both reinforcing and resisting neoliberal fantasies. In the introduction, I mentioned that the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike fueled reality television production in the aughts as a means of bypassing unionized labor.

The current WGA strike, taking place fifteen years later, demonstrates the ongoing and increasing importance of studying reality television, and understanding it as a neoliberal force. Further research could seek to expand upon these findings by conducting deeper analyses of social media content by former participants and by incorporating comment valence into those findings. Additionally, future research could incorporate interviews with producers, staff, show participants, and viewers to gain insight into the various aspects of the production cycle and the affective and material conditions that motivate each group.

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