

‘But She Doesn’t DO Anything!’: Framing and Containing Female Celebrity in the Age  
of Reality Television

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis offers a feminist analysis of the gendered public discourses surrounding notions of talent, authenticity and containment. Using two of the most polarizing stars in North America – ‘Snooki’ and Kim Kardashian – the author offers an analysis of how both hard and soft news frame our everyday understanding of women’s public work. Textual analyses of news articles demonstrated that displays of sexual power were most undermined by the media while attempts to venture beyond the reality television texts were contained. On the other hand, the news media were more likely to use positive framing when women were seen to be fulfilling more traditional roles such as wife and mother. The empirical research approach provides an original framework which can be applied to other female public figures to examine how such ideological and gendered discourses shape our understanding of women’s work as well as, more generally, women’s roles in our society.

“... to provoke, to be rebellious, to start a revolution.”

-Madonna, 2011

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## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	iv
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>7</b>
2.1 Literature Review.....	7
Celebrity.....	7
Reality Television .....	16
2.2. Theoretical Framework.....	22
Cultural Studies and Structuralism .....	23
Feminism .....	27
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b> .....	<b>39</b>
3.1 Overview.....	39
3.2 Detailed Method.....	51
Snooki .....	52
Kim Kardashian .....	58
<b>Chapter 4: Snooki</b> .....	<b>66</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	66
<i>Jersey Shore</i> .....	66
Snooki's Audience .....	68
4.2 Sexual Snooki .....	71
4.3 Pregnant Snooki .....	75
Is Snooki Pregnant? .....	75

Is Pregnant Snooki Still Snooki? .....	78
4.4 Mother Snooki .....	93
4.5 Containment in the Media.....	96
Spin-Off .....	96
Beyond Reality Television.....	97
4.5 Conclusion .....	101
<b>Chapter 5: Kim Kardashian .....</b>	<b>103</b>
5.1 Introduction.....	103
5.2 Love and Marriage.....	106
Divorce.....	107
Romance .....	111
5.3 Sex, Lies and Videotape .....	113
Sex Tape.....	114
Physical Appearance.....	119
5.4 Containment in the Media.....	124
Celebrity Hierarchy.....	124
Acting as Talent .....	128
Business Ventures.....	132
5.5 Conclusion .....	134
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion .....</b>	<b>136</b>
6.1 Summary .....	136
6.2 Reflections .....	142

6.3 Relevance.....	147
References.....	151
Appendix: Links to articles discussed.....	179

## List of Figures

Figure 4.1 .....	77
Figure 4.2 .....	81
Figure 4.3 .....	93
Figure 4.4 .....	94
Figure 4.5 .....	100
Figure 5.1 .....	126

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Whether it’s Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian or whoever, stupidity is certainly celebrated. Being a f\*\*king idiot is a valuable commodity in this culture because you’re rewarded significantly.”

– John Hamm, film and television actor, 2012<sup>1</sup>

The sentiments of this quote have been echoed not only by other successful male Hollywood actors (i.e. Daniel Craig, Jeremy Renner, see Franich, 2012) but also other figures in the media (i.e. Anderson Cooper and, more recently U.S. President Barack Obama<sup>2</sup>) as well as people I encounter in my day-to-day life in both professional and social situations. “But she doesn’t DO anything!” is a common grievance, as is an alleged lack of intelligence. Snooki, the notoriously hard-partying, underwear-flashing, spray-tanning, poof-sporting breakout star of MTV’s *The Jersey Shore*, has even been called “evil.” These reactions to numerous “illegitimate female celebrities” who are “famous-for-nothing” (Negra & Holmes, 2008) necessarily invoke discourses that call upon Western democratic capitalist values of talent and hard work.

Taking the position that such concepts as “talent” and “hard work” are relational and ideological, this thesis proposes to illustrate how these ideals ultimately serve to delegitimize both the presence and the work of female reality television celebrities in the media today. As has been noted by Negra and Holmes (2008), the female reality television celebrity serves as a site of contention in our society, where crises of worth and legitimacy are articulated (see also Williamson, 2010). These articulations occur, not so

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<sup>1</sup> Hamm made this statement in an interview with *Elle UK* (see Collins, 2012, “Kim Kardashian to Jon Hamm: I’m not stupid – look at my hair!”).

<sup>2</sup> See Simson, 2010 and Jackson, 2013, respectively.

much in the reality television text itself, but in the public discourse surrounding these celebrities – a discourse that *plays up* as much as it plays upon “public fears that we don't know what talent is anymore and that the traditional expectation that fame is based on talent is dying out” (Negra & Holmes, 2008, p.3). Here, I will offer a feminist analysis of the gendered framing of these public discourses in relation to notions of talent, authenticity and containment.

As several reality television theorists have observed, this new type of “everyday celebrity” has become a site of contention in merit-based democratic capitalist societies (Cross & Littler, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008). Such stars embody more than a tension between what is possible and what is out of reach for “ordinary folk” (as some theorists propose to be the source of our fascination with Hollywood stars, see Dyer 1979; Marshall, 1997). They, in fact, expose some of the most basic fallacies upon which our meritocratic society is based. Could this be the reason that they incite such outrage in some citizens: are some people's views of their own possibilities in society threatened by what they perceive to be undeserved success? Or is there perhaps more going on here? Could the way in which certain media outlets report and editorialize on such stars lead their audience to start thinking in certain ways about certain celebrities?

This thesis will take a uniquely empirical approach to answering these questions, using two of the most polarizing reality stars today – Snooki and Kim Kardashian. Though both have taken different routes to stardom, they could each be said to be famous

for presenting an “authentic”<sup>3</sup> version of themselves to the public rather than having achieved anything spectacular or for having claims to rare and unique talent. Despite having managed to keep themselves almost perpetually in the media spotlight in recent years, they are often reported on in a disparaging tone that minimizes their claims to authenticity as well as legitimacy in the public sphere (for example, the “Snooki is evil” comment mentioned above, uttered on-air by a local Ottawa radio station entertainment news reporter upon announcing the star’s rumored pregnancy<sup>4</sup>). It is important to note that such disparagement is riddled with both gender and class politics.

The public sphere into which regular people are launched (thus becoming “celebrities”) and then talked about (reported on, gossiped about, biographized, etc.) influences our own understanding of and relation to such figures, whether we take a critical stance toward them or place them upon a pedestal as idols of worship (see upcoming section on individuality in Literature Review, Chapter 2). Additionally, the reporting on of celebrities in this fashion is, for the large part, focused on female celebrities. Though gossip rags and news columns may speculate on John Travolta’s sexuality, the debasement of young female starlets is much more frequent and prominent (as is demonstrated when looking, for instance, at the respective media fallout for Kristen Stewart versus that of the older, married director Rupert Sanders with whom she had an

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<sup>3</sup> The exact meaning and use of the term “authenticity” within the context of this thesis is a complex and multi-faceted notion that will be further discussed and developed in upcoming sections as well as in the thesis itself. For clarification here, I am using it in Marshall’s (1997) sense of there being a public image versus a “true” private side of a celebrity.

<sup>4</sup> At the time this occurred, I did not note down the details such as radio station, reporter, date, or time, but the comment was uttered in the context of a discussion morning talk-show entertainment report concerning Snooki’s impending motherhood.

affair<sup>5</sup>). There is a gendered aspect to the denigration of stars in the media, and the fact that it is so difficult to name, let alone examine contemporary male parallels to Snooki and Kim Kardashian, highlights this gender bias<sup>6</sup>.

These points also raise a larger issue at stake in such discussions. What happens when the media do the denigrating? Are the media merely doing the critical thinking for us? Are they succeeding and to what effect? The rise and fall of the celebrity shows the capability of the media to serve the roles of both admirer and equalizer for its own audience. The news outlets' continued reporting on the comings and goings of the celebrity makes it a key cog in the Hollywood star machine, and its dual role as both promoter and prosecutor can raise some problematic issues. The additional framing<sup>7</sup> of such stories in many "hard news" sources (i.e. traditional newspapers) allows for it to be taken as an afterthought – usually found at the end (of the broadcast, paper, or bottom of the website), because that is where the less important stories go.

Most studies thus far have focused on the phenomenon of celebrity – the history of fame (Braudy, 1997); the relations between celebrities and audiences (Dyer, 1979); the different kinds of celebrity that exist (Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001) as well as the ties between celebrity and larger issues of power, class and the media (Marshall, 1997;

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<sup>5</sup> In light of the scandal, Jodie Foster wrote an interesting piece defending Stewart against the media spectacle from the perspective of a former (female) child star (2012): <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/15/jodie-foster-blasts-kristen-stewart-robert-pattinson-break-up-spectacle.html>

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that male stars are not denigrated in the media (see for instance Michael Jackson or the aforementioned John Travolta – both of whom are often derided for their perceived "femininity" and/or questioned in terms of sexuality) but there is a lack of parallels specifically in terms of reality television stars.

<sup>7</sup> This important concept will be discussed and developed in more detail in Chapter 3 on methodology.

Turner, 2004). There has also been much work on reality television stardom (Collins, 2008; Holmes, 2004; 2011; Palmer, 2005) as well as, more specifically, the relations of reality television stardom to class and gender issues (Holmes, 2011; Kavka & West, 2010; Williamson, 2010). Yet little work has been done outside of this context – leaving behind the borders of the reality television text (and other celebrity-creating texts such as film, music, etc.) and looking more systematically at how celebrity (discourse) plays out in the public sphere once the star has been “born” or already constructed. Furthermore, there has been little empirical focus on the particularities of this discourse surrounding female celebrities and how those are shaped by larger struggles that have surrounded women both within and outside of the public sphere for decades (if not centuries).

Therefore, to be more precise, this thesis aims to examine the following research question: How do mainstream news sources report on today’s female celebrities in ways that minimize their authenticity and legitimacy as members of the public sphere and thus neutralize the threat they impose to the myth of meritocracy? My hypothesis is that textual analysis of individual case studies will demonstrate that the media employ frames that contain female celebrities (physically, sexually and textually) by calling into question their authenticity, as well as denying them talent and, therefore, legitimacy in the public sphere. This allows mainstream news media to neutralize the threat posed by female reality TV stars who, by their very existence, expose the systematic fallacies behind the myth of meritocracy upon which our society is built, without having to call into question larger issues of media power.

In order to address the research question, sample articles about Kim Kardashian and Snooki will be culled from mainstream online news sources in both Canada and the U.S. (CNN and *The National Post*) as well as online tabloids (People.com and TMZ). These articles will be examined for ways in which both stars are presented as being undeserving of their fame and inauthentic in their public persona. I have chosen two of the most controversial and polarizing case studies in the celebrity system today in hopes that starting with the supposed worst might demonstrate how these concepts could apply to other, more “legitimate” celebrities as well.

The thesis will take the following form: firstly, in Chapter 2, I will provide a brief review of the existing literature on celebrity and reality television. I will then present my theoretical framework, which includes key concepts from structuralism and cultural studies as well as feminist theory. I will present these issues in relation to three of the central concepts in this thesis: legitimacy, containment and authenticity. This will then lead into my next chapter on methodology. Chapter 4 will contain the data and analysis for my first chosen case study, Snooki. Chapter 5 will contain the data and analysis for my second chosen case study, Kim Kardashian. Finally, Chapter 6 will provide a brief review of the findings and analysis as well as reflections upon the research done and its possible implications, applications and further development.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Literature Review

#### Celebrity

Though there are many interrelated aspects in the study of celebrity, I have grouped the various approaches into two main sections that most directly relate to and structure my hypothesis regarding the news coverage of certain female celebrities. Firstly, I will look at the concept of individuality, an approach that takes into account more historically-based ideas regarding fame versus anonymity, as well as the appeals of celebrity in democratic, capitalist society. I will then move onto authenticity, which will allow for an examination of some interesting discussions on identity representation in the public sphere. I will then tie this into an exploration of some key ideas related to legitimacy. Finally, I will talk specifically about reality television as a platform for the creation and sustainment of celebrity today before tying in the previously discussed concepts of authenticity and legitimacy.

**Individuality.** In its most basic sense, the concept of fame upon which celebrity is based dates back years to the idea of a person being known for something (Braudy, 1997). One of the key theoretical approaches underlying this perspective relies on the necessary differentiation between the person who is famous and the crowd who is anonymous. Some theorists have chosen to examine what qualities make one person “rise above” the crowd (for more on charisma see Shils, 1965; Weber, 1968; see also Rojek, 2001 on ascribed, achieved and attributed celebrity) while others have not shown concern with what *causes* fame, concentrating more on how it is developed and maintained (see

Marshall, 1997; Turner, 2004). The historical shift, however, toward today's 'modern' conception of fame, and the resulting shift to the word "celebrity," has most commonly been tied to the commodification of labour and people. In the age of industry, the "mass" no longer refers simply to a group of people, but also to a way of living in which mass production and mass circulation of both goods and symbols was possible, thus providing yet another key dimension to modern fame – celebrity as both an industry and a commodity in the modern mass marketplace (see Turner, 2004, pp. 34-41; also Collins, 2008; Hearn, 2006).

P. David Marshall (1997) provides an extensive summary of the ways in which both the French and Industrial Revolutions changed the concept of the crowd and the corresponding power shifts toward the masses as well as the development of the audience as the new mass (pp. 30-49; 63). The "celebration" of the individual is a fairly recent development in human society that is often tied to the Enlightenment (see Dyer, 2004, pp. 8-9; Marshall, 1997, on Weber, p. 55); it is also a vital element of democratic capitalist society, in which fame itself becomes the goal of achievement rather than the opposite. Theorists Braudy (1997) and Marshall (1997), though approaching the topic from vastly different angles, both locate in celebrity an appeal to the individual audience member who views fame as the ultimate validation of individuality in modern society, particularly when a person is seemingly famous for being themselves<sup>8</sup>.

However, the processes through which "regular" private citizens engage with famous public figures are still relatively little understood. The earliest attempts in this

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<sup>8</sup> This is an important point that will be discussed further in the Theoretical Framework section on authenticity.

realm analyzed what draws the masses to mediated identities more generally – particularly in cinema studies, as that was one of the first mass mediums to be legitimized in academia (see Mulvey, 1975/1989; Metz, 1982 for psychoanalytic approach). Dyer (1979) looks at the appeal of various dichotomies surrounding more specifically the film star, all of which center on the private person/public image tension. Some scholars posit that celebrities provide a space in which such tensions, which plague people in their own lives as well (Goffman, 1961), can be reflected and negotiated. Others have looked at the parallels between the appeal of celebrity and the appeal of religion in terms of new, modern “objects of worship” (Alexander, 2010; Rojek, 2001). Still other studies outline parallels between celebrities and religious icons in terms of selfless sacrifice, God-given ability, and sociological power (Andacht, 2010; Braudy, 1997). Additionally, there are more specific analyses of “fan” behavior (for discussion on the connotations of ‘fan,’ see Redden and Steiner, 2000; also Marshall, 1997 on ‘crazes,’ p. 166). The person who wants to be closer to the celebrity as their “object of worship” often expresses it by emulating them (usually in fashion) as much as possible (see Alexander, 2010; Basinger, 2007) or seeking to know more about them, a desire most commonly exemplified in the consumption of “fanzines” and tabloids (Marshall, 1997; Turner, 2004, pp. 67-8). At the same time, however, the reverse phenomenon has been noted by celebrity theorists who have examined the public push-back (or *Schadenfreude*) that brings our objects of idolization back down to our level (see Cross & Littler, 2010; Rojek, 2001 on celebrity scandals, p. 89; Williamson, 2010). Again, these conceptions of celebrity build upon the notion of some sort of identification process occurring between audience member and

celebrity. However, in modern celebrity discourse, an important element was added onto this identification/dis-identification relationship that recurs as one of the major tropes surrounding celebrities today – the notion of authenticity.

**Authenticity.** The notion of authenticity is one clear marker in the shift from more classical conceptions of fame to today's celebrity. The idea of a distance between the "true" person and the known image can be traced back to the origins of film, wherein stars became known specifically for acting out other characters and not being themselves (for a useful discussion of film acting vs. theater performing, see Marshall, 1997, pp. 80-89). In his study on celebrity, Marshall outlines the various distinctions between celebrities in different media, particularly in terms of the notion of authenticity in the public sphere. His basic argument is that film celebrities build an "auratic" distance from their onscreen selves (see also Dyer, 1979) while television celebrities move toward merging their onscreen/offscreen identities. The music celebrity, alternately, produces (or is taken up into) a discourse of authenticity that draws upon ideals of artistry and talent (Marshall, 1997, pp. 150-184). Though these distinctions are not absolute, they are helpful in understanding the ways in which different media create differing (and hierarchal) relations between its stars and audiences, particularly when considering the specificities of the reality television age.

Television "personalities" (for discussions of the term "personality" versus "star" see Marshall, 1997; Bennett & Holmes, 2010) could easily be perceived as being closer, more "real" than film stars not only because they are often playing the same role on a continuous basis (see Hills & Williams, 2005) but also because of their physical

proximity to the audience's private, domestic lives and their presentation of ordinary "everyday" events (Marshall, 1997). Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956/2006) outlined the notion of para-social relations, wherein repeated interactions help people begin to feel like they know the personality on their radio, television, or movie screen. Radio and television performers will often address the audience directly, breaking the "fourth wall" and causing them to feel as though they know the authentic star – the viewer feels they can judge whether or not the star is acting out of character (Horton & Wohl, 2006). Many stars of TV talk shows (such as Ed Sullivan, Johnny Carson and Oprah) follow this format directly. Other stars who do act – particularly in sitcoms – are often considered to be merely playing themselves (e.g. Lucille Ball, Mary Tyler Moore, or Jerry Seinfeld.).

This impression of everyday *real* and *authentic* selves being captured on television led to a shift in conceptions of "work" for these performers: "The emphasis on a close coincidence between on/offscreen persona [for the television star], which seeks to offer the impression that the person is just 'being themselves,' effectively evacuates the importance of skill, talent and work" (Holmes, 2011, p. 44). This apparent contradiction to the individualist myth of success then complicates the notion of legitimacy in the field of television versus other media, (which will be discussed in more detail in the upcoming section on reality television) and displays some of the complex problems that arise when applying the term "authentic" to public figures. Perhaps because of these problems, relatively little work has been done to explore the other side of the equation – how

audiences approach and understand the issue of authenticity when consuming celebrity culture.

Joshua Gamson (1994) dared to venture into this territory with his work *Claims to Fame* in which he conducted several focus groups on celebrity in America. After speaking with audiences, Gamson was able to delineate five different approaches to celebrity culture (p. 146) – with audience members embodying different approaches depending on the context and/or which celebrity was being talked about (i.e. the categories are not mutually exclusive). The first approach is the traditional one, also known as the *believer*. This view takes celebrity at face value, and as something earned and therefore legitimate. There is no question of authenticity. The second approach, *second-order traditional*, is more nuanced. This audience member perceives a difference between “natural” celebrity (i.e. legitimate and authentic) and “artificial” celebrity (manipulated and manufactured). The third approach, which he called the *postmodern* approach, rejects the entire system as a sham. The fourth and fifth positions, however, reject the limits of the “natural” versus “artificial” binary code and see the whole celebrity system as more of a game – hence the name “game player.” There are two types of game-players: *detectives* and *gossipers*, and they differ according to their use of the game. Detectives enjoy the process of seeking out clues of artifice and authenticity while gossipers use celebrities as a social game – often repeating tabloid gossip to others without really caring whether or not it is true.

Of these five positions, note that, despite much of the common discourse surrounding celebrity (which will be discussed further in the upcoming section on reality

television), *only* the first two hold the celebrity system to a higher claim of authenticity: “In order to get pleasure from the activity [of celebrity watching], these audiences need to be reasonably certain that what they are getting in each particular case is the real thing. [...] That [real] self is *the destination*” (Gamson, 1994, pp.170-1, emphasis in original). For the other three categories, postmodern and both types of game-players, the notion of authenticity becomes much more complex and, in some cases, of no consequence at all. This idea is quite different than the more “traditional” approaches to celebrity as seen in the previous discussion about individuality (and the work of Braudy, 1997; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001). As Norma, a retired secretary in her late 50s, states in one of Gamson’s focus group discussions:

I don’t think whether it’s real or not is significant. What difference does it make if it’s real? It’s like you go to the movies. It doesn’t have to be real. You are using what’s given to you, and you don’t have to delve or look behind the scenes (p. 157).

It is worth taking note of Norma’s parallel to “the movies,” as I do believe this parallel can be extended into other types of media, but most importantly for this thesis, to the world of reality television. Many viewers of reality television could not care less about the distinction between “real” and “staged” events – they either enjoy the programming for its social value (gossipers, talking about the show around the water-cooler at work the next day) or for the fun of seeking out the moments of reality within the larger artificial construction of “the game” or the production (detectives) (see Andacht, 2013; Cloud, 2010; Dubrofsky, 2011; Hill, 2002; Hall, 2003). Furthermore, the fact that enjoyment can still be culled from reality television programs for those who take

the postmodern position of complete artificiality (and this is often a position taken toward non-competitive reality shows such as *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and *Jersey Shore*), demonstrates the confusion surrounding the importance of authenticity.

Gamson's studies found that the postmodern viewer, despite rejecting everything as artifice, does not necessarily disdain the process itself and can, on the contrary, express admiration of an individual's ability to manipulate the system (their "media genius").

This view, understandably, is not often voiced in the media itself – the system that is being manipulated by these individuals but still relies upon the central myth of meritocracy to maintain its hierarchal and authoritative position in society. This becomes an especially potent point when considering the position of reality television stars, who would seem to be penultimate "masters of the media," so to speak, versus the way they are viewed and spoken about in the news media, in ways that minimize this mastery.<sup>9</sup>

If the concept of authenticity becomes much more nuanced for three out-of-five audience categories, how does such an abstract notion become an unquestioned norm against which celebrities are judged? Furthermore, how do issues of authenticity come into play when the subject of such questions and judgments are female? An interesting exchange occurred during one of Gamson's focus groups in which the notion of merit came up:

Kelly (flight attendant, 44): There's so many [celebrities] on the peripheral edge, the Marla Maples or the whatever. There's just so many of them. Lisa Hartman, Audrey Landers. All of these people come to mind. [laughter]

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<sup>9</sup> There were, however, in Gamson's groups, postmodernists who rejected "media-savvy stars" as just another level of artifice, i.e. Madonna's media savvy is just another part of her carefully constructed image (p. 157).

There's probably many more of those types than there are the real true, talented stars.

Deborah (unemployed, 31): I *hate* those people. *I really hate those people.*

Michelle (mail clerk, 36): They are *conniving*.

Kelly: Those people to me are just *disgusting*. And there's so many of them. They want to be stars, they want to be famous. They're not really talented, but they might be attractive. Known somebody. A woman gets her boobs done, has some stuff here and there. And they're just there and I don't know how. Some of them are laughable. They must know somebody, or they get a good agent. And it's really sad, because there are so many talented people who won't make it because they don't have the look.

Joy (secretary, 40): They'll always be grade B.

Kelly: And they either have a man like Donald Trump, or maybe they've had to sleep with somebody, or somehow they've just gotten to be in a lot of TV movies. They're just always on the outside trying to get in, and I just can't stand them.

Joy: It's like they don't deserve to, you know. They should pack up and go home

(p. 165, emphasis added).

The fact that these participants are referring only to female celebrities is never made explicit or explored further, but there is a clear gender distinction here. It is only *women* who are on the periphery of the system (though the “true, talented” ones are able to gain insider status) and these audience members are “disgusted” by them and “hate” those women. Not only are these women not authentic: - “they're not really talented” or they've had their “boobs done” – they are also undeserving of success. Interestingly, it would seem that many people claiming to not like these women often have no experience with them beyond the public discourse surrounding them – a discourse rooted in disdain<sup>10</sup>. Nowadays it is the female reality television star who receives the brunt of this

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<sup>10</sup> This is a claim based upon my own personal conversations with people about stars like Snooki and Kim Kardashian – they do not watch the shows but they “know of them.” It is another reason why I wanted to move away from an analysis of the reality television text itself toward the public discourse surrounding these women. I will further develop this point in my upcoming methodology chapter.

type of vitriol (see “Snooki is evil” comment from introduction). In fact, as Nick Couldry (2011) points out, reality programming is actually a genre that encourages, and in many cases even necessitates, the judgment of others along classed and gendered lines.

### **Reality Television**

Apparently in middle class circles today, the more there is about the individual that deviates in an undesirable direction from what might have been expected to be true of him, the more he is obliged to volunteer information about himself, even though the cost to him of candor may have increased proportionately (Goffman, 1963, p. 64).

At the most basic level, reality television can be understood as a broad genre: “[t]he common feature of its formats or sub-genres is the unscripted surveillance of the behavior of ordinary people in circumstances that range from the everyday to the exotic” (Andacht, 2013, p. 43; see also Godlewski & Perse, 2012, p. 149; Hill, Weibull & Nilsson, 2007, p. 18). Its lineage can be traced to documentary filmmaking techniques (lightweight equipment) as well as “factual programming” from the 1980s and 1990s in both America (*America’s Most Wanted*) and Europe (*Video Diaries*). Today, “reality television” has become a wide-ranging term that refers to a pervasive flood of programming on North American networks (and certainly beyond, yet this thesis is concerned with the North American context and American reality stars).

There are shows that are competitive only within the confines of the show’s format (for example, *Big Brother* or *Survivor*) while others are talent-based competitions with the promise of some type of (talent-based) career after the program is finished (*The X Factor* or *Top Chef*). Other shows fall into “lifestyle” categories such as makeover shows (*Extreme Makeover Home Edition* or *What Not to Wear*) or life-altering challenges (*The*

*Biggest Loser*, *Undercover Boss*). Some reality programs are more “educational” offering lessons in science or history (*Mythbusters*, *American Pickers* or *Colonial House*). Some reality shows use the simplest surveillance format – following people as they go about their everyday lives (which may or may not be extravagant: examples would include the *Real Housewives* series and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*). These types of reality shows can produce stars (i.e. Jade Goody after appearing on the U.K. edition of *Big Brother* or Honey Boo Boo after first appearing on American TLC network’s *Toddlers and Tiaras*, both of whom were able to land their own spin-off series and extend their fame into other mediated texts beyond the original celebrity-inducing text).

Within all of these thematic and stylistic sub-divisions of reality television there is another distinction to be made with regards to the characters or people who participate in these programs. It is worthwhile to make some distinctions across the spectrum of reality television, despite the lack of theoretical work done in regards to this level of classification (an interesting exception would be Hugh Curnutt’s 2009 study on reality television celebrity, particularly in relation to “all-star” seasons when former contestants or participants are brought back to perform two roles: “real” person as well as recognized, entertaining reality television personality). While many reality shows cast “ordinary” people (i.e. people with no prior connection to the public sphere), there are programs that, alternately, cast participants who are already famous or known to some degree. Within this group of programming, it is important still to distinguish between shows that follow famous people as they go about their everyday lives (*The Newlyweds* or *The Osbournes* for instance) versus reality show programs that normally use ordinary

(non-famous) people but hold special edition seasons using celebrity figures (*Celebrity Big Brother* or *The Celebrity Apprentice*). These competitive shows often also run the aforementioned “all-star” seasons where previous outstanding reality personalities are brought back. A further distinction could be made to discuss shows such as *Dancing With the Stars* whose format does require that the participants be previously publicly known on some level, but instead of offering any insight into the star’s “private life,” the competitive reality program chronicles their journey to develop a new skill or talent.

On the other hand, many of the shows which rely upon unknown casts (particularly the talent-based competition reality programs) promise their participants some type of access to (or visibility within) the public sphere which extends beyond the basic reality television text for which they are first recruited (i.e. *American Idol*’s promise of pop stardom). And even if the format of the show itself does not promise this access to the public sphere, there are some reality stars who are able to finagle their way, for however short a period of time (i.e. “fifteen minutes”) into public view, as previously mentioned in the “all-star” category or becoming the subject of a reality television spin-off (Honey Boo Boo or Jade Goody, again, would be examples in this last category.).<sup>11</sup>

However, while these distinctions among various types of reality television stardom are important to make, it is also important to clarify that this thesis does not wish to take too deterministic a stance. Though different media can shape different kinds of and relations to stardom (as discussed previously in the section on authenticity), the ensuing

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<sup>11</sup> There is also a worthwhile distinction to make between famous people cast as participants versus famous people as judges (*The Voice* or Gordon Ramsay shows) whose previously established “specialness” in the form of skill, talent, experience, etc. is called upon to provide expertise and legitimize the show’s promises of success to its participants.

processes of celebrity vis-à-vis the media are usually quite distinct from the relations the star had with the media text that at first created the fame. In fact, it is often in this subsequent stage of stardom (interviews, publicity, tabloids, etc.) where the hierarchical systems of celebrity emerge and come into play as a part of the public discourse. The chosen case studies as well as the subsequent news analysis, will, I expect, illustrate the incongruity of such hierarchical judgments precisely because the idea of legitimate versus illegitimate fame (in terms of causation) serves a larger purpose than helping the public to decide which stars are worthy of admiration. It helps us also to delineate which *people* are worthy of admiration and it is precisely this call to judgment that has engaged many reality television theorists of late.

While many media theorists have lamented the ways in which certain groups have been excluded from the discursive realm (see Butler, 1993; Hall, 1993; Jiwani, 2006 discussed in Theoretical Framework to follow) the recent emergence of reality television as an economically viable genre of programming has necessarily democratized the system to an extent. Though access may still be quite limited by the producers (and parameters) of such programming, there can be a more varied representation of people across lines of gender, class, race, sexuality, etc. when television shows are not necessarily looking for the most “beautiful” or “talented” people but the most volatile and interesting personalities which, when combined, create broadcast-worthy drama. Mixing people of different socio-economic backgrounds appears to be one of the key ingredients in creating non-scripted drama.

In his discussion of reality television in relation to issues of class, Nick Couldry (2011) points out that, although reality television may seem to offer a more “democratic” form of media production, it still works to bolster traditional socio-economic lines of separation. It does so by not explicitly acknowledging the ‘rules’ of the game (as discussed in the previous paragraph – the means by which the show’s producers choose who will participate and who will not) but also in its exposing the majority to “others” without explicitly acknowledging that they are “others” (here, he speaks specifically in terms of class but I want to also include gender, and, to a lesser extent, race, as both Snooki and Kim Kardashian are ‘marked’ others<sup>12</sup> – Snooki as a working-class pseudo-Italian female and Kardashian as a member of the privileged upper classes of society, but also an ethnic minority of Armenian descent). This exposure to the unarticulated other, according to Couldry, is an inherent generic quality of reality television. “Through the rhetorical invitation of the reality TV text (its implied claim to access ‘shared’ reality), its judgments carry an assertion of universal relevance and authority – they are judgments about ‘the way things are’ for all of you” (2011, p. 37; see also Grindstaff, 2011; Negra & Holmes, 2008). Couldry then goes on to make a particularly relevant claim regarding reality television’s invitation to judgment:

We now live in societies where, within the authorizing frame of media institutions, people are allowed to harshly judge and embarrass others in public without the judged having the opportunity to respond, let alone question the basis of the judgment [...] reality TV does more than naturalise the judgments of class that, in another era, were ‘hidden’ and privately internalised: it naturalises the force and violent interchange of those judgments and installs them as a ‘fact’ of public life” (pp. 37-38).

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<sup>12</sup> See footnote on page 26.

This environment of judgment in which media figures become fair game for ridicule and embarrassment is classed, as Couldry argues, but is also highly gendered. In her piece on American reality television star Kate Gosselin, Brenda Weber (2011) examines the public judgment that has been aimed at her seemingly for nothing but becoming famous in the way that she did (through making the *calculated* move of allowing, for money, TLC reality television crews to capture the lives of her, her husband and their eight children):

[W]eb postings, tabloid headlines and late-night comedians do not suggest that the values by which we understand ‘making it’ are themselves bankrupt (in other words, famous people really are and deserve to be, living the American Dream) but that the bartering of a private life for a public career is somehow false and wrong, particularly for mothers (p. 157).

Weber argues against this, for us to start questioning the premises upon which such judgments (particularly against *mothers* in this case) are made:

At this point, gender scholars have to step back and ask, ‘What’s going on here?’ Why is it permissible to label a mother who courts fame a hypocrite, a bitch or a whore? Should we not praise those women who have been resourceful enough to achieve what the land of milk and honey has to offer rather than degrading them on both classed and gendered grounds? (p. 164).

This does lead to one of the main epistemological positions taken in this work, which will be discussed in more detail in the upcoming section (theoretical framework) – the notion of “achievement” as it applies to celebrities today is not an objective, measurable unit. Achievement ties into the notion of talent, both of which uphold the hierarchal celebrity system. They are normative, ideological

concepts that are applied in highly gendered (and racist, homophobic, ageist) ways to people in the public sphere (see Negra & Holmes, 2008). By focusing on reality television stars, I hope to make clear that the debate over their worthiness of being in the public eye is not of interest here. My research, to reiterate, concerns the ways in which news media report on certain celebrities to minimize their legitimacy and authenticity as members of the public sphere. When one accepts the basic tenet that the system is *not* fair, nor is it open to all, despite the traditional discourse surrounding the system the issue of legitimacy becomes moot. This then leads into the larger power issues underlying this thesis – specifically, the importance of upholding the myth of meritocracy upon which Western, democratic, capitalist, patriarchal society is built.

## **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

As noted by Brenda Weber (2012), the celebrity system today:

performs a valuable cultural work akin to other social formations such as religion or heroism in that it often polices and makes intelligible divisions between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the normal and the excessive and even between life and death (p.66).

This call to a higher order (policing) implicates a certain morality and ethicality at stake in the celebrity system. In order to maintain this crucial function, the celebrity system has to sustain certain myths surrounding it – the myth of meritocracy (legitimate, talented stars providing valued work, see Cross & Littler, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008) and the myth of individualist authenticity (the idea that we are each called to “be true to ourselves” and that if we can attain success by being true to ourselves, our individual

worth – as a good person – is affirmed, see Taylor, 1991). This thesis aims to question both of those ideals, particularly as they are used to contain women in the public sphere – sexually, physically and textually. I will now briefly explore some of the key theoretical perspectives underlying that questioning.

### **Cultural Studies and Structuralism**

Structuralist theory encompasses cultural studies, semiotic analysis and the highly influential work of Michel Foucault, all of which highlight the importance of the systems of representation that shape our understanding of ourselves, others and the world around us. Stuart Hall (1993), one of the leading contributors to cultural studies, posits that we, as humans, are unable to access any such thing as a “reality” (in a positivist, empirical sense) outside of the meaning-making system of language, and that all identities are shaped by such structures:

The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and ‘naturalness’ of language, but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use. They produce apparently ‘natural’ recognitions. This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present (95).

The naturalization<sup>13</sup> of the systems of representation surrounding the star not only informs our understanding of visual representations generally, but also our understanding of the discourse that surrounds stardom specifically (particularly discourses about worth and work in relation to public success). Our understanding of celebrity is rooted in the

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<sup>13</sup> Naturalization in this sense is taken from the work of cultural studies’ theorists on ideology. Ideology is defined as “the collective beliefs, attitudes, and values of a given group of people” (Gunn, 2009). Oftentimes, such beliefs, attitudes and values are said to be working unconsciously and tend to promote the status quo. It is in this sense that such beliefs are said to be naturalized – when they are the dominant groups of beliefs in a society and are taken to be common sense without question (Gunn, 2009).

naturalized idea that those who are famous somehow deserve to be – or at least that’s the way it *should* be (again, this is reflected not only in news discourse on celebrity, but also much of the theorizing surrounding fame and celebrity, which, as was shown in the section on individuality, positions fame within a cause/effect paradigm – see, for instance Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001).

This prescriptive function of the media extends beyond the issues at stake in discussion of celebrity, but also into representations of femininity and the female (sexual) identity, and has become one of the most important functions of public discourse (and is, thusly, one of the reasons that this thesis is concerned with, not only the star as text, but the public discourse surrounding the star). The media use naturalized codes of representation, in Hall’s sense, as well as their legitimized position in order to prescribe people’s roles in society and maintain certain power structures:

Through the media, we learn where we fit in the social order and, moreover, how to increase our chances of fitting in, the latitudes of freedom which we can exercise, and the penalties that may accrue from transgressing these limits. In that sense, the media clearly *privilege and communicate the dominant discourses of morality and mobility* (Jiwani, 2006, p. 36, emphasis added).

Though Michel Foucault (1972) is often credited for popularizing the notion of discourse<sup>14</sup> in the academic world, Richard Dyer (2004) was one of the first theorists to tie the concept of discourse into studies of fame more specifically, though his focus

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault (1972) argues for an understanding of discourse as no longer simply signification itself (but still of course, including groups of signs), but also as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 49). John Storey (2009) provides a helpful summary of this idea:

Language, for example, is a discourse: it *enables* me to speak, it *constrains* what I can say, it *constitutes* me as a speaking subject (i.e. it situates and produces my subjectivity: I know myself in language, I think in language; I talk to myself in language) (p. 128, emphasis in original).

centered on film stars. In his study on Marilyn Monroe, Dyer used discourse analysis to examine the various “ideas, notions, feelings, images, attitudes and assumptions” that surrounded one particular star at a particular time (pp. 17) – a definition of discourse that will be particularly useful in this project vis-à-vis news reporting. Taken together, such ideas and attitudes allow analysts to paint a more general picture of what messages about celebrities mean and the context in which such images generate, stabilize or problematize meaning for both the producers and consumers of said imagery. On a larger scale, they also help to sustain ideologies, which in turn sustain certain power structures.

One such power structure sustained by the celebrity system, and its underlying myth of meritocracy, is Western individualist democratic capitalism (Cross & Littler, 2010; Holmes, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008; Weber, 2012). Drawing upon the theories of Karl Marx (1975) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1999), Steve Cross and Jo Littler (2010) have examined the “equalizing” effect of celebrity *Schadenfreude* (the delight in celebrity downfall). In particular, they are concerned with the relation between such *Schadenfreude* and the audience’s ability to negotiate the central paradox of neo-liberal capitalist ideology – the simultaneous championing of equality of condition and private property (material inequality). Furthermore, countering the logic of equality of condition, is the “logic of police,” which is:

the managed, ordered field of the ‘social’ and what this field legitimates as its perceptible, ‘natural’ elements, the places and positions which subjects and identities occupy within it. These can be straightforwardly ‘hierarchical’ in terms of a law of ‘essences’ [...] or ‘naturalized’ in more complex ways through notions of a hierarchy of ‘intelligence’ or ‘merit.’ In either case they account for and legitimate rule by the ‘best’ (Ranciere, summarized in Cross & Littler, 2010, p.403).

These notions of what are best – what constitutes intelligence or merit – are thus necessarily biased to serve the interests of those who have been found to be (or have declared themselves) legitimate rulers. They preclude the notion that all men (and women) are created equal and thus the idea that anyone can and should be able to rule.

Feminist theorists have long been interested these power struggles and the subsequent ways in which women have been systematically excluded from the realm of equality. One of the most prevalent and effective ways in which this exclusion has occurred has been through limiting their place in public discourse and denying them access to the position of subject.<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, whose work in gender studies has been highly influential to feminist theory, argues that gender is constructed discursively through “exclusionary means” and that which does not appear to be “properly gendered” (for instance, through age or deformity or both) is subject to “radical erasure” in the discursive realm (1993, p.8). These “excluded sites” form the boundaries of the normative sexed body and continue “to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation” (Butler, 1993, p. 8). Though women do *appear* in the discursive realm, there are certain roles that they are *allowed* to occupy and there are certain structural limitations on *what kinds* of women can occupy those roles (it is not an open, fair game for those who are ready to earn their role). It is through examining, not just the roles themselves, but also the public discourse surrounding the

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<sup>15</sup> Both Erving Goffman(1963) and Wayne Brekhus (2003), though approaching the topic from different angles, discuss the notion of there being a “marked” versus “unmarked” member of society – an unspoken norm against which we judge all other deviations. That unspoken norm is, in the most basic sense, the Caucasian, heterosexual male. It is he who is the implied subject of public discourse.

women who fill (and those who transgress) these roles, that a more clear understanding can emerge of how public talk informs and reflects larger power struggles surrounding the appropriate roles for women in society.

### **Feminism**

**Containment.** As was seen in the literature on reality television, this new genre provides a particularly clear view of the gendered nature of celebrity discourses in relation to ideals of talent and authenticity. My hypothesis is that certain female celebrities (in this case Snooki), when seen to be transgressing the norms of feminine behavior, will be framed in terms of (a lack of) the former, while others (Kardashian) will be framed in terms of (a lack of) the latter. In fact, in direct relation to questions of sexuality and talent, there exists a common theme surrounding the representation of female identity that can be demarcated: containment. The notion of containment, which will be explored further in this section, relates to conceptions of both authenticity and legitimacy, framing the discussion and understanding of today's female (iconic) celebrities. I will now briefly describe the three most common ways in which women are publicly contained – sexually, physically (in appearance and behavior), and textually.

The idea of containment of sexuality centers on arguably the most recognizable example of iconic representation of womanhood – the symbol of the Virgin Mary (Driscoll, 2002). Two key concepts recur in various incarnations of this symbol: her virginity (which represents purity) and her maternity, a contradictory tension that marks her as the impossible ideal toward which “regular” woman must strive. As Catherine Driscoll (2002) argues, the Virginity of the Blessed Mary has come to symbolize a

purified state of being for all women (and therefore a preferred or ethically superior state of being) in which their sexuality is contained, controlled and/or denied (p. 142; see also Dyer, 2004 on Marilyn Monroe as the innocent sexpot, thus neutralizing the threat of her sexuality, pp. 17-63). As will be shown in the case study analysis, this is a common trope in the representation of women in the media today, particularly with regards to female reality television stars, many of whom often present (and experience) their sexuality as “real” or are able to barter it for fame (or both).

There are other ways in which classical iconic representations of women foster the notion of containment – one of which is containment of the female body itself. This is commonly done through clothing such as corsets, brassières, high heels, etc., all of which not only contain the female body, but also limit movement, which, in turn, affects “how a girl produces power with her body” (Justice-Malloy, p. 111; see also Berger, quoted in Heinecken, 2003; Pollock, 2003). These physical restrictions create normative power restrictions on women’s activities both in and outside of the home. Women, however, are contained not only by their clothing, but also by norms imposed upon their physical bodies in terms of size and behavior. Women who resist – consciously or unconsciously – these imposed limitations, either by being overweight and taking up “too much public space” or by being loud and/or partaking in “male” activities, are perceived as threatening (Heinecken, 2003) and are positioned in opposition to ethical codes of conduct (see Rowe, 1995 on the “unruly woman” as exemplified by Mae West, Roseanne Barr, etc.) Women, thusly, are judged against norms of appearance and behavior. If they do not comply and extend “too far” into the public sphere, they are framed as transgressors.

Additionally, certain female celebrities need to be contained in a different way – in regards to the medium in which they appear. Reality stars, in particular, are vulnerable to this type of containment, for someone who is famous for “doing nothing” should not dare try to achieve something such as writing a book or starting a fashion line.

In fact, women have long experienced heavy limitations on what they can and cannot do in the media. Though by the 1980s, massive progress was being made by women’s equality movements both economically and politically, most high-powered culture and media positions (producers, directors, studio heads) were, and still are, occupied by men (Lind, 2010 p. 327; Turner, 2004, p. 84<sup>16</sup>). At the same time, female celebrities were increasingly framed as having more cultural (and economic) power than ever before (Roseanne, Oprah, Madonna, etc.); there was also a theoretical turn amongst feminists in academia toward the legitimization and celebration of women’s popular culture (Durham, 2003). Again, these discourses celebrated a type of visibility that was still rather limited by larger structural forces at work. I will refer to this variation of containment as textual containment – an idea that, as will be shown, is an important trope in the discourse and treatment of reality television celebrities who try to extend their visibility into other realms of the media.

The battle to venture into other realms of the public sphere, however, is not unique to women in the reality television world. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, women were able to successfully break through into male-dominated alternative cultures (see punk rock movement The Riot Grrrls; art/protest movement group Guerrilla Girls).

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<sup>16</sup> A recent article in the *Financial Post* revealed that 22 out of 23 of the top paid media executives in 2012 were male (Acuna & Rosenberg, 2013).

However, their revolutionary reclamation of the tropes of female images and sexuality were quickly taken up by popular culture and re-inscribed into norms about female sexuality (see, for instance Attwood, 2007, on the reclamation of the word “slut” in the post-feminist punk movement, wherein the underlying power struggles inherent in the word are masked by a popular embrace of the term). The Spice Girls combined the power of consumption with the power of sexualized images, re-appropriating them toward their own message of “Girl Power” – a concept that celebrates both femininity (in a traditional, appearance-based sense) and the consequent powers that are reclaimed through embracing such traditional tropes of femininity. The celebrated idea of “sexy girls breaking through and kicking butt” still surrounds many female pop culture figures today – though evolving somewhat into a new formulation (see Durham, 2003 on modern ‘girl heroes’ – there is more physical power displayed by women onscreen, but they still fit a very specific mold of what a woman should be and/or look like, i.e. Jennifer Lawrence in *Hunger Games* or Anne Hathaway in *The Dark Knight Rises*). It is worthwhile to note here that the Spice Girls, though massively enjoyed and celebrated on a global scale, were often framed as the butt of a larger joke – an illegitimate force that somehow entered popular culture, despite having a lack of (or even at the expense of) talent, work ethic, and artistic credibility:

The Spice Girls very successfully claim to be what girls want, and the usual grounds for dismissing this claim is that they are just a glossy pre-packaged commodity. The usual story of their origins—that they were brought together by managers through an ad in a theatre magazine—is a principal reference here (Driscoll, 1999, p. 177).

Such formulations deny these women authenticity as well as agency in their own stardom. The fact that the Spice Girls were brought together by an ad, though not rare in band origin stories, is used as a *critical* frame through which they are judged, and, necessarily implicates that there are more *legitimate* ways for groups to come together, without explicitly stating what those ways are. As stated earlier, this research takes the epistemological perspective that such ideals of legitimacy are dubious, and in this case it is very clearly tied to a notion of inauthenticity on the group's part. I would argue that such notions of authenticity, particularly when framing public figures, are just as dubious. It is to this issue that I will now turn briefly before describing my methodology.

**Authenticity.** Though talk of “authenticity” has become commonplace today both within and beyond the media, its meaning is often taken for granted. In the most basic sense, it is being true to oneself (Taylor, 1991), but as Charles Taylor notes, this ideal often ties into a notion of expression: “[b]eing true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself” (p. 29). When we express what our true self is – either through actions, words or, crucially for this discussion, art – we are more in tune with what makes us original and special – what defines us as individuals (Taylor, 1991, p. 61).

This leads back to an important point mentioned early in the Literature Review – the idea, espoused by several theorists (Braudy, 1997; Marshall, 1997), that fame serves to affirm the importance of the individual. They argue that this affirmation is strongest when a person is famous simply for being themselves – that having accomplished something as a part of their original, individual specialness is the basis upon which they

become a “higher” (visibly and morally) person in society. However, it would seem that nowadays, with the “famous for nothing” motif surrounding many public figures, a discursive shift has occurred. No longer does fame serve as an affirmation of the self if it can be attained by any self out there wily enough to grab it. This conception of fame as no longer affirming the self is particularly potent in relation to the reality television celebrity who is famous *only* for being him or herself (minus any sense of accomplishment). This idea – that our system of fame no longer serves its proper validating function – I believe, is used discursively *against* women, in particular, in a way that calls upon (but does not articulate) Taylor’s (1991) assertion that modernity has eclipsed the higher moral calling toward authenticity *should* strive. These women become the sites upon which such modern relativistic and self-serving ideals are debated. As was seen in Gamson’s (1994) focus group discussions – women on the periphery, i.e. those who have not legitimately earned their place in the celebrity system because they are *only* famous for being famous – are seen as fakes and whores. They are therefore not good people.

At the same time, another shift has occurred – the shift away from people being celebrated (by the public discourse surrounding them) for (successfully) being who they are to a celebration of people who can *express* who they are (through art, which requires talent, leading back to the previous points on legitimacy). Taylor points out the parallel between this idea of authenticity and art, arguing that art, which was once called upon to reflect (realistically) reality is now judged against the abstract – how it makes us feel;

how the artist expresses him or herself on the canvas. Art no longer serves a larger purpose; it is not called to reflect upon anything other than itself:

Beauty gives its own intrinsic fulfillment. Its goal is internal. But authenticity too comes to be understood in parallel fashion, as its own goal. It is born [...] out of a shift in the centre of gravity of the moral demand on us: self-truth and self-wholeness are seen more and more not as means to be moral, as independently defined, but as something valuable for their own sake (pp. 64-5).

Taylor's entire argument is rooted in his call to return to a higher moral order – what he terms “horizons of perspective” where authenticity is no longer the goal in-and-of itself. Interestingly, this could be argued as one reason audiences (according to Gamson's, 1994 study) are so ambivalent toward such ideals of authenticity as espoused by the public discourses surrounding the celebrity. It also ties back into Cross and Littler's (2010) argument about celebrity *Schadenfreude* as the great leveler - the inherent contradictory notions of a person's material worth and self-worth can be eased when people who have attained high exchange value are brought back down to their “intrinsic” value (p. 406). In developing an understanding of a celebrity's “true self” (and thus, their worth as a human being), we come to reconcile our own worth in comparison (either in the form of discourses suggesting that “we are not as naturally gifted as them, and thus deserve to remain unrecognized” or, more of interest to this paper, “they are nothing special and deserve to be treated as such until they return from whence they came”).

Though a proper treatment of the philosophical debates over authenticity is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that celebrity discourse is inseparable from such moral ideals. Despite the complexity surrounding this ideal of authenticity,

which has become a critical part of our modern existence, it is often applied in lackadaisical and arbitrary ways when it comes to celebrities. To speak of an authentic celebrity does imply moral judgment without an articulation of the importance that relativistic self-fulfilment, as well as exchange-value, plays in our individualistic, capitalist, democratic society. This lack of articulation makes it difficult to identify and define how it is being used to frame certain celebrities as being “bad” versus “good” and who gains what from that type of framing.

On the other hand, some reality television theorists have been interested in precisely how this genre is re-defining and re-inscribing its own interpretation of authenticity – most commonly seen in the notion of the “labours of selfhood” (see, for instance Andrejevic, 2010; Hearn, 2006; 2008; Lewis, 2011; Palmer, 2010). As articulated by Hearn (2006), the “form of work performed by the [reality] shows’ participants involves the self-conscious development and management of public persona based on templates of the ‘self’ supplied by corporate media culture” (p.133). In other words, despite the implied associations with morality and ethics, the understanding and use of an authentic self, particularly as exemplified through reality television programming and its participants, has increasingly come to serve (and legitimize) the interests of capitalism and consumer society. Today’s “self-branding” reality star becomes a model to us all in this networked age and can simultaneously serve both public needs – being acknowledged for cunning media prowess while still serving as subject to *Schandenfreude* equalization. It will be of interest in this thesis, then, to explore more specifically the way in which the idea of authenticity is called upon to frame our specific

understanding of female celebrity today, particularly as it relates to notions of “worth” and “work” within capitalist patriarchal society.

As seen in Gamson’s focus group quoted in the Literature Review above, discussions of women’s authenticity and legitimacy as members of the public sphere frequently refer to their sexuality. This theme of sexuality is often articulated in terms of the body itself. Dyer (2004), for example, points out the differences between the perceived authenticity of American stars such as Marilyn Monroe or Judy Garland and the perceived “performers” usually of European tradition such as Roger Moore and Grace Kelly (p.12)<sup>17</sup>. It is worth noting that the cues of authenticity identified by Dyer are all signals of physical excess – drug addiction, drink, and temperament all work to create a notion of “stars who are thought to be genuine, who reveal their inner selves, but *the final touchstone of that genuineness is the human body itself*” (p. 12, emphasis added; see also Redmond, 2008 on the importance of physical cues to authenticity in celebrity talk show confessions).

The body is also an important site in the judgment of authenticity in reality television performance. Ellis (2009) points out how such physical displays of authenticity within that kind of public forum had to be learned, for it was once highly frowned upon to “lose control” on television (a helpful analogy might be to think of the old 1950s talk show formats versus the situations which arise on talk shows like *Jerry Springer* in which physical altercations often occur). In today’s reality television format, the audience has

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<sup>17</sup> This is an important point that will be revisited throughout this thesis: the fact that not all stars are judged against standards of authenticity even when they are working within the same medium (Monroe versus Kelly, mentioned above) or within the same genre (Groucho Marx’s stylized character comedy versus comedians like Jerry Seinfeld or Ray Romano who are said to essentially be playing themselves).

learned to seek out those moments where control is lost (see Gamson's game-player detective, discussed earlier) within the larger contrivances of casting and production set ups (see Andacht's, 2004 discussion of indexicality on reality television; Cloud, 2010; Crew, 2006; Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002).

Dubrofsky (2011) interestingly focused on the correlation between emotion and authenticity as experienced and performed by participants on the hit U.S. reality series *The Bachelor* as well as its spin-offs *The Bachelorette* and *Bachelor Pad*. Drawing upon the work of Linda Williams (1989) on pornography as well as Laura Grindstaff's (2002) application of the same concepts to confessional talk shows, Dubrofsky identifies a female version of the so-called 'money-shot' whose function in pornography is to authenticate the action (and more specifically the pleasure) onscreen. In reality programs like *The Bachelor*, the audience seeks to authenticate, not the pleasure, but the opposite emotions – pain, sadness, anger, jealousy, and other emotions indicative of “real” feelings and “real” heartbreak.

In fact, argues Dubrofsky (2011), this distinction between a sexual 'money shot' and an emotional one is crucial to the gender politics of reality television, for it is the women who seem to not 'perform' emotion well as a function of authenticity – the ones who are judged to be *too emotional*, and therefore out-of-control – who are most often and earliest eliminated from the competition, thus privileging rationality over emotionality. “[Being too emotional] represents a transgression in which the display, the exposure of a woman's inner, private, emotional self, puts her at a disadvantage and promotes, supports, and bolsters male privilege” (p.70) as it is ultimately the male who

decides who does and does not cross that boundary. In the realm of reality television where participants (and often especially women) are *supposed* to lose control of their emotions in order to authenticate the action on the television screen, what prescriptive codes of are being communicated? What do these codes say about female sexuality and how are they applied prescriptively to judge and punish the women who participate on these shows?

Several theorists considered such questions before reality television became a scholarly pursuit. John Berger (1973) posited the notion that, as opposed to men, women are constantly doubly viewing themselves – firstly, they have their own perception of themselves while, secondly, they are constantly aware of how they appear to the world and, notably, to men: “From earliest childhood [woman] has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (p.46). This split hints at a sort of authenticity paradox within women – their ‘true’ self is always aware of how they are supposed to look and behave (though certainly the performance cannot be maintained at all times – see Goffman’s work on ‘breaking frame’<sup>18</sup>). Interestingly, this perhaps could be argued as one of the reasons that women

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<sup>18</sup> Goffman (1974) proposes that human beings understand their world and act accordingly based on frameworks that can be either natural (i.e. the weather) or social (traffic laws) and help to structure not only an individual’s behavior but also the behavior of others in the same society. Though the effective application of frameworks does require involvement, there can be instances of being engrossed (i.e. when a reader becomes so involved in a novel to equal or surpass even their level of involvement in certain everyday activities) as well as instances of breaking frame. Furthermore, the two are not mutually exclusive, for one can be so caught up in the current situation that they forget the social rules governing the moment or are unable to sustain their adherence to them, such as when a crazed fan breaks through the red velvet rope barrier and manages to touch her favourite actor (as happened to Johnny Depp at 2012 Toronto International Film Festival) or when an awkward situation results in laughter (“cracking up”). Such

make such compelling and pervasive reality television stars – they are simply used to surveillance and performance.

To summarize, this research will bridge the gap between celebrity studies, reality television studies, and feminism to address the precarious position occupied by such stars as Snooki and Kardashian. I propose to examine the ways in which these “new” types of stars – female reality television stars – are talked about publicly in ways that contain them sexually, physically and textually. In calling upon the tropes of legitimacy and authenticity upon which myths of individualist democratic capitalism rely, the media is able to contain and neutralize the threat posed by women who do nothing – or, who do too much – yet succeed.

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moments as these are too an important part of the workings of reality television. Viewers tune in precisely for those moments when the frame breaks – when a contestant “loses it” and forgets about the rules governing the game and/or social behavior.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Overview**

To reiterate, my research question is as follows: how do mainstream news media report on today's female celebrities in ways that minimize their authenticity and legitimacy as members of the public sphere?

My hypothesis is that qualitative analysis of individual case studies will demonstrate that the media frame certain female celebrities as being illegitimate and inauthentic members of the public sphere, which helps to serve the larger function of sexual, physical and textual containment. This containment neutralizes the threat imposed by female reality TV stars who, by their very existence, expose the systematic fallacies behind the myth of meritocracy upon which our society is built, while at the same time, inhibiting the power of women in the media today.

Because these issues are so rooted in the feminist and structuralist paradigms discussed in the previous chapter, it is necessary to unpack some of the common readings and assumptions behind our everyday language as applied to celebrities. As noted in the Literature Review, most of the studies dealing with both celebrity and reality television thus far have centered on the texts themselves (see also, Turner, 2010) and not on the discourse surrounding the stars, as exemplified by the news media. I have moved in the opposite direction with this thesis for precisely that reason. I wanted to examine how the ways in which we talk about celebrities (particularly when considering that most people do not claim to have watched these shows or to be fans of these stars) influence our ideas of what it means to be talented and authentic. The choice of news analysis was made for a

practical purpose – it did provide an easier avenue for investigation than, say, examining word-of-mouth gossip. Furthermore, the distinction between “hard news” and “gossip” was something that has been underexplored in celebrity studies thus far. I chose to include both types of news sources to demonstrate how larger news frames construct ideas and messages that cater to and/or reinforce the preconceived beliefs of their audiences with regards to notions of worth, work and truth – which, in turn, have been shaped by previous public discourses about worth, work and truth.

Additionally, the method chosen here offers an avenue through which my own arguments and views as a researcher could be tested and challenged. Though I did follow an emergent research design, which will be defined and discussed shortly, there is a general frame of work offered here which others could adopt and adapt in relation to any celebrity case study of their choice. In fact, that is one of the significant contributions of this thesis in that it offers to empiricize a field that is often approached in very critical, abstract and theoretical terms. It is important to note, however, that my choice of case studies is extreme and atypical. I chose two of the “worst of the worst” reality television starlets, not as representative of general trends, but to illustrate that even in what may seem like the most basic and straightforward discussions of (lack of) talent and work there are other gendered biases at work.

Snooki and Kim Kardashian are two of the most talked about and most polarizing reality television celebrities today. Before delving into the specifics of the analysis, however, a brief introduction is in order. Both of these women are most commonly known as “reality stars,” having been featured in reality shows, but their relations to the

media more generally are different from each other and worth charting. Snooki was unknown publicly when first cast on MTV's *Jersey Shore* in 2009 (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). The show followed the previously mentioned surveillance format, in which six strangers with much in common were sent to live together in New Jersey one summer. Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi's antics, including heavy drinking, tanning, hooking-up, and poofing her hair, made her one of the show's most talked-about stars. She subsequently managed to launch her own cosmetics and accessories lines as well as land a spot on the New York Times' bestseller list in 2011. She and her reality TV best friend Jenni "Jwoww" Farley, also of *Jersey Shore* fame, starred in their own spin-off show which continues to run on MTV today. Snooki is famous not only simply for being famous, but also, for being too much – too drunk, too loud, too horny, excessive in appearance, etc. in a similar way to how Jade Goody was characterized as crass and vulgar in the British media (see Kavka & West, 2010). Snooki is not generally regarded as a role model, but often denigrated in the media for her excesses and grotesqueness. Furthermore, the presentation of such excesses via both the MTV show as well as the extra-textual appearances by Snooki (where she often is seen to maintain that same level of grotesqueness usually through her physical appearance i.e. tanned, outrageous animal-print clothing, platform shoes, poofed hair) has led to the overall acceptance of Snooki as authentic – for no one could possibly *want* to act that way simply in order to become famous; it must not therefore not be a calculated performance. The reporting on Snooki in the news is done in a way that does not question her sincerity or authenticity, but rather, judges her as a (bad) person who has no right to be famous (illegitimate).

In another distinct realm of the reality television landscape, we find Kim Kardashian whose every move is framed in terms of authenticity and questioned for underlying motive (usually suspected to be merely publicity). On the surface at least, Kardashian and Snooki would seem to have a lot in common: reality shows, fashion lines, social media use, tabloid ubiquity and publicized pregnancies. A deeper look reveals some important distinctions. Kim Kardashian was born and raised as a socialite among the elite in Los Angeles to parents Robert and Kris Kardashian.<sup>19</sup> Her stepfather is the somewhat known, if no longer much talked about, Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner<sup>20</sup>. In February of 2007, a sex-tape was leaked of Kim and then boyfriend Ray-J (himself a known singer in some circles, with an even more famous sister in singer Brandy). Eight months later E! television network debuted *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, a surveillance type series that follows Kim and the rest of their family as they go about their extravagant and privileged lives. Since then, Kim and her sister Kourtney have starred in their own spin-off series while remaining featured stars on *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. Unlike Snooki, Kim was known (in some circles, if not widely) before either of her reality shows ever aired. Reality television only amplified her (and her family's) stardom.

Though much work has been done in terms of celebrity scandal, there is a dramatic lack of research and writing on the specificities of the sex tape. It would be difficult to convincingly argue that the sex tape was a determining cause in Kardashian's fame, but

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<sup>19</sup> Biographical information on Kardashian is taken from her Wikipedia page: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim\\_Kardashian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Kardashian)

<sup>20</sup> According to recent reports, Bruce Jenner and Kris Jenner have separated (Takeda, 2013).

the timing of its release just before the launch of the hit reality series does not seem fully coincidental. Paris Hilton, another famous socialite and former friend of Kim Kardashian, was also the star of her own sex-tape scandal in 2003 shortly before the launch of her own reality television show – it would therefore seem that the sex tape has become a natural step in the launching of socialite reality television programs. On the other hand, it is possible that the sex tape has little cumulative effect in the fame-building process as there has likely been little reporting on sex tapes that did *not* lead to high levels of celebrity. Furthermore, already “established” celebrities have themselves been the subjects of sex-tape scandals, which seemingly had little effect on their overall careers (see, for instance, Pamela Anderson, Kendra Wilkinson, and Dustin Diamond<sup>21</sup>).

The idea that the sex-tape was responsible for Kardashian’s success underlies two major themes in her characterization by the media. Firstly, Kardashian is often presented as someone undeserving of fame (illegitimately famous) and, secondly as well as consequentially, she is presented as lacking any agency in her own celebrity. Her illegitimacy as a star is framed specifically in terms of a lack of action and talent – she doesn’t do anything, she is an idiot, she is the product of others’ actions be it her mother, her sisters, her boyfriends, or her producers. Furthermore, (and contrarily) Kardashian is also often framed in terms of a lack of authenticity – actively seeking out publicity for publicity’s sake either through faking a marriage, scheming her way into very public relationships and even orchestrating a pregnancy. She is denigrated for these two points by a media system which could (and has) easily praise(d) others who may not do all that

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<sup>21</sup> It is rumored that Diamond in fact directed and released his own sex tape in hope that it would re-launch his acting career which had stalled since the end of *Saved by the Bell* in the late 1990s (Pessolano, 2012).

much themselves or have a whole lot of quantifiable “talent” but are equally physically attractive (the aforementioned Pamela Anderson might be a good example here). Perhaps Kardashian is simply an example of letting go of the charade – no longer pretending that women are valued publicly for anything beyond how they look. Perhaps she has merely found a more efficient way of delivering the product to her audience, bypassing the more traditional (male-dominated) avenues to fame. In order to accept those scenarios, one would have to accept that Kardashian is, firstly, a willing and able agent in her own success and, secondly, as “authentically” talented as any other model, actor or producer in Hollywood who manages to succeed publicly. The media work to negate these two claims. This thesis will examine how.

In order to address this research question, sample articles about Kim Kardashian and Snooki were culled from mainstream online news sources in both Canada and the U.S. (CNN and *The National Post*) as well as online tabloids (TMZ and People.com). Articles appearing from January 1, 2012 to December 31, 2012 were used. In this instance, the importance of focusing on a range of mainstream news sources is crucial to this research project, as the aim is to understand how messages about female celebrities fit into larger power struggles of class and gender. As Deacon et al. point out in their discussion of news analysis, the news media help to build a notion of what is common sense in its readers by speaking “on behalf of their readership” (p. 180, see also Fairclough, 1988, pp. 132-3). The processes of cloaking “invisible assumptions and values” in the logic of populist common sense are also at work in the reporting on celebrities lives in each of the aforementioned types of discourse surrounding the

celebrity (individualism, authenticity and legitimacy). Such news sources as CNN and *The National Post* do report on celebrity culture, but frame it much differently than tabloid news whose sole purpose is to gather and report celebrity gossip. Traditional news outlets usually report on celebrity culture as a kind of “filler” afterthought, or in opinion pieces, both of which formats shape the audience’s own framing of these stories (see Turner, 2004, pp. 72-76). Simultaneously, these news sources will often use tabloid journals as a source for their entertainment stories. Tabloid news sources are often viewed as more harsh in their critique of celebrity, despite their heavy dependence upon the celebrity system. In recent years the tone of tabloids has been perceived to even further push the boundaries of this critical/dependent relationship, and it is upon female celebrities that this burden of representation most often falls. As noted by Negra and Holmes (2008), “[i]ncreasingly “bitchy” and malicious discourse is sanctioned by such sites [as gossip blogs] which essentially take pleasure in the surveillance – and thus policing - of the female celebrity body” (p. 12).

I therefore included two major tabloid news sources in my analysis along with two more “traditional” hard news sources – TMZ, *People*, CNN and *The National Post* (all online) – which allowed for larger cultural narratives to emerge. CNN is owned by American media conglomerate Time Warner (owner of Warner Bros., hundreds of television networks including HBO, numerous magazines, movie studios and other media) and was distinguished as the most visited American news site in 2011 (Joyella, 2011). I chose to also look at Canadian news – as this thesis was undertaken by a Canadian student at a university located in the Canadian capital – which encompassed

stories running in the *National Post* (online database) CanWest Global Communications (privately owned in Canada by Post Media and Shaw Media). Readers of the *National Post* are, on average, 51 years old, employed in white collar or senior management professions, married with children, with an average household income of \$93,246 and a personal income of \$65,583 (National Post Media Kit, 2011).

*People* magazine has gained a reputation as being one of the more reputable celebrity gossip magazines, as it often will land exclusive photos and interviews with celebrities (usually through a mutually beneficial arrangement, including large payouts to said celebrities).<sup>22</sup> The magazine is owned and published by Time Inc. (which is also under CNN parent company Time Warner) and has an average readership of 44 year-old, college-educated, working women with an average household income of \$68,630 (2013 Rate Card People, 2013). TMZ launched its website in 2005 (a television show by the same name debuted just a couple of years later) and differentiates itself by providing brash and sarcastic critiques of the celebrities and stories they are reporting (a sample headline on the site recently reads “Kim Kardashian: Newborn May WeeWee in Pree,” TMZ.com, 2013). In fact, managing editor Harvey Levin prides himself on not being “beholden to publicists” the way that other publications are (Freydkin, 2006). TMZ is also under the umbrella of Time Warner holdings but specifics on site traffic are difficult to locate, though online statistics database Alexa.com<sup>23</sup> provides the following data: “the site’s audience tends to be Caucasian; they are also disproportionately moderately

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, \$4.1 million payout for 2006 exclusive cover photos of Shiloh Jolie Pitt (Ortiz, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Alexa is an online database of statistics about websites including links, rankings and traffic information (see [www.alexacom/company](http://www.alexacom/company), 2013)

educated, childless women earning over \$60,000 who browse from home and work” ([www.alexacom.com](http://www.alexacom.com), 2013).

Using the above sources, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of news items about female celebrities, using a combination of analytical methods including linguistic, semiotic and frame analysis. As stated by Norman Fairclough (2003), textual analysis can provide a wide understanding of our relations to the media because texts perform three crucial functions: firstly, they “represent aspects of the world”; secondly, they “enact social relations between participants in social events and the attitudes, desires and values of participants”; thirdly, they “coherently and cohesively connect parts of text together and connect texts with their situational contexts” (p. 27). Analyzing news texts, in particular, are useful in delineating how the news “functions in the reproduction of ideologies and hence in the legitimation of power or the maintenance of (and resistance against) the status quo in the global information and communication order” (van Dijk, 1988, p. 19).

Critical linguistic analysis, as outlined by Deacon et al. (2007, pp. 170-186), encompasses the following: 1) identification of intertextual relations – for instance what kind of news story is it (is it a part of a larger gossip column, is it a story related to television programming, etc.), what is the relation between headline, subhead and the text, and what photos and captions are used; 2) analysis of thematic structure – what is the narrative theme of the text, who is quoted and how are those quotes used to frame those narratives; 3) analysis of the discourse schema – what are the sources used? Who is providing the “scoop” and what sorts of framing devices are used – (as noted by van

Dijk, “[t]he construction of news... is ‘most of all a reconstruction of available discourses’” (quoted in Deacon et al. p. 184); 4) finally, consideration of lexical choices – what about the use of language – particularly in these cases, derogatory or slang terms, sarcasm, emphasis, tone, attribution, etc.

As interesting as such questions are in relation to this piece, on their own they do not provide as deep of insight as a combination of approaches. There is often a temptation on the part of the researcher to draw overarching conclusions based upon the interpretations of one article in one news source. Deacon et al. point out that many times the opposite interpretation can be made of the same text and advocate the need for a multitude of articles to identify larger patterns: “[For] anything other than an impressionistic view of a news story’s relative conventionality as a discourse type is dependent on – at the very least – some basic proof of frequency” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 190). Once this fact is accepted and utilized cogently by the researcher, then many interesting provocative and productive hypotheses can be generated from such types of research (p. 189).

Subsequently this research methodology also entailed a thematic analysis of the broader issues in relation to my theoretical framework – authenticity, legitimacy (notions of work and talent), and containment (particularly sexual). Additionally, I used a combination of semiotic analysis and frame analysis, as outlined by Deacon et al. (2007) to enliven and enrich the discussions produced by my discourse analysis.

Arthur Asa Berger (2012) notes that the “essential breakthrough of semiotics is that it takes linguistics as a model and applies linguistic concepts to other phenomena – texts – and not just to language itself” (p.5). In other words, much in the way that

linguistic analysis can reveal underlying meanings in everyday language usage, semiotic analysis can reveal the underlying meanings in other communicative systems of relations – including pictures, concepts, genres and texts. In this thesis, semiotic analysis will be most useful when examining not only symbolic systems and relations (the use of, for instance, the word “slut”) but also the photographic images that accompany the articles and how those can add or detract their own meanings to what is being reported. Though most online news organizations draw from a fairly narrow bank of stock photos of celebrities, and thus often run similar if not identical photos on multiple stories, it is worth taking a closer look at what might be said about what sort of connotations some of these images inspire. I used the techniques outlined by Deacon et al. (2007, pp. 198-208), which include consideration of camera placement (in particular consideration here if the star is looking into the lens of the camera which is usually the case on red carpets, appearances, etc. versus the more paparazzi-style candid shots where the star is seen from a distance going about their day-to-day lives); composition of the shot (especially when more than one figure appears in the shot – who is bigger in relation to whom); color and lighting (which parts of the frame are well lit and which are darker, if any – nighttime paparazzi shots often involve sharp contrasts in color and lighting while red carpet photos are usually saturated with color, giving the event and the celebrity a much more glamorous appearance); and, lastly and perhaps most pertinently to this discussion is the notion of real images versus digitally manipulated ones – another sense in which authenticity becomes a concern. Photos where celebrities’ flaws are visible in the form of wrinkles, make-up malfunctions, cellulite, etc. are often considered to be more authentic

than photos used to sell beauty or fashion products. The fact that tabloid magazines are usually the ones to run the more ‘authentic’ and unflattering photos shapes our understanding of them, as do the ways the photos are framed by the accompanying captions or narratives which usually explicitly point out the flaws for the reader.

This point leads to another important aspect of the textual analysis conducted. Frame analysis was of most use to this particular thesis when considering what is being presented and what is being omitted from the story. Deacon et al. (2007) define two distinct but interrelated roles played by frames in the media:

In [our] conception a frame is a central organizing or structuring device that gives definitional shape to a particular issue. It does this through what it selects and omits, highlights and elaborates. Alternatively, a frame can be understood as the consequence that follows from the application of this conception within a media text. A frame can therefore be seen as either sense-making, or the sense already made of an issue, or both (p.161).

Deacon et al. advocate, thusly, for methodology that considers the importance not just of the “organizational devices of a text,” but also to examine “how frames define the ideological horizon in which social reality or some aspect of it is set, since we can only begin to understand this through analyzing the particular ways in which frames operate within specific media texts” (p.162). As will be further discussed in my analysis of the articles relating to Snooki, the frame of motherhood is one crucial way in which women’s identities are constructed publicly. By examining articles in relation to this framing (what is and is not appropriate behavior for a mother, for instance) we are able to discern some of the more prevalent narratives surrounding women and, subsequently, the prescriptive functions of the news media.

### 3.2 Detailed Method

As noted in the theoretical framework, this thesis is rooted in a structural feminist perspective. This perspective necessitates a qualitative approach to the research question, as one of the main goals of this thesis was to investigate the ideological and relativistic nature of such concepts as authenticity, work and talent. As such, I knew at the outset of designing my methodology that I would be conducting a qualitative, textual analysis of news discourse. I did not, however, know exactly what I would find or how I would find it – a common challenge for naturalist researchers that often necessitates an emergent research design.

Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) explain that emergent research design is a key tool in naturalistic inquiry because:

it is inconceivable that enough could be known ahead of time about the many multiple realities to devise the design adequately; because what emerges as a function of the interaction between inquirer and phenomenon is largely unpredictable in advance; because the inquirer cannot know sufficiently well the patterns of mutual shaping that are likely to exist; and because the various value systems involved (including the inquirer's own) interact in unpredictable ways to influence the outcome (p. 41).

This explanation will become crucial in understanding the way I gathered, analyzed and presented the data in the upcoming chapters. Because I have such a large corpus of data, sampling became one of the biggest challenges in conducting this research. Sampling, for the naturalist, serves a different purpose than it does for the positivist – the point is not to be able to generalize or to predict other outcomes. This thesis is concerned with how discourse frames our understanding of two of the “worst” female reality television stars today. I am not extending my conclusions here to the framing of other reality television

celebrities, nor other female celebrities in relation to issues of authenticity, legitimacy and containment. Furthermore, I would make no claim about the applicability of my results here to similar analyses conducted on these same two stars in 2013. My research was focused on these two specific stars at this specific time in a specific context.

However, I do believe I have offered an approach that could effectively be applied to other stars, at other times, in different contexts. The analytical approach, rooted in empirical data, will be duly outlined in detail so that such an analysis could occur, which further contributes to the trustworthiness and credibility of my research presented here (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 298 on the *transferable* nature of empirical evidence, thus lending to the trustworthiness of the research in question). My intent here, to reiterate, is not to produce generalizations and, as such, I follow Lincoln and Guba (1985)'s assertion that "sampling is not representative but contingent and serial – each element sampled depending on the characteristics of all the preceding elements, and no element being identified until its predecessor elements have been identified and, so far as possible, tapped" (p. 224). I will now describe exactly how this process unravelled in relation to my key theoretical concepts – authenticity, legitimacy and containment.

### **Snooki**

The first case study to follow will be that of *Jersey Shore* star Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi. In total, there were 231 articles returned in the search for "Snooki" across the four online news sources for 2012 – *National Post* (41), CNN (41), *People* (59), and TMZ.com (90). Of those, eight were not used because they had no mention of Snooki (most of those came up in the search because they included a hyperlink to another Snooki

article in the “related stories” section) while 39 were not analyzed because the main content was a photo gallery and/or video (i.e. CNN search results included many clips from CNN television programming), as the main concern of this thesis is to examine written news text<sup>24</sup>. Articles were then subdivided according to subject – those whose main subject was Snooki herself (or her within the context of one of her reality shows *Jersey Shore* or *Snooki and JWoww*);<sup>25</sup> those with one line or one sentence about Snooki (i.e. an article about another celebrity in which that star makes an offhanded comment about being “as pregnant as Snooki”); articles functioning as gossip columns including multiple short stories (usually two to three sentences) about different celebrities and/or entertainment news items.

Once articles were organized into these categories, out of sheer practicality I had to narrow my focus to articles whose main subject was Snooki, which totaled 136 articles<sup>26</sup>. I then searched for articles in relation to my themes discussed in Chapter 2 – “Virginity/Maternity” (which I now refer to as “Containment of Sexuality”) and “Containment/Agency” (which was used in reference to containment in public, including her body/behaviour, and textual containment). There were articles which fell into both categories and were thus copied into both (hence the total being higher than 136). The total number of articles categorized as “Containment/Agency” articles was 63 while the

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<sup>24</sup> Videos and photos were likely to contain clips from the television shows – necessarily taken out of context. As stated previously, I wanted to move away from the reality shows as texts themselves, into discourse and so chose to focus on written articles only.

<sup>25</sup> Articles were considered to be mainly about Snooki if they were not gossip columns (multiple stories on multiple stars) and if they fulfilled one or more of the following criteria: 1) Snooki mentioned in the headline; 2) Accompanying photo is of Snooki; 3) More than one line or sentence about Snooki herself.

<sup>26</sup> For a list of links to all articles discussed, see Appendix.

number of articles categorized as “Virginity/Maternity” articles was 103. After separating the articles into the two categories, I further organized them into sub-themes. There were seven sub-themes within the “Containment/Agency” category:

1. Containment of location – articles about spin off show;
2. Pregnancy - weight gain, engagement;
3. *Jersey Shore* – moving into her own house, reviews of the show;
4. Other business ventures;
5. Appearance/Clothing – going out wearing a bathing suit, lack of make-up;
6. New baby – the “change” of motherhood;
7. Miscellaneous (ex-boyfriend remarks about her pregnancy, tanning mom calls her disgusting, etc.).

Within the category of “Virginity/Maternity” the sub-themes were as follows:

1. Pregnancy rumours and confirmations;
2. Will Snooki be a good mother;
3. Pregnancy activities – practicing with dolls, wearing high heels, etc.;
4. Snooki ‘s changing relationship with the *Jersey Shore*;
5. Giving birth;
6. Life as a new (changed) mom;
7. Relationship with Jionni;
8. Sexual Snooki (pre-pregnancy; only TMZ).

After categorizing the articles as above, I started with a chronological analysis – which happened to coincide with the simplest of the sub-themes – sexuality. Articles dealing with Snooki’s sexuality were rare. News of Snooki’s pregnancy broke early on in 2012 and only TMZ discussed Snooki before that. Nine articles appeared in that time<sup>27</sup>; six were about Snooki shooting her Jersey Shore spin-off show with JWoww. After reading all of the articles, I analyzed three articles that centered on issues of sexuality and discussed two of the three – the ones that used derogatory language in reference to sexuality.

Therefore, one of the emergent criteria for analysis on this sub-theme was editorializing, which entails the use of derogatory or slang terminology as well as the use of sarcasm and/or font (italics, bold, capital letters) for emphasis. The fact that so little articles on Snooki’s (pre-pregnancy) sexuality appeared allowed for this criterion to be sufficient for inclusion in the initial analysis. However, when it came to other issues – particularly the pregnancy, I had to be more selective. Since such negative framing tools were quite rampant throughout all of the data (particularly TMZ’s use of editorializing with capital letters, which occurred in practically all articles) it remained a crucial but not sufficient criterion for analysis. Thus, I searched more thematically through the remainder of the data in regards to Snooki’s pregnancy.

After separating the articles according to sub-themes, as noted above, it seemed logical to approach the topic chronologically to follow through from pregnancy rumours,

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<sup>27</sup> Later in the year (June of 2012, well into the pregnancy) two articles appeared on TMZ discussing leaked nude photos of Snooki. These were analyzed, but not discussed, as Snooki herself said nothing about them (aside from a rep confirming their authenticity) and TMZ’s staff presented the issue as fairly benign in comparison to the sexual behaviour exhibited on the show.

confirmations, baby-bumps, preparation for motherhood, and finally, birth of the child and life as a new mother. When examining articles on pregnancy – as with all the major topics of this discussion as well as that with Kim – I did generally give preference to stories that were picked up by all, or more than one, news sources. This would seem to support the idea that newsworthiness, based on recurrence, was a second criterion for sampling. However, to gain a broader understanding of how certain issues are prioritized over others, it was also necessary to look at instances of under-reporting, so this was not a hard and fast rule in my analysis.

At that point I had to make choices as to what was relevant to the discussion and what was not. One such choice was made to discuss the articles that framed the pregnancy in relation to my themes of authenticity and legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> As the remainder of the pregnancy unfolded, I selected the most relevant issues, and omitted articles that contained similar themes (for instance, articles where other ‘Jersey Shore’ cast-mates talk about how great a mother Snooki would be, thus underlying the transformation discourse to be discussed); and other articles that were peripheral and/or generic articles following pregnancy (discussed the impending preparations like baby showers or the announcement of the child’s gender). In total, 77 articles ran across the four news sources in 2012 dealing with Snooki’s pregnancy (pre, during, and post) and I discussed 21 in detail.

Additionally, there were repetitive stories along the same theme, so at times I analyzed one as an example (for instance, of the 10 articles about Snooki giving birth, I talked

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, all four news sources reported on the initial reports of pregnancy but in the discussion only the story from CNN was omitted from the final discussion, as it contained no editorializing and employed no frames suggesting that either Snooki was lying or that she shouldn’t be a mother (as subtle as those frames are in the other articles).

about three). Similar pieces that offered no unique angle (or frame) were not included. I found that a majority of the articles fell in line to support the larger narratives that I discovered, and did employ the frames of legitimacy and authenticity but had to select for practical reasons of space and time. Additionally as Snooki's narrative of transformation (see upcoming chapter) became clear, I chose to analyze articles that most related to it. This necessitated a focus on the change/stay-the-same dichotomy (Jersey Shore, style, relationships) presented throughout the pregnancy.

Lastly, as the narrative surrounding Snooki became clear, I realized that my categories of "Containment" versus "Virginity/Maternity" issues were inadequate, as Snooki's sexuality was often spoken of in terms of containment (or loose-ness, out-of-control). This led me to delineate my three major categories of containment – 1) sexual; 2) physical (behaviour and appearance); 3) textual. That left me with a new approach to my former "Containment" category for Snooki with a focus on only two of the sub-themes listed above: containment of her reality television text and containment in terms of business ventures outside of reality television – both of which can be conceived of as textual containment.

For that discussion I had to be selective. In terms of articles about Snooki's spin-off show, I discussed one article in depth, out of 15 articles, as it provided the most complete coverage including interviews with both Snooki and her co-star JWoww. It was also the article that had the most editorializing on the subject, despite the fact that it was from one of the more "traditional" hard news sources – *National Post*. Again, the majority of those 15 articles (10) were about shooting headaches (the mayor of Hoboken,

for instance, denied MTV a shooting permit so they had to re-locate) and were thus repetitive. In terms of business ventures I chose to discuss three articles from a total of five. Again, I looked for articles that dealt with ideals of authenticity and legitimacy, and the articles about Snooki's business ventures could arguably be used to either support her legitimacy as a celebrity, or undermine it. I tried to illustrate how, despite the report existing – which does support her legitimacy – more subtle cues are employed to undermine that legitimacy but these are complex issues that could have been further explored. Overall, my discussion includes 29 out of the 136 articles that were mainly about Snooki in 2012.

### **Kim Kardashian**

Though Snooki's pregnancy and childbirth kept her relatively newsworthy in 2012, Kim Kardashian was far more discussed on all four of the news websites that year. The search term "Kim Kardashian" generated results of 584 articles (compared to 231 for Snooki) which broke down as follows; 97 *National Post* articles, 79 CNN articles, 106 articles for *People* online and 302 for TMZ. In all, 31 articles were omitted for lack of relation to Kim Kardashian while 125 were not analyzed because they were mainly video clips or photo galleries. Additionally, in order to narrow down my corpus I did not analyze articles with one-liner references to Kim Kardashian (74 articles) or gossip pieces with stories on several celebrities (53). That left a total of 301 articles whose main subject was Kim or one of her family members.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> As in the Snooki analysis, articles were considered to be mainly about Kim or family if she or another Kardashian is mentioned in the headline, if the accompanying photo is of her or if there is more than one sentence about her.

The 301 remaining articles covered everything from Kim’s sister’s paternity scandal<sup>30</sup> to Kim’s well-meaning, if not highly informed, Twitter remarks on peace in the Middle East<sup>31</sup>. Again, for practical purposes, the corpus had to be narrowed, despite the risk of missing other important angles of the Kardashian public narrative (i.e. the ongoing feud between her and former best friend and fellow socialite Paris Hilton – another sex-tape star turned reality star turned fashion/business mogul). As previously highlighted, this thesis seeks to examine ways in which these new types of female celebrities (reality television stars) are framed as illegitimate and inauthentic members of the public sphere. My previous hypothesis was that Kardashian, unlike Snooki, is often framed as being inauthentic (calculating and manipulative) and illegitimately famous despite fitting some very traditional standards of beauty and sexuality. In fact, it is this notion of inauthenticity that is often used to discount or undermine her sex appeal – a basis upon which many female stars in the past have more “legitimately” become famous. Additionally, and contrarily, I hypothesized that Kardashian is often framed in ways that strip her of agency in her own fame. This goes against her framing as inauthentic because it denies her own complicity and calculation in the fame game. It will therefore be most crucial to examine news articles that deal with both of these issues.

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<sup>30</sup> In early 2012 Kim’s sister Khloe was at the center of a paternity scandal when two of her late father’s (Robert Kardashian) ex-wives claimed that he was not her biological father (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian – Robert is DEFINITELY Khloe’s Biological Dad”).

<sup>31</sup> In late 2012 Kardashian found herself in hot water after tweeting “Praying for everyone in Isreal.” A short while later she tweeted “Praying for everyone in Palestine and across the world!” The two posts were shortly thereafter deleted and Kardashian issued the following apology:

I want to own up to and explain that earlier today I sent out two tweets about saying prayers for the people in Palestine and Israel and after hearing from my followers, I decided to take down the tweets because I realized that some people were offended and hurt by what I said, and for that I apologize (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian – I’M SORRY for Isreali-Palestine tweets,” para. 5).

I therefore began with removing articles that were found to be more about one of Kim's family members than her (for instance, an article about Kim taking a trip to visit sister Khloe and her husband<sup>32</sup> fit the criteria of "mainly about Kim" – she is mentioned in the headline, photo is of her and Khloe and the article contains more than one line about Kim) or articles that were about Kris Humphries (several articles ran about whom he would be subpoenaing during the divorce proceedings; his new girlfriend's comments about Kim, etc.). That excluded approximately 30 articles from my corpus of data, leaving me with approximately 270 articles which I then sub-divided much in the same way as I did with my Snooki articles. However, for Kim, as there were more articles, I divided into four categories: Divorce (26 articles); Sex and Love (101); Authenticity (48); Containment (82). Again, several of the articles overlapped and were doubly or even triply categorized if they in some way applied to these themes.

Within these categories, I subdivided further according to sub-themes, except for the "divorce" category, which contained only 26 articles (of which I discussed eight). The second major category was "Sex and love," which had five sub themes as follows:

1. Single Kim;
2. Appearances (bikini shots, sexy outfits, etc.);
3. Relationship with Kanye;
4. Sex tape;
5. Pregnancy.

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<sup>32</sup> TMZ Staff, 2012, "Kim Kardashian—I'm Flying to Texas to Save Khloe"

The third major theme I sub-categorized was “Authenticity” (48 articles) which broke down as follows:

1. Marriage and divorce;
2. Relationship with Kanye;
3. Endorsements and businesses – lawsuits;
4. Appearance;
5. Miscellaneous (for instance, an interview with Oprah, articles discussing the nature of her fame, her high-paying salary and Britney Spears’ remarks about not being like her).

The fourth major category was “Containment” (82 articles) which was harder to sub-categorize and so was done more along various narratives rather than themes:

1. Comments from other stars;
2. Politics;
3. Appearance;
4. Flour-bombing;
5. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*;
6. White House Correspondents’ Dinner;
7. Famous friends;
8. Business ventures/lawsuits;
9. Acting and Fame (most-searched stars, Walk of Fame, public appearances).

I did analyze all of the articles, but only had room to discuss a select few (earlier drafts would demonstrate a higher number of articles discussed but were removed for lack of contribution to the thesis). Furthermore, as my sub-themes emerged and became clear, notions of containment and authenticity were seen to re-appear in the major narratives surrounding Kim's sex, love and marriage (and divorce) life and thus did not warrant their own, separate treatment but were analyzed in relation to the themes of containment demarcated earlier (sexual, physical, textual).

Once again, I started chronologically with the first major topic of the year being Kim's divorce. Out of the 26 articles examined, only a handful contained quotes from Kim herself regarding the marriage. I chose to focus on those, as those were the articles most likely to be carried across the different news sources (filling the aforementioned criteria of newsworthiness). TMZ was the most likely to run items at varying stages on the minutiae of the divorce – I referenced a couple of instances where TMZ denigrated Humphries (as media and money hungry jilted husband) which were representative of their tone throughout all of the reporting, but again, did not analyze those pieces in-depth as they were quite repetitive.

I then moved onto articles discussing the developing romance with Kanye West. As news of the relationship broke, it was carried in all news sources (newsworthy) and I was struck by the choice of all four news sources to reference Kanye's lyrics about his affections for Kim, and so focused on those items in regards to this topic. That left 16 other items about the blossoming romance – including Humphries reaction as well as that of various members of the Kardashian family and several fairly benign (straightforward,

little editorializing) and repetitive reports on early public appearances by one or both stars. I chose to discuss items that directly related the relationship to the reality show (whether or not Kanye would appear). Articles discussing the sex tape were analyzed for positive or negative framing. In total seven articles appeared dealing with the sex tape. I analyzed all, but only included four in my discussion as several were directly related to the same issue (two TMZ stories on Kris Humphries' allegations that Kris Jenner produced the sex tape, four were about Kanye liking the sex tape – the final one was about there NOT being a second sex tape which seemed irrelevant to me<sup>33</sup>). Out of the 101 articles categorized as “sex and love,” I discussed 14.

The articles dealing with Kim's appearance were numerous. I tried to give as accurate a representation of the numerous TMZ and People articles about her appearance – two sample headlines are mentioned out of 17 in total. For my discussion, I focused on articles that presented a unique angle (as none of these items fit the criteria of newsworthiness - no crossover reports) for instance, Kim's remarks on going “au natural.” Most of the 17 articles did contain editorializing – either in a supportive way “damn! Look at those curves!” or a negative way “this is why you shouldn't wear leather leggings” – neither of which I found to contribute to this thesis enough to warrant their own analysis.

The articles on containment posed the greatest challenge in terms of analysis. Overall, I found 82 articles relating to issues of containment (physical and textual) but I had to pick and choose which stories best related to this topic. I chose to focus on three

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<sup>33</sup> TMZ Staff, 2012, “Kim Kardashian Sex Tape Company – There is NO Second Tape!”

issues – the Jon Hamm comments (about which there were nine articles – I discussed five); Kim’s attempts to foray into the acting world (four of 13 discussed) and finally, reporting on her business ventures (one of five discussed). This necessarily excluded relevant sub-plots such as the flour bombing, her invitation to the White House Correspondents’ dinner, and interestingly her friendships with other stars, all of which could be more developed in further research.

Overall, I followed an emergent design – as relevant narratives surrounding female sexuality and/or motherhood emerged, my sampling and analysis shifted to address these issues. At times, they did not fit in with the previously presented hypotheses, and I did include these instances in my discussion. Furthermore, one of the main purposes of this thesis was to offer an alternate reading of the public discourses surrounding these women, and I therefore did focus on aberrations and exceptions rather than representative norms. The data presented here, though arguable and indefinite, is meant to be taken as one researcher’s interpretation, but can still be held to objective standards of credibility and reliability. The research method discussed here can be taken and applied to other female celebrities. It is therefore reproducible (to the extent that such a qualitative analysis can be reproduced). I also, once again following Lincoln and Guba (1985) acknowledge that there are other readings of my data, but have filled many of their outlined criteria for trustworthy research (pp. 301-307) including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation (of sources and methods), external evaluation, referential adequacy, and transferability. As Lincoln and Guba point out, “naturalistic inquiry operates as an *open* system; no amount of member checking,

triangulation, persistent observation, auditing, or whatever can ever compel; it can at best *persuade*” (p. 329). On that note, I will now present my first case study and openly illustrate how discourses of talent, work and authenticity are employed to influence our understanding of the role of motherhood in shaping the identities and behaviours of out-of-control young women.

## Chapter 4: Snooki

### 4.1 Introduction

#### *Jersey Shore*

The first case study to be examined here will be that of *Jersey Shore* star Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi. As was noted in the methodology section, several specific themes emerged in the news discourse on Snooki in 2012. Firstly, there was reporting on her sexuality before news of her pregnancy broke. Secondly, the narrative of pregnancy (and transformation) emerged and shaped most of the discussion on her in 2012. Finally, I examined articles dealing with textual containment – either articles about how bad her shows are (including her spin-off with *Jersey Shore* co-star JWoww) or articles that dealt with ventures beyond the reality television text. I will shortly present each of these analyses in turn. However, when discussing issues surrounding Snooki’s sexuality, pregnancy and reality show containment, it will be worthwhile to provide a bit of background from the program that propelled her to stardom. Snooki was one of the few “breakout” cast members of *Jersey Shore*. She quickly became the most recognizable figure from the show, popping up on red carpets and coming to symbolize all of the excesses for which the show was infamous. *Jersey Shore* is an MTV reality program that follows eight “Italian-American” (some, including Snooki, are Italian by adoption) young adults as they partake in various forms of debauchery – drinking heavily, fighting, partying, clubbing, hooking up, cooking and eating (Italian food), and “GTL”ing (for the uninitiated that is gym, tan, laundry – the group’s favourite way to spend a lazy Sunday afternoon). Snooki, for her part, spent most of the show being single and “on the prowl.”

She had a voracious appetite for alcohol – to the point of getting arrested for public intoxication in one episode – which was nearly matched by her appetite for men (she and the others use the term “smushing” to describe sex).

In fact, sex was one of the main themes of the show for all the participants/characters. The men on the show (who coined themselves MVP – Mike, Vinny, Pauly D) would work as a team to “score chicks” and bring them back to the house to “smush” – some attempts being more successful than others. But it was the girls – Snooki and Deena particularly – whose failed efforts at hooking up often became a punch-line both within the house and for the audience. From the outset Snooki would often talk about how “horny” she was in her confessionals<sup>34</sup> and how she just wanted both to get “smushed,” and to find a good “juicehead” to settle down with – never excluding the possibility that one man could serve both these desires.

The fact that she was often unsuccessful and highly intoxicated in these endeavors to find and keep men lent an authenticity to her that was not often called into question, an unusual case with reality television stars, many of whom are often publicly called upon to affirm the authenticity of their performances on the programs as well as the programs themselves. In the debate surrounding Snooki the focus was more on her display of (a lack of) values and morals, though Snooki was never apologetic. She valued her authenticity over all else: “I will never care what anybody thinks of me,” she says.

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<sup>34</sup> For an interesting discussion on the functioning of confessionals in reality programming, see Aslama & Pantti, 2006. A confessional in reality television programming is when one participant is interviewed alone and reflects upon the show and/or their own experiences on the show. Often the person conducting the interview is neither seen nor heard, and sometimes there is no one conducting the interview at all, so that the monologue appears to naturally capture their thoughts and feelings.

“I’m not living in the world to try and please everyone and I’m just basically myself and if you don’t like me get out of my way” (quoted in Dekel, 2012, “Jersey Shore’s Snooki & JWOWW are taking over with spinoff series on MTV,” para. 21). Snooki prided herself on being the same drunk and sober (she rarely lamented actions or statements made when drunk), which for her signified a consistent performance of her true self. This claim toward an unchanging authentic Snooki is a recurring theme throughout the articles reporting on her – it is often Snooki’s way of framing herself in relation to the negative statements about her and the news media rarely called this into question.

### **Snooki’s Audience**

To reiterate, one of the key epistemological positions of this research is that there is no such thing as “legitimate” versus illegitimate fame. Again, the feminist structuralist perspective taken here is that the system is geared to favour certain groups of people while others become marked. The fact that members of these marked groups are able to succeed publicly (fame, fortune or both) is an exception, not a rule to the capitalist system. Accordingly, the value placed upon hard work and talent in the system of fame in America is a fallacy perpetuated by discourses in the media which frame success as a direct result of these two personal attributes (without the necessity of having to define them, see Holmes, 2010). The emergence of reality television and, subsequently, the entrance of reality television stars into the celebrity system (around the world, but here we are focusing on North American celebrities) has posed a significant challenge to such discourses. The media often is called upon to reinforce traditional frames of success and fame and often use negative framing of reality television stars to accomplish this task.

Those negative frames are often, more specifically, frames of authenticity (or inauthenticity) and legitimacy (or illegitimacy), both of which neglect one key aspect of the entire media system and, more specifically, the celebrity system – the audience.<sup>35</sup> As stated in the previous chapter, few theorists have thus far dared to venture into this terrain as Gamson (1994) did with his audience studies. A critical finding of his work was that audiences approach notions of authenticity and legitimacy in complex and multifaceted ways. It is important to note here as well that not only does Snooki have a complex and multifaceted audience, but so too do each of the news sources studied – TMZ, CNN, People and the *National Post*. Readers who peruse the entertainment section of the more news-based *National Post* are less likely to be interested in celebrity gossip (see Gamson’s game-player gossiper audience category discussed in Chapter 2) than those who regularly log onto TMZ or People.com. Reporters for each of the news sources must, to some extent, have this idea in mind, which would explain some of the more sympathetic coverage given to reality starlets on the more gossip-oriented news sites. Additionally, the idea of several audience categories that do *not* concern themselves with questions of authenticity can be extended to include an audience that does *not* concern themselves with questions legitimacy – of *why* someone is famous. Furthermore it would not be unreasonable to expect that an audience disinterested with the causal view of fame is likely to share many similarities with reality television audiences.

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that the frames of authenticity and legitimacy are not mutually exclusive and distinct categories, but are complex and intertwining concepts that I am employing as separate conceptual frames here for the purposes of discussion and analysis.

Again, the purpose of this thesis is to examine more specifically how these various techniques of framing female celebrities in news media today extend above and beyond the reality television texts and audiences to build larger cultural narratives about famous women. As was stated in the previous Chapter, my first hypothesis was that Snooki's claims to authenticity would not often be questioned by the news media, which turned out to be verified. This, I conclude, has much to do with the fact that Snooki's displays are often considered too grotesque and sexual (in an unattractive way) to be calculated publicity moves, and, consequently provide her with extremely limited power as a public figure. My second hypothesis was that, relatedly, Snooki would be framed as being an illegitimate member of the public sphere – an out-of-control presence on the loose (both physically in the world and intertextually in the media). Again, this framing was found to occur often in the articles about Snooki – particularly those dealing with her sexuality and her ventures beyond the reality television text. What was more surprising in the findings, however, was how the two frames often intersected in the narrative of Snooki's pregnancy and early days of motherhood.

A vast majority of the articles on Snooki in 2012 dealt with the key transformation in Snooki's life from a dangerous single woman into proper mother. They called upon authenticity frames to highlight this transformation in prescriptive ways, using Snooki as the penultimate example of a tamed woman. I will be subsequently examining in more detail three key steps transformation narrative: 1) pregnancy rumors and confirmations; 2) pregnancy as maturity (how Snooki is preparing to be a mother and the implicit threat that somehow Snooki will NOT be changed by motherhood); 3) the

birth of her son and her life as a new (changed) mom. Interestingly, the prescriptive tale of her journey into motherhood became a more important focus than questions of her legitimacy (which will be seen to arise much more in the case of Kim Kardashian). Before the pregnancy narrative came along, however, Snooki was still presented as a threat – most commonly in terms of sexuality. I will first look briefly at these issues before turning my attention to her transformation into motherhood. Finally, I will examine some of the other ways the threat of Snooki was able to be contained by the media in 2012.

#### 4.2 Sexual Snooki

The pregnancy rumours began to circle around Snooki toward the end of February 2012. Prior to that, there is little-to-no mention of her in either of the more “hard news” sources (*National Post* or CNN), nor in *People*. However, TMZ had several pre-pregnancy stories on Snooki, two of which contain colourful commentary on her sexuality. The first is a story of an ongoing feud between Snooki and one of the more peripheral male cast members of *Jersey Shore*, The Unit. In the article *The Unit* says: “The thing with me and Snooki ... she can't seem to take my name out of her mouth ... but that's Snooki for you, she's always got something in her mouth.” (TMZ.com, 2012 “Jersey Shore’ *The Unit* – I’m NOT DONE ripping on Snooki,” para. 3). This not-so-subtle innuendo suggests that Snooki is “always” performing oral sex on men. Surprisingly, the writers of the article come somewhat to her defense, calling *The Unit* a “dbag” (douchebag – a common derogatory term that also carries associations to the dirtiness of female sexuality). However, the headline on the article, written in much

larger font on top of the embedded video of the incident, does little to defend Snooki. It reads: “The Unit ROASTS Snooki – She’s Kind of a Slut.” This does seem to be TMZ’s choice of word, as it does not appear in any of the direct quote used by The Unit.

The word “slut” has a complex and multifaceted history that is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, for my purposes here, I would like to point out two elements of its connotations that are particularly applicable to Snooki, and are often used to denigrate her publicly: first off, “slut” implies (much) sexual activity on the part of a woman and therefore impurity. It has no equivalent for men – words used to describe sexually active men have positive or powerful connotations – i.e. “player” or “pimp.” In some cases, when needed to apply similarly to men the qualifying adjective is used – i.e. “male slut.” Secondly, the term “slut” applied to women suggests agency on her part. A woman *chooses* to be a slut; she *acts* like a slut. She is never *made* a slut (for an interesting and related discussion of the power dynamics underlying this word, see Attwood, 2007; Lim & Fanghanel, 2013). The fact that Snooki is female sets her up to a different standard of public judgment than her male co-stars – particularly when it comes to sexual behaviour. She is not a player – she is a “slut.” And the fact that she actively seeks out (by literally *going out*) sexual encounters with men makes her sexuality all the more dangerous and in need of containment.

The second article mentioning Snooki’s sexuality deals with news of her spin-off with *Jersey Shore* co-star JWoww. TMZ reporter Johnny Lopez describes the apartment that will be used by Snooki and JWoww as they film their show – a converted fire hall.

The headline reads: “Snooki and Jwoww’s<sup>36</sup> New Crib – House Full of Hose!” (Lopez, 2012). He refers to the place as their “new smush pad” in the body of the article and includes the following description: “the 150-year-old firehouse comes with [...] bedrooms with doors labeled ~~skank~~ Office of the Battalion Chief and ~~grenade~~ Captain” (“grenade” is a word used on *Jersey Shore* to describe an unattractive woman). The use of the word “hose” in the headline can be read as a double-entendre, especially when the author goes on to describe the apartment as a “smush pad.” (An unlikely equivalent scenario might be if Vinny and Pauly D from *Jersey Shore* were to move into a converted cat shelter and the headline read “Palace Full of Pussy!”) Additionally, the use of the word “grenade,” though derogatory within the confines of the *Jersey Shore* text, is fairly innocuous for someone having little to no familiarity with the show. “Skank,” on the other hand, is a word used to denigrate women, not in the same way that “slut” is, which does imply active sexual agency on the part of the woman – but instead usually connotes appearances only. A “skank” is, as articulated by Urban Dictionary, a “[d]erogatory term for a (usually younger) female, implying trashiness or tackiness, lower-class status, poor hygiene, flakiness, and a scrawny, pockmarked sort of ugliness. May also imply promiscuity, but not necessarily” (“Greenie,” Urban Dictionary, 2003).

Lopez does not specify which of the girls is which (is Snooki the skank or the grenade?) but the implications are clear: these two slutty women are going to have sex in this apartment and that is gross because they are unattractive and skanky, and are

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that Jennifer “JWoww” Farley usually either capitalizes the first “w” in her alias or capitalizes all the letters (as in “JWOWW”), neither of which usages are applied by TMZ when reporting on her (“Jwoww”). CNN, People and the *National Post* all follow JWoww’s usage.

therefore undesirable. Yet that message of undesirable sexuality on the loose is troubling. So there is one more jab to be had at Snooki: “And while the place may not have a hot tub, it does come with an authentic fire pole ... perfect for keeping a wasted Snooki busy for hours” (Lopez, 2012, para. 4). It is important to note that this thesis is not interested in defending Snooki. Her public persona as performed and displayed on her reality show encapsulates a woman who is often drunk and that intoxication often leads her to behave in more overtly sexual ways (and who can really know or state the reasons behind this – it may be pure idiocy just as soon as it could be her way of reconciling urges that are not proper or right for ‘sober’ women to have/explore). That this is the last sentence of the piece is interesting within this context as it provides a resolution for the reader – a method of containment for Snooki’s out-of-control (drunken) sexuality. The perceived threat is curbed by that final mental image of a drunken Snooki gyrating on a pole in her own little space.

This does lead to one of the first common critiques of Snooki which, as will be seen, resurfaces in other news media – that she has become famous not only for drunken antics, but for revealing very basic and crass body parts and bodily functions (she would often talk about her bladder functions and/or force MTV producers to blur out exposed body parts). However, as easily as it could be said that Snooki has obliterated the bounds of decency and that people like her are a key factor driving our societal tendency to overshare, it could also be argued that women have never before been allowed to talk about their bodily functions in the way that Snooki does. Again, this thesis is not interested in defending or persecuting Snooki for her lack of decency, but rather, how her actions are

reported on in ways that shape our understanding of what is and is not decent for women. Certainly the image of gyrating against a pole is not what most would consider decent behaviour for a woman, let alone a mother, which ties into my next section. The main theme across the next line of reporting on Snooki was the implied worry that motherhood would, in fact, *not* change Snooki – that through it all she might still be drunkenly dancing on a stripper pole.

### 4.3 Pregnant Snooki

#### Is Snooki Pregnant?

At the beginning of 2012, Snooki and JWoww were doing media to promote their new spin-off reality show when one radio interviewer asked Snooki about the pregnancy rumors circling her at the time. The story was picked up by both the *National Post* and TMZ – though the former was more clear to assert that Snooki was joking when taking offence at the question: “Does that mean they’re calling me fat?” Snooki joked on the radio show *Opie & Anthony*, on which she was appearing alongside Jersey Shore co-star Jwoww” (Nationalpost.com, 2012 “Snooki is pregnant according to Star magazine,” para. 2). The TMZ report employs similar frames: “Sources close to the MTV star tell us ... Snooks WAS already pregnant when she went on Sirius/XM radio on Feb. 1st and told everyone she was OUTRAGED by the suggestion that she had preggo belly” (TMZ.com, 2012, “Pregnant Snooki – Why I lied about my Pregnancy in 2012,” para. 2). Though the word “outraged” is capitalized which could suggest either emphasis or sarcasm, the next sentence suggests that TMZ also concluded that Snooki was joking: “But we’re told Snooki is taking the situation very seriously ... especially the taboo about revealing the

pregnancy before the 3rd month.” Both publications, therefore, frame Snooki positively here, as consciously making a joke which both plays upon her persona as a superficial dummy and mocks the larger societal taboos surrounding overweight women and mistaken baby bumps.

In fact, intense baby bump scrutiny is a major trope surrounding women in the media today (see Gow et al., 2012 on pregnancy speculation as a function of weight or shape; Ryan, 2007), with tabloids often running swollen belly photographs, many of which later turn out to be false alarms. A baby-bump is clear, undeniable visual proof of gestation. It can confirm a rumour and can serve as precious visual evidence. In Snooki’s case, as is often the case for female celebrities, the media follow her bump through both stages. People was the only news source to run a speculative piece in early March, showing Snooki (Figure 4.1, below) carrying a large handbag near her stomach (in a fairly banal way, seeing as most handbags are held on the arm in a similar manner).



*Figure 4.1*

Her choice of a loose-fitting top was perceived to be out-of-character “from her usual body-hugging fashion” and a sure sign of germination. (Lehner, 2012). Though at the surface this seems like a fairly straightforward description of Snooki’s style (she does often appear in public in tight-fitting clothes) there is a clear association in general between women wearing tight-fitting clothes and promiscuity (not necessarily a correlation, to be sure) – an association made clear in the use of other frames such as those applied to Snooki in the TMZ stories discussed above (“slut,” “skank” “pole-dancer”). Her choice of clothing fits into a larger frame which paints her as someone who tries *too hard* to be sexy and is therefore not authentically sexy (this idea will be explored further in the upcoming section on her relationship with Jionni). The fact that Snooki does not fit the traditional mould of what is considered to be an ideal weight (by

Hollywood standards, Snooki was overweight, she has since changed dramatically) gives her choice of tight clothing an additional element of transgression. The commentary in this particular article may seem harmless, but when examined within the context of the larger narratives surrounding Snooki and her sexuality it does seem to help position her as illegitimately famous (in opposition to people who are naturally talented and/or do not have to try so hard to be sexy).

### **Is Pregnant Snooki Still Snooki?**

[The movie or television star] is paid to put on that mask and be that ‘actor.’ ... the newbie talent show winner and reality TV contestant has had no time to deliver such a persona or distance between themselves and how they might be understood. They must be what they have always seemed to be (Palmer, 2005, p. 43).

When a woman becomes famous for being herself, but that self does not fall into what society has deemed an appropriate fit for other roles (i.e. wife and mother), the reality TV starlet will have to negotiate a difficult transformation paradox. If she wishes to maintain her fame, as indicated in the quote from Palmer above about these new types of stars, she will have to retain a large sense of what she was famous for. If she wishes to be accepted in the new roles (such as that of wife and mother, which is different than roles in other media – those will be discussed in the upcoming section on containment), it will be necessary to demonstrate some sort of change. It is interesting to see how, exactly, Snooki navigated this change calling upon discourses of an authentic self; a gendered one at that – a woman underneath the girl, ready and waiting to be called upon as mother. In general, the media supported this framing, which seems to serve a larger cultural narrative about the possible domestication of wild, out-of-control women. The fact that

questions of legitimacy fell to the wayside demonstrates just how much more important that transformation narrative is.

The paradox of this transformation is, in my view, what makes this framing unique to Snooki and other stars of her ilk. As discussed by Negra and Holmes (2008), female stars' pregnancies often are figured as "redemptive" in that being a "Mom" is championed as being of more value to these women than their (legitimate) public careers: "motherhood can become a site upon which the female celebrity can make a claim to 'ordinariness' and 'realness,' while simultaneously appearing to distance herself from the apparently more 'shallow' trappings of 'image' and fame" (p. 10) For reality television stars like Snooki, however, motherhood is not seen as bringing her back down to earth, as she is already "beneath us" so-to-speak. Instead the redemption of motherhood must be framed in terms of an authentic self, one that is still recognizable to the public eye if Snooki wishes to remain recognized by it herself. This led Snooki to hold onto claims of "always being herself" while simultaneously propagating the cultural narrative of transformation that motherhood requires.

This "unchanged-transformation," as I will call it, is demonstrated in three of the "storylines" surrounding Snooki's pregnancy: firstly, Snooki's continued participation in reality television programming (particularly the filming of her breakthrough series *Jersey Shore*) but now in a different capacity; secondly, her sartorial choices – most notably her continuing to wear towering platform high heels despite the realized danger of stumbling while navigating the Jersey terrain; thirdly, her engagement to the father of her unborn

child, Jionni Lavallo. I will now examine each of these issues in turn to see how they employ authenticity and legitimacy frames.

**Reality television Snooki.** Snooki's pregnancy was first revealed as she filmed the inaugural season of her spin off show with JWOWW in early 2012. Speculation began as to whether or not Snooki would return to film with the rest of the *Jersey Shore* cast for Season 6 that summer, considering both that at that time she would be at least in her late second trimester as well as the fact that the show was mostly known for Snooki's drunken antics. This then leads to two interesting dimensions to the discussions surrounding Snooki's place in the public sphere: firstly, what, exactly, is considered "working" for a (pregnant) reality star and, secondly, if Snooki is not acting drunk and wild, is she still Snooki – and, consequently but of less interest to this project, is *Jersey Shore* still *Jersey Shore*? I will now turn my attention to the articles discussing these issues to see how those inform the larger framing surrounding Snooki.

After confirming the pregnancy Snooki first got back to work on her spin-off show, though the reporting of this fact in *People* is fairly ambiguous when describing what this "work" is: "[Snooki] got back to work and was photographed filming a scene for her *Jersey Shore* spinoff show in Jersey City, N.J., on Wednesday night – all dolled up in feline fashions including leopard-print tights and a black tiger T-shirt" (*People.com*, 2012, "Snooki Pregnant & Filming New Reality Show: Pictures"). This description seems to indicate that Snooki's work is selecting and wearing clothes. Shortly after this item appeared an odd filming incident was picked up by both *People* and *TMZ* – Snooki

and JWoww were caught walking around town carrying baby dolls. People magazine attempts to give some context to the story, though very limited: “Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi appears to be practicing for her baby's arrival by borrowing a page from Home Economics 101” (People.com, 2012, “Snooki Pregnant; Carries Around a Baby Doll: Pictures” para. 2). The accompanying photo (Figure 4.2 below) is fairly absurd – Snooki is seen with a focused expression as she pushes a baby stroller down the sidewalk containing what is very obviously a doll. She is wearing an exaggerated pink flower/hat contraption and bright pink animal print platform booties.



*Figure 4.2*

TMZ describes the same situation thusly: “Only one of them is really pregnant at the moment, but Snooki and Jwoww both got practice being moms as they were spotted holding fake babies while filming their new ‘reality’ TV show in Jersey City on

Thursday” (Lopez, 2012, “Snooki & Jwoww – Fake Babies for Fake Reality Show,” para. 1). The story again provides little detail and almost no context. Both news sources identify the dolls as “practice” for Mom-to-be Snooki, but only People attempts to contextualize this, pointing to similar “practice” exercises in high school. TMZ, on the other hand, does not contextualize this way. This choice to present situations so out of context<sup>37</sup> affects readers’ ideas of what it is, exactly, that these women are doing (or not doing) – how can carrying a doll around be work? Furthermore, the use of quotation marks on the word ‘reality’ delegitimizes its use here. The accompanying headline reads: “Snooki & Jwoww – Fake Babies for Fake Reality Show” which undermines both the claim to authenticity behind the reality series as well as the conception of “work” for these reality stars, as they are just playing with dolls. But the underlying contradiction here is never articulated: if their activities with the dolls are part of some inauthentic, rehearsed performance, then would these two not really be doing (media) work in a very traditional sense?

As the pregnancy unfolded, MTV revealed that it would continue to film *Jersey Shore* that summer with its expectant cast member, (though this was the last season for obvious reasons). However, almost immediately after shooting began, Snooki moved out of the house traditionally shared by all eight cast members, sparking heavy media interest (reported in three of the news sources) as it seemed to offer hope that perhaps motherhood would change Snooki in the necessary ways after all. The *National Post* pointed to this revelation as yet “another sign the cast members are getting too old for

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<sup>37</sup> TMZ does the same thing another day when Snooki and her fiancée are caught out again with the doll.

this” but, interestingly chose not to present it as evidence of maturation on Snooki’s part, whose nearby relocation, to them, signaled that she did not want to “miss out on the party” (Wilkinson, 2012). Another *National Post* article running just a short while later similarly employs frames of immaturity:

But, she warns, just because she’s got a baby to think about doesn’t mean she’s become overly concerned with being a good role model. “Me and Jenni pee in public, we had sex on TV so what really are we trying to hide?” Snooki laughs. “Can you shut the cameras off? That doesn’t happen” (Dekel, 2012, “Snooki & JWOWW are taking over whether you like it or not,” para. 14-5).

This use of Snooki’s quote is noteworthy for this discussion as it seems to be taken out of context. We do not know for sure what question Snooki is responding to here, but it seems unlikely that it is: “are you concerned with being a good role model for your child?” The talk of going “pee in public” here is used by Snooki to underline her authenticity within a larger promotional context for her show, while the author uses it to illustrate her immaturity in the face of impending motherhood as well as to affirm her illegitimacy in the public sphere, the implication being that this woman is famous *merely* for peeing in public and having sex on television (which she arguably is).

Surprisingly, TMZ seems to take a more sympathetic stance toward Snooki’s negotiation of the role that made her famous and her new role: “the mama-to-be is taking her pregnancy very seriously, choosing to live NEAR the “Shore” house rather than IN it because it’s not worth it to be surrounded by boozy, loud roommates while pregnant” (TMZ.com, 2012, “Snooki – I’m evicting myself from ‘Jersey Shore’ house,” para. 2). In using the word “choosing,” TMZ ascribes Snooki with the responsibility for this decision.

The headline echoes this agency on Snooki's part, presenting the information as though it were a direct quote from Snooki (it is not): "Snooki – I'm evicting myself from 'Jersey Shore' House." The previous *National Post* article does *not* clearly word this as Snooki's decision, neither in the body of the article, nor in the headline ("Snooki's baby bump will get its own house on Season 6 of Jersey Shore").

On the other hand MTV executive Chris Linn, as reported by Entertainment Weekly (and carried on CNN), does credit Snooki with making this decision, and further argues that Snooki's move next-door is not about staying near the party, but about separating herself from it:

"I know she's concerned about the perception of her being a pregnant woman in a party house [...] This is an opportunity to see how she deals with it and how the rest of the house deals with it. The show has always been about following what's really happening in their lives." (Linn, quoted in Hibberd, 2012, para. 7)

Note how Linn here has also taken the opportunity to affirm the authenticity of the show – "what's *really* happening" – and therefore the authenticity of Snooki's decisions. He points out that she is concerned about how she might be perceived, which marks a change from the careless attitude of Snooki in her wilder days.

In the same piece, however, Linn works to affirm the authentic Snooki that has *not* changed, as she is one of the major appeals to viewers of the program (and it is important to note that this is a promotional article for *Jersey Shore*). "I don't think anybody expected Snooki to be the one to blaze that trail, but she is, and it's going to change the dynamic with everybody else," Linn says. "She's just as funny, if not funnier,

than she's ever been." (Hibber, 2012, para. 12). Again, a seemingly contradictory message is being sent: "Snooki is changed by motherhood, yet she is still the authentic Snooki our audience loves." Indeed, much of the discourse offered by MTV producers, cast members and even Snooki herself suggest that Snooki-as-good-mother does not necessarily contradict the authentic self that had been revealed publicly prior to pregnancy. Interestingly, the media does not often challenge this claim.

Snooki herself is given multiple platforms to explain why she perceives she will be a good mother. In an interview with *People* (which was also picked up and reported on by CNN), Snooki told the magazine that she "guesses" pregnancy has made her "more mature [...]" "It's different because now I'm not drinking, I'm usually partying and going to clubs but pregnancy made me grow up a lot." (Rayford, 2012, para. 4). In another piece picked up by TMZ (originally it was an interview conducted for the Huffington Post), Snooki acknowledges that people will have low expectations of her parenting: "Everyone will be surprised to see a different side of me. I'm loving, caring, sensitive, protective and very maternal, no matter what people might think" (TMZ.com, 2012, "Pregnant Snooki – I Will Be the Best Mom"). Again, such comments are interesting because they affirm Snooki's sense of her true self being multi-faceted – she does not deny her partying and sexually adventurous past and does not see it as a contradiction to her future as wife and mother – a viewpoint that surely would be shared by numerous women in the 'real world' when examining their own past and future selves.

However, reality television participants are often presented as one-dimensional caricatures (Dubrofsky, 2011; Grindstaff, 2011), and at some point in their public career usually must acknowledge the difficulties faced by this double-awareness – this knowledge of how they might seem to the world versus how they know themselves to be (see discussion of Berger in second chapter). Dubrofsky (2011) explores this theme among female cast members on *The Bachelor*, particularly in the “Women Tell All Episodes” which are filmed after the entire production has wrapped, while the show airs (which usually involves several weeks, if not months delay). It is interesting to note how contestants react to seeing themselves (usually a clip montage of their “time with the Bachelor” is presented with an inset shot of them watching the same footage and reacting to it). It is during these types of reunion specials (which occur in many competitive reality television series) where the talk of authenticity is strongest. “That’s not how I *really* am” or “I felt I was *true to myself*” are common tropes in these discussions and contestants will often express pride at maintaining an authentic self even if that self has been revealed to be unlikeable, selfish or mean-spirited.

It is interesting, then, to examine Snooki’s comments above in relation to this larger context. Throughout most of the series, a key part of Snooki’s persona was her carefree, no-apologies attitude. She was who she was (authentic) and did not care what “the haters” had to say about her. As talk of her turned toward pregnancy and motherhood, Snooki’s relation to her public persona grew much more complex. Suddenly there was an impetus to change put upon her, but in making remarks like those above she is able to affirm the consistency of her authentic self within the larger tale of

transformation. She argues that it is possible for the same woman who drinks to excess to be capable of being nurturing, loving, and maternal. Most of the articles do contain quotes from her that support this message and frame her as capable of transformation. This would seem to show that for the media overall, the narrative of domestication (sexual and out-of-control into mature mother) is of more importance than issues of authenticity and legitimacy. The overall message becomes “if Snooki can change (in ways she *should*), then any woman can change” which helps to support traditional norms of womanhood and motherhood in society (see Driscoll, 2002 discussed in Literature Review, pp. 27-8).

**Snooki’s style.** The ways in which Snooki navigated this change in the media are interesting in particular for what she holds onto to signify the unchanged authentic self (her style, outrageous clothes, shoes, hair, etc.). From the outset of her pregnancy Snooki’s footwear became a controversial topic. The “old” Snooki was known for outrageous, towering heels (which did help to lift the 4’8” tall starlet nearer to that of her cast-mates) almost as well as she was known for falling right off them (usually in a drunken stupor). Yet for Snooki, as for many female celebrities, pregnancy did not necessarily bring about a change in shoe height (see also Jessica Simpson, Kim Kardashian). In April (presumably into her second trimester at this point) Snooki posted a photo to her Twitter account (as reported on People.com) of her shoes for that day, which were bejeweled black platform heels (People.com, 2012, “Snooki Tweets Shoe Picture, Can Wear Heels While Pregnant”). The article’s headline reads as a direct quote, but it is not: “Snooki: Why I Can Still Wear Outrageous Heels While Pregnant.” In fact, nowhere

in the article does Snooki call her shoes “outrageous” – it would seem to be a word chosen by People’s editorial board which does connote a sense of excess and irresponsibility on Snooki’s part.

However, a few short months later, even further into her pregnancy, Snooki still had not taken off those outrageous heels. While filming the Jersey Shore in June, two separate incidents of a now approximately seven months pregnant Snooki stumbling in heels were caught by paparazzi cameras. The first was only reported by TMZ and reporter Johnny Lopez (again covering Snooki) captures the incident thusly: “Snooki is no stranger to losing her balance and falling on the floor, but this time alcohol wasn't what caused her to almost bite it ... it was her huge platform wedge heels” (Lopez, 2012, “Snooki’s Downfall – Being Pregnant in High Heels,” para. 1). Lopez’ expressed concern for Snooki’s unborn child – “luckily... avoiding any sort of injury to herself or her unborn baby” – seems offset by the sentence immediately following: “This may be Snook's first fashion misstep that didn't involve a low cut top, leopard print spandex mini-dress, or Ed Hardy” (Lopez, 2012, para. 3). Snooki did not actually fall down at this time, which encourages readers to focus on the jokes made about Snooki (the references to her being drunk a lot and her fashion choices). The fact that it is not reported in any other news source indicates how uneventful (and not newsworthy) this incident was.

However as TMZ continued to follow Snooki, a few weeks later she stumbled again, this time making contact with the ground. The story was also picked up on People.com but, again, there was no serious injury and no harm done to the child. Much

like the TMZ story above, the People.com report made the connection between pregnant falling and the drunken falls Snooki has undergone in the past. However, they did quote a witness who pointed out that Snooki is not merely a cartoon character: “Sad thing was that the paparazzi all kept snapping their photos and no one went to help her. That’s kind of sleazy. If you see any pregnant woman fall you should help them” (People.com, 2012, “Snooki Takes a Tumble in Platform Sandals,” para. 3). The “source” was quick to add that Snooki had no plans to get into flat shoes in the near future and pointed out that Jessica Simpson’s pregnancy involved heels “almost to the end.” This report then follows an interesting pattern in that first it affirms Snooki as a drunken slob, then reminds readers of her impending motherhood and humanity, and, finally reaffirms that Snooki will *not* change who she truly is merely to reconcile these two contradictory personas.

Similarly in the TMZ report on her fall, readers are once again reminded of Snooki’s drinking past: “[j]ust because she’s carrying an unborn baby inside her and not downing tequila shots doesn’t mean anything has changed for Snooki” and “she was uninjured, quickly got up and went on her non-alcoholic merry way” (Lopez, 2012, “Snooki – The Sober Stumble for Two,” para. 2). Lopez then, once again, reminds readers of her sexual history (this is the same reporter who wrote the piece on Snooki and JWoww’s “House full of hose”). The article ends with the sentence: “Snooks isn’t letting pregnancy stop her from getting on her knees.”

Despite this comment, Snooki’s sexuality actually no longer posed the same threat because, as was heavily reported throughout the pregnancy and childbirth, Snooki was

engaged. It was perhaps this piece of news that was most important in affirming the containment of the threat of Snooki and her transformation into adulthood and motherhood. Talk of the engagement to Jionni LaValle (who himself appeared sporadically on *Jersey Shore* as a romantic partner for Snooki) began at the same time as the pregnancy rumors began to circle. It is worth noting that the news confirmations of Snooki's pregnancy also included confirmations of her engagement to LaValle, and his appearance both on the show as well as in her real life once again serve the narrative of an unchanged authentic self, transformed by motherhood.

**Engaged Snooki.** People.com ran the story as part of the confirmation of Snooki's pregnancy and used a quote from an interview conducted before the announcement: "I know he's the one so I know the ring's gonna come soon," Polizzi told PEOPLE on Jan. 12 – though at the time, she had no idea a proposal was coming" (Messer & Dyball, 2012, para. 3). The article ends by pointing out how things are now going to change for Snooki: "Surely a new routine is necessary for the formerly hard-partying, GTL-loving [Gym, Tan, Laundry] star. May we suggest BDL: bottles, diapers, lack of sleep."

The *National Post* similarly frames the story as one of change, most notably by reminding readers of Snooki's "pre-pregnancy" persona and using direct quotes about transformation<sup>38</sup>:

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<sup>38</sup> CNN ran a very similar story using almost all of the same quotes from the US Weekly article and was therefore not specifically discussed here (CNN.com, 2012, "Yep, Snooki's pregnant – and engaged – The Marquee Blog).

The pint-size “meatball,” who denied pregnancy rumours a month ago, told *Us Weekly* that she is about 15 weeks along and is ready for the next chapter in her life. “I have different priorities now,” she said. “I don’t care what anybody else thinks. As long as I know I’m ready and he’s ready.” Fiancée LaValle told *Us Weekly* he’s 100% sure about their next step, saying, “We are not going to screw this up.” Snooki revealed she found out she was expecting “right after New Year’s,” and her first thought was, “S–t, I’ve been drinking!” I was worried. It was New Year’s Eve and we were in Vegas, so I did go crazy.” (Furtado, 2012, “Snooki and Jionni LaValle are engaged, expecting a baby,” para. 4-6).

It is interesting to note that Snooki does admit to drinking in this interview, knowing that it is a part of her public persona and accentuating her claims of authenticity. In the context of this story, it is Snooki’s wording that becomes crucial in such claims. By saying “I have different priorities now” instead of “I have changed,” Snooki is able to communicate that she will in some ways transformed (matured) by motherhood while at the same time *not changing* her authentic self which has *always*, in her view, been capable of being a good mother.

In many ways the most important part of this transformation is not the abstaining from alcohol, nor the tanning (as mentioned previously, those are health necessities and therefore lose symbolic weight), but the move from single, on-the-prowl, sexual woman to engaged mother and wife-to-be. As outlined by Dyer (2004) in his discussion of Marilyn Monroe’s innocent sexuality, a key factor in neutralizing the threat of female sexuality is to ensure that it is not the woman who experiences that sexuality but the man. For the woman, the experience of sexuality is limited to its performance *for men* (to reiterate, Dyer argues that this is one of the main reasons behind the success of Marilyn Monroe – her persona plays up the innocent and thus, non-threatening, side of female

sexuality because only the man realizes how sexy she is). Furthermore, a woman can *be* sexy (if judged as such by men, usually those running the media) but cannot *try to be* sexy - once she crosses that line and uses her sexuality, it is no longer authentic, as will be seen in the upcoming discussion on Kim Kardashian.

Pre-pregnancy era Snooki broke both of these taboos (and was often, as seen in section two, punished for it in the media through ridicule). Firstly, her frequent talk of being “horny,” combined with her deliberate efforts to go out to clubs, find and seduce men, all signaled a sexual being with desires, agency and power. Secondly, the fact that Snooki did not fit into more traditional notions of female beauty took the transgression even further – for, it would seem, the only thing worse than a drunken slut is an ugly drunken slut. The presence of Jionni as a love interest in the Snooki narrative removes these threats. No longer does Snooki have to go out (into public) and enact (and experience) her sexuality, nor expose herself (in all her outrageous excess) to others (and us). She is with Jionni, in a monogamous relationship, sexuality neutralized and under control.<sup>39</sup> The additional element of pregnancy/motherhood only strengthens that control. In the role of mother and wife, Snooki can now enter adulthood as a functioning member of (public) society.

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<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that this process was a contentious one for the young couple, as exhibited in one of the recurring sub-plots on the *Jersey Shore*. The transition from single Snooki to girlfriend Snooki was not a smooth one but received limited coverage in the news media text (which the general public was more likely to access compared with fans of the show).

#### 4.4 Mother Snooki

After Snooki gave birth, several news items ran to reaffirm this resolution and strengthen her new position in society as mother and wife-to-be. In fact, Snooki's own discourse shifted, in one of her first interviews as a new mother, she tells *People* magazine that she has *completely changed*: ““The partying is long gone [...] I'm a new person" (CNN.com, 2012, “Snooki shows off baby Lorenzo: Partying days are done,” para. 4). That story ran on CNN and goes on to recall how Snooki separated herself from her *Jersey Shore* cast mates' partying while she was pregnant and filming the last season. “While it was ‘bittersweet,’ Snooki's embracing the change. Of her new son, she said, ‘It's a different kind of love that I never felt before’” (CNN.com, 2012, para. 7). In the accompanying photo (Figure 4.3), which ran on the magazine cover, Snooki is in close-up holding her son up, looking straight into the camera.



Figure 4.3

The baby is dressed in all white except for tiny booties bearing the Italian flag on the bottom. He wears a cross around his neck, which immediately signifies Italian Catholicism, but also connotes Catholic themes like purity, re-birth, absence of sin. Snooki, smiling proudly, wears a pale pink dress (quite a subdued hue for her) with a bright red flower in her hair (which makes a visual/fashion connection to the Snooki of yesteryear and thusly, once again, ties into a notion of an unchanged authentic self).

People.com ran two other stories shortly after the birth of Snooki's son. The first was a fairly mundane wrap up Twitter messages about the birth. (Nudd, 2012). The second however, is more of note in this discussion because it calls upon previously employed frames of authenticity surrounding Snooki's unchanging style. The piece is about how Snooki "loves nursing" her newborn son (People.com, 2012, "Nicole 'Snooki' Polizzi Breastfeeds Baby Lorenzo") – a reported change in attitude compared to comments made a few months earlier that breastfeeding "looks so painful." The article is able to establish the continuity of the authentic Snooki, once again symbolized through her style but this time that style is extended to her son. The second accompanying photo is of Lorenzo's nursery (Figure 4.4), which includes leopard print linens on what appears to be his changing table.



*Figure 4.4*

Leopard print was long a signature element of Snooki's style – it is used as her background on both her Twitter page (<https://twitter.com/snooki>) as well as her personal website (<http://www.celebuzz.com/nicole-snooki-polizzi/>). Again, we see and recognize that although motherhood has transformed her in important ways (she no longer parties/gets drunk, nor does she present an out-of-control sexual threat), she is still the same person underneath those excesses as symbolized by the leopard print. This serves the larger cultural narrative surrounding Snooki in that women who are dangerous and out-of-control are able to be transformed, tamed and contained. If Snooki – the worst of the worst – can step into the role of wife and mother satisfactorily, then all women can and should be able to do the same (see Jiwani, 2006 on the prescriptive function of the media in Theoretical Framework, p. 24).

## 4.5 Containment in the Media

### Spin-Off

Before turning to the second case study, I would like to briefly examine some of the ways Snooki has been contained outside of the themes of sexuality and motherhood. This is most commonly done for Snooki, as for many stars of reality television, in the form of containment of the media text. For instance, in early 2012 MTV producers began filming what would be a spin-off show for Snooki and fellow *Jersey Shore* cast member JWoww. Three of the four news outlets (the exception being People.com) ran stories about the filming headaches, as various locations refused to allow production to occur. In fact, TMZ reported on a specific incident where Snooki was banned from even entering a wine store in Jersey City (regardless of whether or not a camera crew accompanied her – note that this incident occurred before the pregnancy announcement)<sup>40</sup>.

Less on the logistical side, there was also some hesitancy about not only the implications of a spin-off reality show (i.e. more media exposure) but also its quality. Despite having a fairly low benchmark set by *Jersey Shore*, critics were quick to pan *Snooki & JWoww* – even before the first episode aired. In June the *National Post* did a write up on the show in anticipation of the first season airing later that month, even conducting an interview with the two stars. Readers interested in the show, however, might feel chastised for their interest:

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<sup>40</sup> Lopez, 2012, “Snooki Banned from Jersey Wine Shop.”

[F]or all her haters, the news is only about to get worse. Snooki is about to become even more over-exposed as she and her best friend and fellow Shore castmate, Jenni “JWOWW” Farley, embark on their own creatively titled MTV spin-off, *Snooki & JWOWW* — a program that, ironically, grew out of their frustration about not getting enough screen time (Dekel, 2012, “Jersey Shore’s Snooki & JWOWW are taking over with spinoff series,” para. 3).

The headline for the article ominously reads: “Snooki & JWOWW are taking over, whether you like it or not” which seems to indicate the expectations that some (if not many) readers will *not* like it. The choice of words “taking over” seems again to exaggerate a sort of threat – how are they taking over unless the audience *chooses* to watch them? The posing of their spin-off show as a threat needing to be contained helps bolster the larger idea that these two are already “over”-extending themselves into a public sphere where they are not wanted. Never mind the fact that *Jersey Shore* is the highest rated show in MTV history (Dekel, 2012, “Jersey Shore cast to say goodbye after sixth season”), or that viewers have the power not to watch *Snooki & JWoww* should they chose not to (Godlewski & Perse, 2010; Napoli, 2010; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002).<sup>41</sup>

### **Beyond Reality Television**

Another angle seen in news coverage of Snooki’s extra-textual media ventures is the choice to omit or minimize her efforts and/or accomplishments. This is done, for

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<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting that *People.com* runs a similar promotional piece before the airing of the show, but frames it much more positively, using the word “entertaining” to describe the situations into which the two stars find themselves (Lambert, 2012 “Snooki & JWOWW Premiere: Watch a Clip of MTV’s Jersey Shore Spin-off”). However, just one day later after the first episode airs, the *People* TV critic Tom Gliatto pans the show, saying it’s a “dumbed-down version of *Laverne & Shirley*” and “horrible.” It ends with the line “I expect great things from Snooki. Just not of her work” (Gliatto, 2012). Neither of the articles on *People* frame Snooki or the show as a threat the way the *National Post* article does above – perhaps due to the dependence such a magazine has on celebrity cooperation (see previously discussed Snooki exclusive article for *People* after the birth of her son).

instance, in one CNN piece running under the headline “Gingrich and Snooki Break It Down” which is about the two stars’ simultaneous appearances on *The Tonight Show*. The article discusses how famed politico Newt Gingrich talked with the host about never watching Snooki’s show, but saying he’d be happy to come visit the Shore house someday. “Although Gingrich admitted to never having seen Snooki’s show, he nevertheless congratulated the reality star on having two New York Times best-selling books. Snooki, who was on with Leno before the politician was introduced, quickly shot back, ‘I’m trying to be like you’” (Davedson, 2012, para. 6). The article goes on to describe the remainder of Gingrich’s appearance after Snooki left, providing no further explanation or context regarding Snooki’s bestselling books. Writing – the production of literature, as with art – is traditionally considered to be a talent (Braudy, 1997) and many best-selling authors have found themselves becoming, to some extent, famous (for instance Stephen King, J.K. Rowling). Discussing Snooki’s publishing accomplishments might lend some legitimacy to her presence in the public sphere and therefore is often slighted, if mentioned at all, in the news media. At the same time, however, it could be said that the media are following Snooki’s framing of her performance of an authentic self on her reality show. If what we see on *Jersey Shore* is who she truly is, she does not seem to have the intellectual capacities to write a noteworthy book (let alone two). It could easily be argued that her own persona stands in the way of her entering into the writing realm of the public sphere and that she must find other avenues that are more in line with her “authentic” self as performed on *Jersey Shore*.

One such avenue might be the boxing industry, into which she entered as a promoter. As in the article above, CNN obscured the starlet's accomplishments and focused on a more tangential issue – her thoughts on the upcoming election (CNN.com, 2012, “Snooki: Trump for president, please”). In fact, the entire article is structured around off-handed remarks made by Snooki at *her own* press conference, announcing the launch of *her own* boxing promotion team (Team Snooki Boxing) where the main event becomes almost an afterthought: “As she relayed at a recent press conference - for the launch of Team Snooki Boxing, the Huffington Post tells us - she's unimpressed [with the candidates for the 2012 U.S. Presidential election]” The rest of the approximately 150 words of the article are about Snooki wanting Donald Trump to run in the election, and the headline reads “Snooki – Trump for president please” without a single other explanation or mention of Team Snooki Boxing. In fact, CNN expresses what could easily be read as skepticism about the true reason for the press conference (“the Huffington Post *tells us*” – as in, who really knows or cares why the press, us included, are here?).

People.com provides a similar example when reporting on Mitt Romney and Snooki attending the same boxing match in L.A, though they do provide more context (and express more confidence in the story than CNN): “Sitting not far from Romney and his wife, Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi enjoyed the fight. The new mom is actually a boxing promoter and was on hand to support Dublin-born fighter, Patrick Hyland, who fought on the Pacquiao-Marquez undercard” (Gray, 2012). Again, most of the article provides details about the night using the news frame of two unlikely people in one another's

presence (a former presidential candidate and a reality television starlet). Even the accompanying photo supports this framing – a clean cut, conservatively dressed wealthy Caucasian man (Romney) framed next to a subdued but still gaudy-looking Snooki, with long bright red hair, large gold hoop earrings and heavy eye make-up (see Figure 4.5).



*Figure 4.5*

Romney is shown in daylight, hands clasped, seemingly in the midst of some campaigning while Snooki is shown dressed in black at night, presumably arriving at some sort of event (her name is partially visible on the black wall behind her), posing for the camera. This contrasting dichotomy of white/black; day/night; action/posing; good/bad reinforces the frame of contrast through which the entire article is presented to amplify the shock at finding such opposites at the same event. But Snooki's presence cannot be delegitimized here – despite the media's tendency to play down her

involvement, she is now a boxing promoter and it would be difficult to report on the star's recent public appearances without mentioning this detail.

The fact that Snooki's numerous other business ventures are rarely, if ever, mentioned in the media allow for two things: firstly, the continued denial of her legitimacy as a public figure (it keeps alive the mantra "she doesn't *DO* anything!") and, secondly, allows her to be continually represented as a threat in need of containment, denying the fact that she does somewhere have an audience who are invested in what she does. If, on the one hand, she is "taking over" as the *National Post* suggests, it seems clear that we must hope that motherhood has truly changed her in all of the proper ways. If, on the other hand, she really is a "good" and hard-working mother, then it becomes much more difficult to frame her, in line with other reality television stars, as a threat to the myth of meritocracy. Kim Kardashian, on the other hand (at least until the birth of her daughter North West on June 15, 2013), does not have such an easy route of escape. It is toward her that this analysis will shortly turn.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Overall, in 2012, most of the news coverage of Snooki centered on her pregnancy and early motherhood. Before news of her pregnancy broke, there was little coverage of her outside of the most gossip-oriented website (TMZ), whose coverage both mocked and denigrated her sexual exploits. As was predicted in the hypothesis, the reporting on Snooki did not often call into question her authenticity either within the context of her reality program or her appearances outside of the reality show. Instead, her authenticity

was used to frame a larger narrative about the transformation from single woman on-the-prowl into suitable wife and mother. This narrative allowed for the threat of Snooki's out-of-control sexuality to be tamed in the most common way – domestication.

While the media focused heavily on the narrative of transformation, Snooki herself was able to affirm this transformation while, at the same time, affirm a sense of authentic and unchanging self throughout the process. While certain aspects of her story do represent maturity (moving out of the *Jersey Shore* house for instance, or becoming engaged), other elements were called upon to signify a consistency of the “real” Snooki (her continued appearance on the *Jersey Shore* as well as her unchanging fashion sense). In calling upon these contradictory elements simultaneously, then, both Snooki's chosen narrative (changing but still the same) and the media's chosen narrative (if she can change so can anyone) can be communicated in the same articles.

However, when it comes to issues of legitimacy, Snooki's perspective seems to be of less importance. When speaking of her spin-off show, the media were found to place quotes out of context as well as provide scathing critiques of the content. Furthermore, when it came to her various business endeavors beyond the reality television sphere, reporting usually focused on peripheral issues if there was any mention of business at all. These two angles served a larger purpose of containing Snooki within the media text which made her famous and allow her to be seen as neither talented, nor hardworking. Similar views are held toward my next chosen case study, which, additionally, has often been framed in terms of authenticity (or inauthenticity) – reality television star Kim Kardashian.

## Chapter 5: Kim Kardashian

### 5.1 Introduction

Overall the analysis for Kim Kardashian is broken down into three main sections; the first on Kim's love life (framed mostly in terms of authenticity), the second on her sexuality (employing frames of authenticity and legitimacy), and thirdly, containment (most related to issues of legitimacy). I will be discussing the marriage and relationships here before the sex tape, despite the fact that the sex tape came first chronologically, for two reasons. Firstly, to follow the main trajectory of reporting on Kardashian in 2012 – early in the year, the focus was on her divorce and it was only after beginning her relationship with Kanye West that the issue once again arose in the news. Secondly, the framing used when discussing Kim's sexuality was more closely interlinked with the findings on containment – both of which seemed to fall in line with my earlier hypotheses on authenticity and legitimacy, while the framing of her love life was *not* as expected and so will be addressed first.

It is crucial to note that, as discussed in the theoretical framework, legitimacy and authenticity are two highly interrelated concepts frequently employed in the discourse on celebrities (see Holmes, 2011; Weber, 2011, both discussed in Literature Review; see also Palmer, 2005 on the “D-List”). For practical purposes, I have tried to distinguish between the two, but do acknowledge that, in many instances, both discourses are being called upon simultaneously in various amounts, and sometimes in self-contradictory ways. For a general example, one of the most common ways in which Kim Kardashian interacts both with her fans and the media is through the release of “selfies” (self-taken

photographs) through her social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram. Often, these selfies are full body shots with Kim wearing revealing clothing or some type of bathing suit/bikini. The subsequent reporting on these photos employs both frames of legitimacy and authenticity – bikinis are as close to nudity as one most often is allowed to be in public which incites notions of “revealing oneself” in a more *true* way than being clothed (see also Berger’s 1973 discussion of Western emphasis on vision as truth). At the same time, however, the fact that Kim poses for, chooses and releases the bikini shots she prefers undermines the claim to authenticity, much in the same way the use of Photoshop (digital altering) does. Still, however, the fact that Kim takes and releases the shots herself to her audience through social media reinforces authenticity framing as direct communication between the star and her audience (something relatively new to the social media era). Furthermore, in between the lines of these discourses lies the notion of legitimacy – if a woman looks good in a bikini, is she fame-worthy? What if she was on stage in a bikini participating in a beauty pageant or in a bikini pretending to be a lifeguard for a fictional story? All of these complex issues intersect in public discourse, and it is beyond my capabilities as a researcher to observe, let alone dissect, each and every one.

However, that is not to say any attempts to do such are futile. I have here used the frames of authenticity and legitimacy to guide my analysis of the news articles as best as possible. The findings are noteworthy in that they deviate from my original hypotheses in several instances. Firstly, unlike my prediction that her divorce (from NBA star Kris Humphries, after 72 days of marriage) would be framed as inauthentic, it was found that

the news media here were hesitant to position themselves as skeptics, often employing the idea of indirect gossip questioning the star's intentions rather than seeming to do so themselves. Secondly, when reporting on the budding romance between Kim and Kanye, the media again did not often question the authenticity of the romance. When it did come up, it was often within the larger context of providing proof that the relationship is, in fact, real.

However, when it came to her sexuality, the reporting was more nuanced with some sources (TMZ for instance) using positive framing that reinforced notions that Kim is, in fact, sexually attractive and that, secondly, perhaps it is not so unnatural for her then to be famous. On the other hand the other, less outrageous news sources (*National Post*, CNN and People.com) were more likely to frame Kim's sexuality either as weird (how could Kanye be *proud* of his girlfriend's sex tape?) or as a contained threat (she accepts the sex tape as part of her past, but has since learned her lesson) or as calculated (the sex tape launched her stardom and she continues to be extremely media savvy when it comes to issues of her sexuality and beauty). Finally, the discourse on Kim's sexuality tied into the final issue examined here which was the questioning of her legitimacy. It is seemingly incongruous to frame a starlet as being at once media savvy enough to exploit herself sexually for fame while at the same time frame her as not having earned that fame (see discussion on Spice Girls from Driscoll, 1999 in Theoretical Framework, pp. 30-1). This paradox is somewhat negotiated through the use of discourses of containment – the idea that sex tape/reality stars belong in a certain realm of the public sphere. It was in this arena that my hypotheses most often appeared to be verified, as Kim was often framed as

illegitimate in a conflict with film and television actor Jon Hamm, and subsequently patronized for forays into film and television acting herself. Finally, when reporting on her various business ventures (which only People and TMZ did), she was framed negatively as the subject of several lawsuits. I will now present the analysis in more depth.

## 5.2 Love and Marriage

Several narratives surrounded Kim Kardashian across 2012, but none perhaps more predominant than her short-lived marriage and drawn-out divorce to NBA star Kris Humphries. The entire affair quickly became a pop-culture punch line and a short-hand reference to the excesses of the reality television phenomenon, as the two were married for millions of dollars on television. It is worth noting that very few articles (three in all searches for Kim<sup>42</sup>) contextualized the union within the larger landscape of shorter-than-average celebrity marriages and, secondly, the questions of authenticity surrounding the marriage as a staged sham seemingly did little to taint Kardashian's 'reality' career or tabloid news ubiquity. I will now briefly examine these issues in relation to specific articles before exploring how these general framing trends extended beyond Kardashian's marriage into her subsequent relationship with Kanye West.

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<sup>42</sup> All three articles mentioned here were not included with the main corpus of data, as they contained only one line referring to Kardashian, though that line was a comparison between her marriage and that of the other star in question. For instance, People.com ran a piece on the death of Ernest Borgnine whose 1964 marriage to Broadway star Ethel Merman lasted less than six weeks and was compared to Kim's in the piece (Orloff, 2012).

## Divorce

Interestingly, the notion of a sham marriage is not directly articulated by any of the news media outlets reporting on the story at first. The earliest article bringing up the accusation is a piece that ran in late January on CNN.com, which was a secondary report on an appearance by Kim Kardashian on a daytime television talk show. The piece quotes her response to being directly asked about the authenticity of her short-lived marriage:

"it doesn't make sense that everyone thinks that...[I]f this was a business decision and I really made all that money that everyone was claiming we made off this wedding and if the wedding was fake and just for TV, I'm a smart business woman, I would've stayed married longer" (CNN.com, 2012, "Kim K: If I married for money, I would have stayed," para. 4).

In fact, most of the news sources (*People* and CNN) carried similar stories where Kim Kardashian's intentions are questioned by some outside authority ("the media say...") and she is given a platform to affirm the authenticity of the marriage using claims that she was merely "following her heart." There is generally very little editorializing in these pieces and the accusations of fraud tend to be framed secondarily as such (i.e. "many have alleged..." in the above article). Both *People* and CNN highlight Kim's use of the term "business decision," when talking about the marriage but they frame it within the larger context of her having called it a bad one *if* that had been her true motivation.

Interestingly, *National Post* writer Miranda Furtado provides much less contextualization. In this article, headlined "Kim Kardashian calls her marriage to Kris Humphries a 'bad business decision'," Furtado opens with the following: "Kim Kardashian is still making headlines about her 72-day marriage. The reality starlet and E!

queen continues to insist her marriage was real, but now admits it may have been a ‘bad business decision’” (Furtado, 2012, “Kim Kardashian divorce: Reality star calls 72-day marriage a ‘bad business decision,’” para. 1). It is interesting to note that Furtado herself (or her editor) put Kardashian in the headline, but phrases it differently – Kim is “still making headlines.” In fact, this phrasing could be read as stripping the newspaper of responsibility in the publicity machine at work here and thus naturalizing the process while also attributing such editorial decisions to Kim Kardashian herself. Furthermore, the quote about the marriage being a ‘bad business decision,’ is taken out of context – for Kim qualifies the statement by saying “if” it was a business decision, as many people are claiming, then it was a bad one, so surely it could not have been because she is a (successful) business woman.<sup>43</sup>

In early February Humphries himself echoed the accusations and the notion of authenticity became the central point of contestation in the divorce. In response to Kim’s petition to end the marriage (with the fairly familiar Hollywood reasoning of “irreconcilable differences”) Kris Humphries countered, seeking an annulment of the marriage upon the basis of “fraud” – a claim premised upon the idea that Humphries was not a party to the fraud, an innocent pawn in Kardashian’s publicity game. The reporting on this angle of the story is somewhat surprising in that it generally does not appear to be all that sympathetic toward Humphries, perhaps because of the idea that if we all (the public, the media, etc.) knew this was just for show, so should have he.

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<sup>43</sup> This claim will be substantiated and discussed further in the upcoming section on containment in the media.

TMZ was the first to break the story, but interrogated several of Humphries allegations, including the complicated and extensive pre-nuptial agreement drawn up by Kim and her lawyers – an agreement which, TMZ reports, accounted for many different scenarios several years down the line indicating a long-term intent on her part. Additionally, the TMZ staff point out the following: “[f]irst of all, [Kris is] the one who proposed. Second, the publicity has made him famous and marketable and he’ll make millions more than he would have otherwise” (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian Divorce Turns Ugly – Reality TV On Trial,” para. 5). TMZ in fact wrote several stories covering different angles of the divorce, most of which position Kim as the more authentic and innocent one while Kris becomes the money- and fame-hungry jilted lover (sample headlines include “Kris Humphries Wants Kim Kardahsian to Fess Up... How Much \$\$\$ Did We Make” and “Kris Humphries’ Media Whorishness Keeping Kim Kardashian Divorce Alive”).

At the same time, it is interesting to note that the short-lived marriage and divorce seemed to have little overall impact on Kim Kardashian’s career in the public spotlight. It could likely just as easily be argued that the sympathetic coverage of her is the cause of this, or the opposite, that it is a reflection of this. It does, however, point to the idea, as discussed in Chapter 2, that many audience members are not as concerned with issues of authenticity as it might seem from the media framing surrounding such stars (Gamson, 1994). The mostly open platforms given to both Snooki and to Kim Kardashian to avow their authenticity in their own words seems to support the idea that the media generally are allowing their readers to make up their own minds in relation to these issues (again,

that is assuming that the reader is even concerned with authenticity). Perhaps it is not coincidental that this type of presentation and framing is used most in relation to two of the most “important” roles that women are supposed play: wife and mother (see discussion on Driscoll, 2002 in Theoretical Framework, pp. 27-8).

However, there does appear to be negative framing surrounding Kardashian in other forms. In this study, the framing of inauthenticity was mostly found in the form of one-liner asides in other articles (see, for instance *National Post*'s statistics on NBA superstar Jeremy Lin which include a couple of digs at Kardashian's NBA marriage, Stinson, 2012; TMZ reporting that Eddie Griffin is giving Kim a “run for her money” for shortest marriage ever, TMZ.com, 2012 “Eddie Griffin - -FINALLY DIVORCED ... After 6 Months of Marriage”) which could easily be missed by fans of Kim scanning the news for items specifically about her.

In general, then, it would appear as though Kim Kardashian's marriage was not often derided in the media for being inauthentic. Subsequently one could deduce that the media were catering to their audience, and that those who are more likely to be fans of Kim are also more likely to read TMZ (while those who do not like her are more likely to be the upper-middle class Canadians perusing *National Post* online). Additionally, it would seem as though Kim's fans, whose interest or numbers do not appear to dwindle after the divorce, then fall into Gamson's category of game-player detectives (1994, p.146) or, more likely considering the sheer amount of coverage given to the women, game-player gossipers. This theory would seem to also explain the sympathetic coverage given to Kim as she embarked upon a new romance in early spring.

## Romance

In the media, there seemed to be a general questioning if, firstly, the new romance between Kim and Kanye West was real and, secondly, how much of it would be presented on Kim's various reality television programs. The idea of an authentic romance was promoted most heavily by TMZ – which could likely be due to TMZ's overall emphasis on paparazzi shots catching the stars “in action” as claim to truth. In early May, TMZ broke the story of Kim and Kanye's new romance with over a dozen photos as well as street footage of the two on a “movie date” in New York City. The article also calls upon an additional frame to authenticate the romance – Kanye's own words/lyrics about Kim from his song “Theraflu”: "And I admit I fell in love with Kim ... 'Round the same time she fell in love with him ... That's cool, babygirl, do your thing ... Lucky I ain't had Jay drop him from the team" (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian Rebounds, Dating Kanye West,” para. 3). In fact, when reporting on the new romance most of the news sources here use similar framing of Kanye lyrics to authenticate the romance (The *National Post* uses TMZ directly as its source, also quoting the same Kanye song. Arrazola, 2012; People.com and CNN both quote the same lyrics in their reports – Garcia, 2012; CNN.com, 2012 “Kanye admits he fell in love with Kim K. in song?”).

It is worth noting that Kanye's own words, which earned him his own legitimized place in the public sphere, are given the authority (over visual images) to verify the romance suggesting perhaps a decline in the weight given to paparazzi shots in the age of reality television cameras. Additionally, it does seem to verify Marshall's (1997) theory that one of the key differences between film and television stars, on the one hand, and

music stars on the other, is the latter groups' claims to (and reliance upon maintaining those claims to) authenticity. Music stars are expected to not only duplicate recorded sounds in a live "authentic" setting, but are also expected to "express themselves" through their music and/or lyrics. As a male musician, Kanye West is systematically privileged in the celebrity hierarchy over Kim Kardashian's reality stardom. The use of Kanye's lyrics, over and above "real" (or reality television) footage, in authenticating the romance, then, underlies the unquestioned acceptance of his public performance as being "real."

Whether the romance is real or simply for the cameras, however, it is expected that when a reality television show star engages in an extra-textual romantic relationship (with a person who is not a participant on the reality television program), such a development will be included in some form on the reality television show itself (provided it falls into the docudrama category of reality television, see Chapter 2, pp. 16-9 for different subgenres). This relationship carried additional significance in that Kanye West was previously an established hip hop star at the time – someone whose private life was not very well known before he began dating Kim Kardashian. Media speculation grew as to what, exactly, would and would not be shown (which does, again, underline a hierarchy of celebrity here – the implication being that Kim, reality television star, is expected to show everything, as that is most fully what she is known for, while Kanye is not expected to go down to that level – a point made implicitly by the reporting, not explicitly).

TMZ reported first that Kanye would, in fact, appear on the show, but only if he happened to be in attendance already. According to their source, “Kanye's personal interactions with Kim will not be aired. We're told if Kanye happens to be at an event with Kim ... and the cameras are rolling ... then so be it” (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian & Kanye West – No Relationship Stuff on Reality Show,” para. 3). They also point out that Kim herself vowed to “never put her relationships onscreen again” which, once again, lends to the authenticity narrative of both the relationship with Kanye as well as her previous relationship with Kris Humphries. In fact, when giving interviews about the relationship Kim often uses the same wording she used when talking about her relationship with Humphries (i.e. “following her heart”), which allows her to propagate a narrative about her true self and authentic feelings within the larger framework of a reality show and various public appearances. The media, for the most part, do not attack this positioning. Again, this could be read either in terms of concern over not alienating Kim (and now Kanye’s) fan base who has actively been seeking out articles about them and/or investment in the cultural narrative that seeks to domesticate out-of-control sexual women.

### **5.3 Sex, Lies and Videotape**

For the most part, it was found that the news media did not use articles about Kim Kardashian’s love (and divorce) life to undermine her claim to authenticity. Instead, frames of authenticity were more often employed when discussing issues of physical appearance and sexuality. The narratives surrounding Kardashian’s sex appeal would often undermine her authenticity (women who knowingly use their sex to get ahead are

not authentically sexy) as well as her legitimacy as a public figure (women who are famous because they have sex and/or sex appeal are not worthy of being famous). This will then lead into the next section on legitimacy and containment in the media but I will first examine how each of the aforementioned narratives are developed in relation to two specific Kim Kardashian sub-plots; firstly, her sex tape and, secondly, her physical beauty.

### **Sex Tape**

As outlined previously, Kim Kardashian first became known for a “leaked” home videotape of herself having sex with then boyfriend and singer Ray-J. Though the sex-tape was shot and released in 2007, there were still several articles about the incident in 2012 – the first of which being an accusation thrown out by Kris Humphries during his messy divorce with the reality starlet. TMZ reported that Humphries asserts that Kim’s mother Kris Jenner was, in fact, the one behind the infamous tape (TMZ.com, 2012 “Kim Kardashian Sex Tape -- Kris Humphries Claims Kris Jenner Staged It”). TMZ presents the accusations as false in the same story, which seemingly denigrates its newsworthiness (none of the other news sources reported on the incident). One could argue, however, that TMZ used the article to do several things: firstly, remind readers about the origins of Kim’s fame; secondly, strip her of agency in her own fame (it was her mother) and, thirdly, highlight the notion that the sex tape was staged (can a sex tape really be anything other than staged?<sup>44</sup>) This serves a larger narrative that Kim’s sexuality is not

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<sup>44</sup> Certainly there are videos of people having sex without them having knowledge of being filmed, but this would likely not be included under the term “sex-tape” as it is applied for celebrities or, at the least, would be qualified when discussing the video. Kim was never presented as not having knowledge of being filmed.

only staged, but staged for the express purpose of being famous and stage-managed by a third party, thus it is not authentic or legitimate (being sexy itself is not an authentic talent here) – which, in turn, positions her as being an inauthentic and illegitimate star.

People.com follows this framing when reporting on Kardashian's interview with Oprah (Schwartz, 2012). In this context even Kardashian herself propels the narrative that the sex-tape version of her is *not* authentic: "I felt like I really had to work 10 times harder to get people to see the real me," (Schwartz, 2012, "Kim Kardashian: Yes, My Sex Tape 'Introduced' Me to the World," para. 4). Kardashian may be aware of the incongruity between the two images or may herself buy into the larger prescription of femininity and sexuality being sewn here, but the message is clear – she is distancing herself from the text which launched her stardom and seemingly provides the most authentic view possible for celebrities. However, at the end of the piece (and interview), Kardashian frames the tape in terms of past mistakes (along with her marriage to Humphries) that helped make her who she is today, thus affirming an *improved* true self, much like Snooki in the transformation narratives of her journey into motherhood.

These interviews with Kardashian about her sex tape raise some interesting questions about agency and legitimacy that are worth noting briefly here and could certainly be explored in further research. If Kardashian had *not* willingly participated in the filming of the sex tape and then used it to gain entry into the public sphere, what would be the implications? If, for instance, instead of willingly participating, she had been an *unknowing* victim of a sex tape which happened to be the most popular sex tape of all time (see TMZ article below), would it have been more acceptable? Is perhaps the

danger here not of a declining moral code in America, whereby celebrities become famous by “whoring themselves” out in the most innovative ways possible (see containment section, Jon Hamm, page 124; Franich, 2012), but of a woman wielding that power *herself*? The beautiful woman not rejecting the “male gaze,” nor herself becoming the gazer, but merely taking back the power of looking and turning it into her own kind of (very public) power – sexual object becomes not sexual subject, but master of ceremonies, so to speak (for relevant discussion of sexual agency, see Attwood, 2007).

Upon closer inspection, the narrative surrounding this story appears specifically designed to mask other power inequalities at stake here. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to dissect the workings of the multi-billion dollar pornographic industry, for many feminists, it has come to serve as an exemplar of the biases against women in the larger sphere of the media. Laura Mulvey’s (1989) highly influential “male gaze” approach to psychoanalytic film theory (in the most simplest of terms, the argument that the cinema camera aligns itself with male subjectivity and thus audiences identify with the male heterosexual gaze objectifying women who are to be filmed/looked at) has served as both a model for, and a point of contention among feminist media scholars looking to unpack some of the power inequalities at stake in mediated representations of sexuality. One common critique of this theory is its “overemphasis on the phallic mastery of all forms of photographic visual representations, especially those of women which supposedly leave no room for desires other than those of the centered masculine subject” (Williams, 1995, p. 5).

But what if we were to leave room for other desires – for instance, heterosexual female desires? “Desire” here is used in terms of sexual pleasure but also in reference to other drives that the embodied woman might experience – desires for power, fame, visibility, or wealth. The narratives surrounding Kim Kardashian often argue that it is, somehow, *worse* when a woman commoditizes sex (in an exchange-based sense) than when a man does it – even, or especially if the woman is in partial or full control of that exchange. This is, in fact, a common critique posed toward Kim Kardashian – that she has become a success merely for “whoring” herself out to whoever might pay the most money and attention and that exploiting the female body, whether done by a man or by a woman, necessarily conflicts with the values of feminism. This does raise a significant question then for feminist critics – if prostitution is not feminist, can there be such a thing as a feminist prostitute? Furthermore, is there any room for prostitution and pornography in the world of feminism and, if so, in what forms? (This is not to say that pornography has been wholly neglected by the feminist paradigm – see for instance Dworkin, 1974; MacKinnon, 1989; Williams, 1989).

In fact, questions of sex and power have been central to the third-wave feminist movement since the late 1980s and early 1990s when members of the female punk rock alternative movement known as the Riot Grrrls began painting the word “slut” on their naked bodies (Attwood, 2007, p. 236). Though the reclamation of sexual power exemplified by the Riot Grrrls was eventually appropriated back into mainstream culture and sold to mass (female) audiences as “girl power” (Attwood, 2007; Driscoll, 1999), an important shift occurred in the way people began thinking and publicly talking about

female sexuality. Though it would be naive to claim that such a shift has been wholly progressive in terms of feminist goals, it has provided an important space in which young women are able to explore, confront and learn to live with (and, crucially, tame) their own sexuality. In dismissing such explorations, particularly when they involve a bartering of power, fame or fortune, feminist theorists risk further alienating an already wary generation of girls hesitant to align themselves with, at least the term “feminism,” if not also its social and political goals (see Crossley, 2010; Olson et al., 2008). The framing of Kim’s sex tape as an illegitimate and inauthentic path to fame does mask the larger appetite that our society has – both men and women – for pornographic content. In so easily dismissing instances of agency, where the woman herself moves away from erotic passive object toward active sexual subject (Williams, 1995, p. 23), it becomes easy to classify *all* pornographic content as obscene and “bad.” In actuality, the judgment of which pornography is “bad<sup>45</sup>,” much like the judgment of talent, I would argue, is ideological.

In what seems to be most closely displaying these differing perspectives, we have the contrast between reports on Kanye West’s affinity for his beloved’s sex tape. While the *National Post* expresses a fairly unusual level of editorialized shock and indignation on this matter, TMZ frames it positively. *National Post* reporter Rebecca Tucker uses italics to emphasize the salaciousness of the following lyric from West: “Eat breakfast at Gucci/My girl a superstar all from a home movie” (Tucker, 2012). Tucker writes:

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<sup>45</sup> Williams (1995) provides a useful, historically situated account of such judgments in her argument for a move away from “male gaze” oriented views of pornographic films and images toward a new conception of the gaze vis-à-vis situated (female) bodies of spectator-observers where observing becomes an active, coded, disciplined activity comprised of an “amalgam of disparate and decentered perceptions” (p. 8).

Dude, this is not amateur footage of someone helping her niece blow out the candles on her birthday — it is a *pornographic video starring your girlfriend*. You can go ahead and be proud of it, weird though that may be, but let's go back to not beating around the bush, shall we? (Tucker, 2012, para. 3-4).

TMZ's framing of the incident, however, provides more context into which we may categorize West's "weird" pride by linking it to the wider pornographic industry: "Kanye -- who's a self-described porn connoisseur -- obviously looks at the movie as an X-rated badge of honor" (TMZ.com, 2012, "Kanye West Raps About Kim Kardashian's Sex Tape," para. 5). TMZ also points out that Kim's sex tape is "one of the best-selling sex tapes of all time" (though the basis of such a claim is not made clear). The fact that people enjoy watching pornography is here naturalized while in the *National Post* piece it is stigmatized. Oddly, here it is TMZ which seems to take a more neutral "news" tone and, once again, seems to reify Kim and Kanye's fans' as well as their own readers' expectations on how newsworthy and relatable these two people truly are.

### **Physical Appearance**

Again, this thesis takes the position that the system of celebrity in North America is neither fair nor equal and that, therefore, the notion of legitimate fame is a fallacy. As Su Holmes (2010) states, the more traditional myths of fame center on the notion of talent, which is problematic: "talent [is] itself an ideological construct that is never clearly defined" (p.74). The idea of legitimate (versus illegitimate) fame serves a larger cultural narrative that propagates ideals of individualistic democratic capitalism, and denies the structural inequities that bar certain people from joining the ranks of the elite. Reality television provides one outlet through which such structural inequities can be

revealed in that those who may not previously have had access to (self) representation in the public sphere are now given increased access (though that access can and is still limited by larger forces controlling the means of production).

The case of Kim Kardashian is unique, however, in that it is feasible that a woman of her beauty and status could and would become famous in the pre-reality television and pre-sex-tape eras. The public rise of beautiful women for beauty's sake is not a new phenomenon (see, for instance the rise of Pamela Anderson, Tyra Banks, Bettie Page). Kardashian's facial features and voluptuous figure in fact make her a sex symbol following a very traditional mould. That is why, for the purposes of this thesis, it becomes interesting to see how her physical appearance, in combination with her sexuality, is used to delegitimize her existence in the public sphere in a way that is highly gendered (see Holmes, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008). The discourse surrounding Kim illustrates the underlying notion that "authentic talent," which is often used to delineate legitimate stardom, does not include being beautiful – at least, in Kim Kardashian's case.

People.com and TMZ were most likely to post stories on a new photo of Kim or a public appearance. TMZ, though sympathetic in other instances, was the least subtle in its objectification of Kim – often pitting her against other women in their regular "Who'd you rather" [have sex with] reader polls. They also regularly run photos of Kim in her bikini – many of which are taken and posted by Kim herself through her Instagram account. They include colourful commentary on the part of TMZ staff: "ridiculous curves," "bootyful bod," and the regular use of the word "badonkadonk" as a euphemism for her backside. TMZ was also sure to report incidents where Kim's cleavage spilled out

of her brassiere (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian’s Cups Runneth Over”) or where her dress was so tight that the zipper burst (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian Channels a Mermaid”).

The stories themselves (and Kim’s actions in posting such photos) make clear that she is on display and is complicit in this scenario. The language makes clear that if Kim Kardashian fails to put on an adequately sexy display, she is fair game for ridicule, thus allowing the media to take back some of the control wielded by Kim in her public image. The fact that she is often taking these pictures herself is used in the inauthenticity and illegitimacy framing rather than to empower her as willing and capable agent in her own fame (bypassing the middle man).

Kardashian herself perpetuates this framing through her own discourse, particularly when she talks about preferring to be all dolled up:

I feel most beautiful when I'm fully in hair and makeup in the middle of a photoshoot [...] I'm not going to lie and say that I spend a lot of time without makeup on. I really don't. I feel more myself, and I feel prettier when I have makeup on (Schwartz, 2012, “Kim Kardashian Bra and No Makeup Photo,” para. 5).

In fact this quote is interesting because it ran on People.com with a story about Kardashian posting a photo on her Twitter account of herself in sweat pants wearing no make-up. While the quote highlights again a certain level of awareness and agency on Kim’s part in terms of her public persona, statements such as these, simultaneously perpetuate the framing of her as “nothing more” than a persona – a fraud. The authenticity (and media value) of her natural beauty is additionally undermined by the use of the quote saying that she feels prettier and feels *more herself* with makeup. Though

it could be argued that such a feeling is not unusual, particularly for women in the public eye, the fact that Kim uses “full hair and makeup” as part of her own image of her authentic self helps to underline how inauthentic she truly is. In fact, this framing of Kim is employed by other female celebrities when trying to affirm their own authenticity (see, for instance Britney Spears’ comments to *Elle* magazine: "I love my jeans and my sweats – I'm really just a tomboy at heart. So it's really hard for me to be like Kim Kardashian and be makeup and hair ready every time I go out of my house" (Coughlan, 2012, para. 8). The interview ran with several professional shots of Spears – none of which featured her in sweats without make-up on).

In fact, another interesting narrative emerges when comparing Kim Kardashian to other celebrities in terms of appearance. In early 2012 TMZ was the only news source to report on a public appearance by model Georgia Salpa in London (TMZ.com, 2012, “Irish Kim Kardashian Lookalike Georgia Salpa – BUSTED in London”). What seemingly made the story so newsworthy to TMZ was that Salpa looks just like Kim, calling her the reality starlet’s “Irish doppelganger” and claiming that she might even be “hotter than Kim.” What is of interest here is TMZ’s clarification that Salpa does not earn a living as a Kim Kardashian impersonator but that she is “Ireland’s premiere glamor model.” The fact that someone who looks so much like Kim is employed in a more traditionally legitimized public career highlights once again how easily Kim Kardashian might have risen to fame herself in a more traditional medium, based solely upon her looks and sex appeal. The fact that she does not use them in a traditional sense (taking and releasing her own photos on her Instagram site rather than posing for Calvin Klein,

for instance) is used to delegitimize her presence in the public sphere and help contain her in her position as (nothing more than) reality television and former sex-tape star. Only TMZ makes this connection between beauty and the more “legitimized” public professions, and the connection is made implicitly, again perhaps with a certain reader (and Kardashian fan) in mind.

At the same time, however, one could argue that these frames which emphasize Kim Kardashian’s looks perpetuate a standard of physical beauty that most women cannot attain. Additionally, her ties to fashion, diet and cosmetic products (which will be discussed in the upcoming section on containment) all serve to capitalize on women’s insecurities about themselves and serve a larger narrative that they will never be beautiful enough. The news media’s use of frames of inauthenticity and illegitimacy here, then, could be said to serve a positive effect in that it helps to neutralize some of the more harmful messages being sent to women about their own appearance.

The fact that this framing does extend to other celebrities to some extent (see, for instance, “Best & Worst Beach Bodies” tabloid features) would then also appear to help deconstruct the more unrealistic standards perpetuated by the media. However, as Negra and Holmes (2008) note, this type of deconstruction of appearance is still highly gendered, and talk of male celebrities’ cellulite or plastic surgery is sparse in comparison. It is difficult then to make claims about how positive or negative an effect this type of body idolization and shaming has on the female public versus men. Still, it does seem that Kardashian who, as a reality television celebrity, does function to bridge a certain gap between the ordinary and the extraordinary (see Palmer, 2005) is positioned as a

more “relatable” star than, say, sticking with the examples used above, Cindy Crawford whose private life was comparatively much less exposed at the height of her fame. This could certainly be one reason that she is seemingly being held to a different standard and why, for instance, her being a “hero” to young girls simply for being pretty could be problematic.

#### **5.4 Containment in the Media**

As with the discussion on Snooki in the previous chapter, Kim Kardashian’s reality television stardom has limited the views of her as a legitimate star in general (compared to others who are judged to have more natural or authentic talent). More specifically, it has also limited the public spaces in which Kardashian is allowed to appear. This allowance is often tested, rejected or accepted through the tone of the news media reporting on her.

I would now like to focus on three ways in which the rules of the game are articulated through Kim: firstly, the relation between her and other (more legitimate) celebrities; secondly, the foray of Kim into more traditionally accepted paths of stardom (in particular, acting); thirdly, other business ventures in which she and her family are involved.

#### **Celebrity Hierarchy**

One of the more prominent stories questioning Kim Kardashian’s place in the public eye surrounded comments made by film and television star Jon Hamm. In an interview with *Elle U.K.* the actor was quoted to have said: “Whether it’s Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton or whoever, stupidity is certainly celebrated. Being a f\*\*king idiot is a

valuable commodity in this culture because you're rewarded significantly" (TMZ.com, 2012, "'Mad Men' Star Jon Hamm – Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton Are 'F\*\*king Idiots,'" para. 2). The story was picked up by all four of the news sources, and was drawn out over several weeks as Kim then responded to his comments, he re-affirmed his statement in other interviews and, subsequently, both made appearances (and, reportedly, amends) on a spring episode of the NBC television comedy *30 Rock*.

The underlying implication behind both the comments made by Jon Hamm as well as the extensive reporting on the interview and the fallout is that what he provides as a public figure is of more importance than what Kim Kardashian provides. Again, this thesis rejects the premises that what Hamm does is either more legitimate or more authentic than what Kardashian does. This position is based upon the theories and literature discussed in Chapter 2 such as Gamson's audience studies on authenticity as well as the history and popularity of reality television programming. However, as this research demonstrates, when examining the reporting more closely it becomes clear that some news media sources not only *accept* those premises but also *sell* them to their readers.

TMZ is once again the most sympathetic toward Kim Kardashian. When reporting on Hamm's remarks, they include a borderline joke which could be read as a mild defense of Kim (as well as a strong compliment to Hamm): "Clearly Hamm was not in his right mind when he gave the interview ... because he also said he doesn't 'even consider myself handsome.' Get well soon, Jon" (TMZ.com, 2012, "'Mad Men' Star Jon Hamm – Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton Are F\*\*king Idiots, para. 3-4). Furthermore,

the accompanying photo (Figure 5.1) could be read as a jab at Hamm, for though it could just be a bad shot, he looks disheveled and possibly drunk – not like an authority over the other two figures pictured with him.



TMZ.com

*Figure 5.1*

In their next related story TMZ reports on Kim’s reactions to the quote, saying that her response “takes the high road” by not lashing out at him: "Calling someone who runs their own businesses, is a part of a successful TV show, produces, writes, designs, and creates, 'stupid,' is in my opinion careless" (TMZ.com, 2012, “Kim Kardashian – Jon Hamm’s Talking Out of His Ass,” para. 3).<sup>46</sup>

*National Post*, on the other hand, framed Kim’s response much differently. Under the headline “Kim Kardashian to Jon Hamm – I’m not stupid, look at my hair!” reporter Leah Collins first calls Kardashian “The Butt” and then summarizes Kim’s viewpoint: “Idiocy may be celebrated, as Hamm suggests, but in Kardashian’s view, only a dum-

<sup>46</sup> CNN took the same angle with Kim’s response, calling it “the high road” (CNN.com, 2012, “Kim K. to Jon Hamm: Calling me stupid is careless”).

dum wouldn't realize it's profitable" (Collins, 2012, para. 3). The same Kim Kardashian quote as that above is then re-capped and the piece ends with Collins pointing out that "[s]ince then, Kardashian has posted five tweets about her hair colour, including a photo of herself in a blonde wig" (Collins, 2012, para. 6) which, contrary to the headline, are not directly connected by Kim to Hamm's quote in any way. It is the *National Post* that frames the pictures as a rebuttal, allowing Hamm's point to be reinforced and painting Kardashian as a bimbo who is only interested in appearances.

Interestingly Hamm is then reported to stand by his comments (Silverman, 2012 "Jon Hamm to Kim Kardashian: 'Stupid' Remark 'Not Personal'") but does make an effort to qualify what was said: "I don't know Ms. Kardashian [...] I know her public persona. What I said was meant to be more on pervasiveness of something in our culture, not personal, but she took offense to it, and that is her right" (Silverman, 2012, "Jon Hamm to Kim Kardashian: 'Stupid' Remark 'Not Personal,'" para. 3). It could be argued that in being given such a wide-ranging platform to express his views as well as his follow-up clarifications, (film and television actor) Jon Hamm is being endorsed by the media as a kind of moral compass in the cultural landscape. This moral compass also happens to embody many characteristics of the dominant member of capitalist patriarchal society – male, Caucasian, heterosexual, wealthy member of the elite. Again, the fact that Hamm sees Kim Kardashian as symptomatic of a larger (and certainly in his eyes negative) element in our culture is never problematized or expanded upon by Hamm or the media reporting on the remarks. It allows for what Bishop (2000) identifies as a superficial self-

criticism by the media – on the surface, the media seems to be reflective when, in fact, they neglect to examine the deeper power relations.

Readers can agree with Jon Hamm and feel that they, like him, are more media savvy than Kardashian fans. Kardashian becomes a symbol for “bad” while those employing that symbol never have to define what that “bad” is or what might be wrong with the system in general – even when they are themselves highly complicit in (and favoured by) the system. Once more, this was one of the few stories to be highly reported on in all four of the media, reinforcing not only Hamm’s message but the authority that Hamm is granted over Kardashian – an authority that is due to the hierarchal nature of celebrity more than an objective measure of the ideologically loaded notion of “talent” (Collins, 2008; Kavka & West, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008; Palmer, 2005; Williamson, 2010).

### **Acting as Talent**

The second way in which Kim Kardashian faces containment in the media is through responses to her efforts to transition into more traditionally recognized platforms for and sources of fame. In 2012 this was most commonly done through acting – one guest appearance on the Lifetime network television show *Drop Dead Diva* and one small part in the film *Tyler Perry’s Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor*. The first story was picked up by both People.com and CNN – though CNN was the only one to remind readers of bad performances past: “Here’s hoping Kardashian has improved since her acting debut in 2008’s ‘Disaster Movie,’ for which she was nominated for a Razzie Award for worst supporting actress” (CNN.com, 2012, “Kim

Kardashian to guest star on ‘Drop Dead Diva,’” para. 8). The article makes no mention of the fact that past Razzie Award<sup>47</sup> winners include Oscar winners Sandra Bullock and Al Pacino (Razzies.com, 2013), which would make a conceptual connection between Kim and more legitimized actors who are generally considered to be of more value than she to the public. The People.com article focuses less on Kim’s potential (or lack thereof), providing a straightforward list of Kardashian’s past roles as well as running a photo of her in character on the set of *Drop Dead Diva* (Lambert, 2012, “Kim Kardashian Goes to Jail on Drop Dead Diva”).

It was the same two news sources (CNN and People) that later reported on the release of the Tyler Perry movie trailer, in which Kardashian does appear. CNN entices readers to click on the embedded video of the trailer with the following promise: “Featuring Vanessa Williams, Jurnee Smollett and Brandy Norwood, among others, the trailer looks to be rife with sex, domestic violence and Kardashian, clad in a form-fitting mini dress” (CNN.com, 2012, “Watch: Kim K. in ‘Confessions of a Marriage Counselor’ trailer,” para. 3). Kardashian is not listed above with the other members of the cast, but characterized as a dramatic element in the film – a plot point. It is also interesting to note the mention here of Vanessa Williams, who herself rose to fame after winning a beauty pageant and then underwent a subsequent scandal over nude photos – a scandal that cost

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<sup>47</sup> Taken from the Razzies’ official website:

Annually presenting Dis-Honors for Worst Achievements in Film since 1980 in categories ranging from the obvious (Worst Picture, Actor and Actress) to the obtuse (Worst Prequel, Remake, Rip-Off or Sequel and Worst Screen Couple) The RAZZIES® today receive television, radio and newspaper coverage around the world (Razzies.com, 2013).

her the title of Miss America.<sup>48</sup> The turnaround in her own career in which she recovered from a scandal of a sexual nature to become a successful singer and actress in her own right demonstrate once again the inconsistencies against which celebrities (and particularly female celebrities) are judged. Additionally, the fact that Williams rose to fame as a beauty pageant winner is not often used as a critical frame to delegitimize her, though today such a path to stardom seems quite lengthy and arduous compared to that taken by Kim Kardashian.

The People coverage of the trailer's release is quite similar, noting that Kim is not doing much in the clip besides "smoldering" in a "skin tight dress." They also mention the cast, but are more interested than CNN in pointing out Kim's off-screen connection to costar Brandy Norwood. Brandy is the sister of Ray-J, Kim Kardashian's "ex-boyfriend." It is interesting to note that People here does not take advantage of the opportunity to mention Ray-J as co-star in Kim's infamous sex tape, which helps to sustain its position as one of the more sympathetic news sources in terms of celebrity (or the one most reliant upon good rapport with celebrities and their public relations teams). Neither article critiques Kim's appearances (or acting) in the trailer, nor do they offer much of a critique on the film itself. It would therefore seem that despite the occasional jab, the interest expressed by People and CNN on the subject is quite superficial – perhaps because bit parts in little-known television programs or niche market films are not perceived as much of a threat in the larger media landscape.

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<sup>48</sup> Though this story and scandal are fairly widely known about Williams, I did use her Wikipedia site as verification, which links to original articles on *People*, *Daily Mail*, *Huffington Post* as well as information from the Biography Channel ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanessa\\_L.\\_Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanessa_L._Williams) )

It would appear then, that as long as she remains on the periphery, Kim poses no great threat to the more traditional hierarchy of celebrity. However, when Kim attempts to usurp the hierarchy dominating her, she is quickly contained. In September of 2012, there was an abrupt response to a comment made by Kim Kardashian regarding the Hollywood Walk of Fame during an interview. She said that one of her aspirations was to become one of the first reality stars to gain a star on the infamous strip honoring Hollywood legends, both living and passed. As reported on People.com, a representative for the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce was quick to clarify that honorees have to “have a career in the acting business for five years or more” which, considering that most actors do not work consecutively, seems to be a choice of wording made specifically with Kardashian in mind (Silverman, 2012, “Kim Kardashian Denied a Star on Hollywood Blvd.”). Furthermore, the fact that the story appears under the headline “Kim Kardashian Denied a Star on Hollywood Boulevard” is somewhat misleading in that it suggests that some element of formality was involved in this request on Kim’s part. It allows readers to dismiss the request in much the same way as the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce does without providing logic or context on the rules (for example, fictional characters like Kermit the Frog have been honored on the Walk of Fame, walkoffame.com, 2013) There is no discussion on if or how it might one day be possible for reality stars to be on the Walk of Fame, or how notions of fame might be changing (see Braudy, 1997; Collins, 2008; Holmes, 2011; Kavka & West, 2010; Turner, 2004).

## **Business Ventures**

A third way in which the news media thwart Kim Kardashian's efforts to extend beyond her reality show and sex-tape texts involves the various business ventures in which she and her family are involved. The fact that the Kardashian name has evolved into a multi-million dollar brand does not arise often in reports. Though she does use her business success to defend herself publicly (see the aforementioned Jon Hamm statements and responses from Kim), it is not often mentioned by the media unless it is within the context of reporting on her extravagances (buying boyfriend Kanye West a brand new Lamborghini, TMZ.com, 2012 "Kim Kardashian Buys Kanye West SICKEST Birthday Present Ever ... A Lamborghini" ; carrying a Hermes Birkin bag as a gym bag, Lopez, 2012, "Kim Kardashian – The World's Most Expensive Gym Bag").

Kardashian, along with sisters Khloe and Kourtney, has been tied to several business ventures, including fashion design and retail, perfume and shoe websites, endorsements as well as promotional appearances, to name a few. However, in the news media world these ventures are often not reported on except in negative contexts, the most common example being the case of a lawsuit. TMZ was most likely to report on any story involving a Kardashian business venture and in 2012 ran several stories on lawsuits, or threats of such, being faced by Kim and her sisters.

For instance, as reported by TMZ in late 2012 the Kardashians found themselves in a legal battle over the name "Khroma," which they wanted to use as the name for their cosmetics line. The original "Chroma Make-up" owner was taking legal action against the sisters, whose use of a similar name, he claimed, would "tarnish his brand"

(TMZ.com, 2012, “The Kardashians – We’ll Win Makeup War ... With Our Secret Weapon”). No mention is given (in 2012 at least) as to if and how this case was settled.<sup>49</sup> By not following up on the story, TMZ is able to leave readers with the impression that the Kardashians are illegitimately stealing another company’s name for their business.

In conclusion, the ways in which the news media contain Kardashian, and her sisters, are at times more subtle than others. The sympathetic framing of Kardashian during the Jon Hamm blowout indicates perhaps an awareness of the more gossip-oriented media of the system at work. The fact that the *National Post* is consistent with its disdain seems in line with its positioning of itself as “serious” news source whose readers have little-to-no interest in the goings on of the Kardashians but to laugh at the absurdity once in a while. However, the overall tone gets more cautionary when Kim Kardashian forays into more traditional media roles, particularly ones that might shift her power from a peripheral figure to a more legitimized one. In this case both the gossip (People.com) and the hard news (CNN.com) sources are fairly direct in their attempts to undermine Kim’s legitimacy and question her intent. Finally, when it comes to other business ventures the news media are, for the most part, silent. Only TMZ reports on the multi-million dollar industries that circle and rely upon the Kardashian brand (as well as their own business prowess), and when it does, it is usually using negative frames of lawsuits and “selling out.” Together these narratives function to contain Kim’s power in

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<sup>49</sup> A quick Google search suggests that the sisters prevailed in this conflict as Khroma Beauty by the Kardashians comes up as the first and second websites under the search term “Khroma.”

the media, so that her story of success need not be looked upon as a model for other women.<sup>50</sup>

### 5.5 Conclusion

As stated at the outset of this Chapter, the findings of this analysis were at times surprising and at times expected. The framing of Kim's sex-tape fame as illegitimate helps to contain the threat posed by women who manage to publicly wield the power of their own sexuality. The complementary frames of inauthenticity and illegitimacy that surround discussions of Kim's beauty help to further contain such a threat. The idea that she does not belong in any mainstream media text is perpetuated by the reporting on her as a lesser star, an untalented actress, and a manipulative business woman. Surprisingly, however, when it comes to issues most favoured by the gossip columnists, the media are more forgiving. Her romantic relationships, though subject to jokes and speculation, were not as often used to undermine her fame. As mentioned several times throughout the chapter, this is perhaps due to journalists' awareness of their potential audience. It is important to note that not only are regular TMZ readers merely clicking through the day's headlines, but so are fans of Kim Kardashian looking for details about her latest date with Kanye or trying to find out the baby's name. It is precisely this point that illuminates a gap in this research – the audience.

Due to time and length constraints, I had to narrow my corpus of data. It is significant to note that I used articles whose main subject was either Kim or one of her family members and did not choose to analyze gossip recap articles nor those with one-

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<sup>50</sup> The idea of Kim (and Snooki) as role model will be further developed in the concluding chapter.

liner references to Kim Kardashian. These last two categories of articles are extremely worthy of further exploration, however. As noted earlier, for instance, many of the one-liner uses of Kim Kardashian's name were in a negative and ridiculing context. It is likely that those who are least familiar with Kim Kardashian would not seek out articles about her, but instead would come across her name in such a disparaging context which creates a different idea of her persona in their mind. For these readers, in a way similar to Jon Hamm, Kim Kardashian can then become symbolic of something "bad" that they often cannot articulate. She is a sign of a turn down the wrong cultural path, a decline of public values, and everything that is wrong with the media. When this symbol is also the site of sexual female identity (and power) the underlying imbalances of the system begin to emerge. Kim Kardashian herself is not "evil" and the threat she poses is not to "good" in North America. The framing of her as such is part of a larger cultural narrative that can and should be studied more closely, as I hope to have, in some way, achieved with this thesis.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary**

This thesis offered a feminist analysis of the gendered framing of public (news) discourses in relation to notions of talent, authenticity and containment – particularly as they frame female reality television celebrities today. It would be difficult to argue that the systems of fame in North America have remain unchanged – particularly over the last couple of decades with the rise of the internet and reality television as popular means of communication. The rise of numerous “talentless,” “lazy” nobodies into the ranks of the cultural elite, has elicited a general sense of malaise both within and outside the ranks of the media. Taking the position that notions of work and talent are subjective and ideological (Holmes, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008), I set out to examine the discourses which call upon these values to frame female celebrities in ways that are perpetuating, if not causing, this general sense of public malaise. It was my hope that in debating, not the cultural value or relevance of reality programming and its stars, but the ways in which the media shape our understanding of their value, that some of the underlying ideological motivations might be revealed.

One of the central tenets of Western capitalist ideology is the notion that, if one works hard enough, one can achieve anything and attain success (usually defined through riches and/or fame) (Cross & Littler, 2010, p. 407; Williamson, 2010). One of the central tenets of individualistic democratic ideology is the notion that everyone has a fair and equal shot at the capitalist game (Cross & Littler, 2010; Marx, 1975; Tocqueville, 1999). The celebrity – as uniquely understood in today’s industrialized and networked society

(for discussion on difference between historical conceptions of fame versus today's idea of "celebrity", see Chapter 2) – is a site in which the myth of meritocracy can be packaged and sold to audiences through the media every day. These ideas, which permeate all aspects of this thesis, shaped the way that I approach celebrity studies and guided me to a research question that was not interested in the *whys* of fame today, but more the *why not's*.

When looking past issues of merit in the celebrity system, two things become quite clear – firstly, the denigration of celebrities in the media today is highly gendered and, secondly, this talk about women extends beyond the media into our everyday vocabulary used not only to discuss these celebrities, but also other public female figures, and, I would assert, women in our own lives. As a number of scholars (Fairclough, 1988; Jiwani, 2006; Holmes, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008) have noted, the media generally, and the news media more specifically, do serve a prescriptive function; it becomes more crucial than ever to explore this prescriptive function when the media use "ordinary" people who have risen to fame to relay these messages. As asserted by Gareth Palmer (2005), "[a]n analysis of how such people are treated is therefore revealing about what the media suggest is the correct way for us to behave, both as enterprising individuals and as 'ordinary' people" (p. 38). It is this process that I wanted to examine here.

My research question was: how do mainstream news media report on today's female celebrities in ways that minimize their authenticity and legitimacy as members of the public sphere? My hypothesis was that for Snooki, a reality figure known for her excesses and grotesqueness, the question of authenticity would rarely come up. Instead,

she would most often be framed in the news in terms of legitimacy. My second hypothesis was that for Kardashian, whose fame was kick-started through a “leaked” sex tape, both her authenticity and her legitimacy as a public figure would be called into question. Drawing upon the structuralist feminist perspective that the patriarchal capitalist system, and its media, do not provide all with equal opportunities (Butler, 1993; Hall, 1993; Jiwani, 2006), I illustrated how ideals of talent and work are employed in ways that delegitimize both the presence and the work of female reality television celebrities in the media today.

As was shown in Gamson’s (1994) studies on celebrity, as well as various explorations of “realism” in relation to reality television (Andacht, 2004; 2012; Dubrofsky, 2011; Hall, 2006) the importance and discernment of authenticity in media figures differs among audience members. This complex process, and in particular its relations to ethical and moral judgments (Taylor, 1991), is certainly something that could be explored in further research. Here, however, my interest was not to prove whether or not Kim Kardashian and Snooki are themselves authentic, legitimate stars, but the ways in which the discourse surrounding them perpetuates ideas of them being (in)authentic,(il)legitimate stars. From there, perhaps some larger hypotheses could be drawn about these frames applied to other women in the public sphere to see how, for instance, Hillary Clinton’s legitimacy as a public figure, like Snooki’s, might be framed in terms of her ability as a wife and/or mother.

My findings, however, did not always coincide with my hypotheses. In the case of Snooki, it was particularly interesting to see how the narrative of her pregnancy was

handled. At first, Snooki, following her persona and behavior as demonstrated on the *Jersey Shore*, was poised as a sort of sexual threat (see Driscoll on sexual containment, 2002; see also Dyer, 2004, on Marilyn Monroe's innocence neutralizing the threat posed by her sexuality). As her pregnancy carried on, Snooki seemed to be domesticated both within and beyond the media. The news articles surrounding her were less interested in issues of authenticity and legitimacy than they were of transformation. However, within these articles, Snooki was granted a platform through which to affirm her own authenticity, which, as pointed out by Palmer (2005), is one of the most vital elements of reality television stardom. This notion of an unchanged authentic Snooki (whether it was the product of Snooki herself or the machinery, including the media, surrounding her) allowed her to maintain her own claim to fame and the rewards of her own "labours of the self" (see Hearn, 2006; 2008; Palmer, 2005) while negotiating the role she had to play in the larger prescriptive narrative of transformation into motherhood. In Snooki's case, then, it would appear that the media was successful in containing the threat she posed (both physical and sexual – see Driscoll, 2002; Dyer, 2004; Heineken, 2003; Rowe, 1995) as an out of control woman.

Kim Kardashian, on the other hand, was much more often framed in terms of inauthenticity – though the news media at times were more hesitant to question this than I had anticipated, particularly in the cases of her romantic relationships. However, when it came to her sex tape and her appearance, Kardashian was often framed in terms of inauthenticity and illegitimacy. Even in her own words Kardashian denies the authenticity of the sex tape and, thus, the power of her sexuality in her own fame (which,

as stated in that chapter, has been a legitimized path to fame for other starlets before her). While Snooki, on the one hand, held onto her claims to authenticity which had propelled her into the public spotlight, Kardashian's commodity-value seems much more tied to a carefully constructed public image. The fact that she does not offer her "true" self to the public in the way that Snooki and other reality television stars do (Palmer, 2005) may account for some of the more intense scrutiny surrounding her, for it signals perhaps a misinterpretation on her part into which level of celebrity she falls.

A notable finding, however, in both case studies was the way in which the news media contain these two female celebrities in terms of the texts and domains in which they are allowed to venture. This could, on the surface, be due to an inability to overcome Marshall's (1997) boundaries separating the different types of celebrity (film, television, music), but when examined within the larger context of celebrity business ventures (i.e. Tiger Woods' endorsement deals, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs' clothing lines), seems to indicate a gendered boundary. The news' silence on Snooki and Kim's businesses (clothing lines, perfumes, endorsement deals and numerous other avenues of professional income) perpetuates an idea that these two women *do not* work hard and *do not* have intelligence. When the media did report on these stars' ventures beyond the confines of their respective television shows or sex tapes, it was often in a negative or minimizing light: Kardashian in terms of law suits and Snooki in terms of peripheral issues (i.e. statements made about politics at her boxing team launch). This then sets standards of where these women do and do not belong publicly – standards that extend to and affect all women who attempt to achieve something publicly.

Despite the extremism of these two female figures, I would argue that a couple of general conclusions might be culled from the narratives surrounding them in 2012. Firstly, it would appear that discourses of talent and agency are still central to the workings of the celebrity system in North America – even when used to frame our talk about reality television stars. Contrary to the more traditional conceptions of achievement or talent-based fame, as well as the ideal of uncovering who our stars *really are* (their authentic selves), reality stars' whole existence is rooted in a different conception of fame – one that relies upon a public performance of the authentic self while no longer requiring an achievement or special talent (Cross & Littler, 2010; Holmes, 2010; Negra & Holmes, 2008; Weber, 2011; Williamson, 2010). Secondly, the application of these frames of talent and authenticity was highly gendered in ways that echo the traditional public containment of women – sexually, physically and textually (Driscoll, 1999; 2002; Heinecken, 1993; Rowe, 1995). Displays of sexuality were most undermined by the news media (usually in terms of disgust, mockery or normative questioning of authenticity and morality), while attempts by the stars to venture beyond the reality television texts were contained – either minimized or framed negatively. On the other hand, the news media were more likely to use positive framing (which, for reality stars is most often seen in the form of affirmations of authenticity) when women were seen to be fulfilling more traditional, domesticated roles such as wife and mother (Driscoll, 2002; Weber, 2010).

## 6.2 Reflections

The empirical research approach offered here provides a useful and original framework which can be applied to other female members of the public sphere to examine how such ideological and gendered discourses shape our understanding of women's work as well as, more generally, women's roles in our society. This unique empirical approach to a subject that is often approached theoretically did, however, pose several challenges. Despite its empirical base, my methodology was rooted in the humanist (interpretivist) perspective and used qualitative data analysis. For ease of access I chose to use online news articles and culled from a range of sources. I worked with the online versions of the *National Post* and CNN. Both are considered to be more in the "hard-news" tradition than my other sources (People.com and TMZ). Readers of *National Post* and CNN are more likely to be white-collar, middle class Canadians and Americans, respectively (National Post Media Kit, 2011). The limited traffic data I was able to track down suggests that readers of People and TMZ are less educated and are more likely to be female (2013 Rate Card People, 2013; [www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com), 2013). This leads to a fairly basic critique not only of this thesis, but also of research that draws on the gendered distinctions within celebrity reporting – the notion that, "at least with respect to the celebrity magazine market, it is the desires of the female audience which are posited as driving the interest in these representations" (Negra & Holmes, 2008, p.15). As was noted in the previous chapter, one of the biggest gaps in this research is the audience. If we were to accept that most of the readers of these news stories are female, it is worth

questioning why they themselves accept, and seek out, such discourses about other women. How does our consumption of these narratives and images, as women, shape our own understanding of our place and our relation to other women in our everyday lives? As important as such questions are, they fall outside the scope of the present thesis.

Another important issue was that of sampling. After limiting the data collection to articles written between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2012 and omitting items returned in the searches that were videos or photo galleries, I was left with hundreds of articles about my two chosen case studies. I then encountered one major limitation of this research project – the difficulty in conducting qualitative analysis on hundreds of articles. I necessarily had to focus my research more, as discussed in the previous chapter on Kim Kardashian, and chose (during the course of the research, following an emergent research design, as articulated by Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to focus solely on articles whose main subject was either Snooki or Kim. This necessarily implied, on the part of the reader, some level of interest in the star. The articles I chose not to look at, articles with one line or less about the star and/or gossip columns containing multiple short stories on multiple celebrities (usually with colorful commentary thrown in), do not necessarily share this same implied reader. People who have no prior knowledge of Snooki and Kim Kardashian may find their most frequent contact with information about that star to be in these last two categories. The implication that those who are *not* a part of these stars' fan bases are gleaning all information about them from usually derogatory remarks is worth noting and further examination.

Another methodological challenge faced by this, and most kinds of celebrity analysis, is the attempt to separate the “person” from the “image.” As noted by Negra and Holmes (2008), it is natural, but very impractical, for a researcher to try to separate the two conceptually and study one in dialectic relation to the other: “[A]s celebrity only exists (for us) within representation, this question immediately becomes a methodological tautology: it is to assume that we can separate the ‘real’ intentions and actions of (for example) [Britney] Spears as distinct from her media image” (p. 21). When talking about the frames employed by the media, I did my best to note when things were said by the stars in question versus things that were said about them. On this, most basic, level, a bit of a conceptual distinction can be made. However, when it comes to other angles of the story (the photo alongside, for instance) or even the story itself, it is difficult to note who is controlling what. That being said, the concern with this thesis, again, was not so much the star’s own agency, power or merit, but the ways in which those are reported on in the media regardless of whose choices those are.

More generally, one of the main challenges in this study was due to its nature as a qualitative project. In order to be able to make connections, I did have to choose which articles I considered to best relate to and support my points. I conducted a thematic analysis and focused on stories as certain themes and narratives emerged from the overall data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, as much of the analysis was interpretation, some might have interpreted the data differently, which is one of the reasons I did try to include as many news sources as possible and make clear connections when I could. In some instances, I focused more on wording choices while in others I

conducted semiotic analysis on the accompanying photos. Again, these were choices made on the part of the researcher and I could have easily chosen instead, for instance, to conduct only linguistic analysis on each piece. I do feel that would have limited the results and drifted too far into a discussion on semantics, which could have eclipsed some of the larger issues at stake.

In summary, then, I do feel as though the various methods of textual analysis employed here generated fruitful results. Results that can, and should, I believe, be debatable, as they are the interpretations of one researcher examining hundreds of articles. A key avenue that remains unexplored are those articles whose mention of Snooki or Kim Kardashian is more casual – either in the form of one-liner references or as part of larger gossip columns in which they are related to other stars in the celebrity hierarchy. Furthermore, in not including some type of foil, a more traditionally talented female star (Jessica Simpson or Lindsay Lohan for instance), or, contrarily, a male star, I have missed the opportunity to investigate if and how such frames of legitimacy and authenticity are extended to others (though I do believe I have offered a useful empirical framework through which this could be done in the future, particularly if one wanted to construct a comparative design). Additionally, it could be worthwhile to examine how audiences (either through interviews or focus groups) react to, internalize and express their own thoughts on the matter. This last thought could be taken further to examine specifically fans (and “haters”) of these stars and their reactions to and interpretations of what they read about them in the various news media.

Finally, I want to come back to the two key issues that have shaped this thesis – legitimacy and authenticity. As stated throughout, the notion of there being a legitimate path to fame versus an illegitimate one is something that this thesis rejects. Surely, there are people who would argue against this point – some ways of becoming famous are in fact more “legitimate” than others (perhaps Jon Hamm, see Silverman, 2012). I have no redress for such a concern, as is too far beyond my epistemological perspective. This thesis was not interested in debating the merit of celebrities like Snooki and Kardashian, and my aim was not to defend (or attack) their presence in the public sphere. However, it was challenging to examine the ways in which the media defend (more often attack) their presence in the public sphere without falling into a defensive position. I hope that a balance was struck, but certainly found that to be a key challenge throughout this process.

As a female (and feminist) communications researcher, it is important to note that there are serious social politics at stake in this discussion. The gendered denigration of women in the media both influences and reflects larger issues about the worth of women and what it means to *really* be a woman. Examining this denigration at a closer level, using a mixed methodology, allows some of the underlying assumptions to surface. In showing how Kim Kardashian and Snooki – two of the most controversial and detested female celebrities today – are consistently framed as being inauthentic and/or illegitimate, I hope to have demonstrated that such frames are *not* objective measures, nor do they provide insight as to what it truly means to be (these) women. They are prescriptive tools used to shape certain ideas of what and how women should be, most of which being powerless, attractive and domestic.

### 6.3 Relevance

In choosing two reality stars as case studies here, I have purposely gone to the extreme in an attempt to expose some of the more subtle frames used to report on women today. As stated several times throughout this work, I was not interested in defending the actions, comments or legitimacy of reality television stars. My theoretical framework rejects the notion that their “work” is of less value to society than other stars in the media (see Cultural Studies discussion in Theoretical Framework) or that their fans are less educated or less cultured than fans of those who have risen to fame in more traditional ways. I agree with Su Holmes’ (2010) assertion that the notion of “talent” is an ideological one, and I believe that this ideology is most clearly visibly at work in its application to women who, for the most part, have had much less control over what appears in the public sphere (Durham, 2003; Lind, 2010). Furthermore, just as beautiful women such as Kim Kardashian have been publicly celebrated for years – perhaps da Vinci’s Mona Lisa might have gotten her own reality show back in the day – so too have disruptive women like Snooki been punitively sidelined or humiliated (see Rowe, 1995 on the “unruly woman”).

Clearly, many faults can be found in Snooki and Kim Kardashian. One of the most common critiques I have encountered in this research is the fact that these women, like it or not, are looked upon as role models. To try to defend Snooki’s desperate displays, though perhaps symptomatic of a deeper malaise in young women, is futile. Her behavior is often inappropriate and, at times, dangerous. Young girls looking for a model

to emulate and admire have much more worthy contenders in the public sphere. For Snooki, then, to become successful (in America, that is to be rich and famous) from such behavior is often read as a decline in values. On the other hand, we could laud the idea that a woman who does not look, talk or behave the way that women have been told they *should* has not only surfaced in the media, but was able to become a (successful) cultural phenomenon. Stepping aside the presumption that this reception by viewers must have tapped into *something* (again, Holmes', 2010, idea of an ideologically-based talent is useful here, what exactly is Snooki's X-factor?), it at least shows that there are more possible roles for women (on television and in public) than one might have thought prior.

Kardashian, too, walks this paradoxical line. If we are at a point now where we celebrate people for baring their most intimate private moments (some through reality television, others on Facebook or Youtube) what kind of decline does that signify? And if that signals a decline, what does that say about a society unwilling to acknowledge, let alone publicly debate the role that sex and pornography plays in shaping not only our relations with one another, but young people's relations to themselves and their own sexuality? Kim Kardashian's status has lifted her to a position where she is, like it or not, a role model for young women. This makes it all the more important to examine how we talk about her in the media. Figures like Kardashian may have now come to signify "bad" – or even "evil" – but that process is reflective of a larger ideology at work, an ideology whose motives and workings can and should be examined more closely.

The news media are not only complicit in this scenario – they are key to its prescriptive function: the news shapes ideology (Deacon et al., 2007; Fairclough, 1988).

It helps to build and sustain ideas of the ways people, and specifically women, should look, talk and behave (Jiwani, 2006). The news media paradoxically also rely upon the continued success of the figures they use to sew these prescriptive narratives and therefore the critiques must be subtle (Cross & Littler, 2010). The authenticity and legitimacy frames here are applied without articulation of the rules. They can therefore be applied unevenly, sporadically, and can be extended to certain public figures at will.

I have chosen two very extreme and polarizing examples in an attempt to show how the way we talk and think about the *worst* women in society extends beyond them. The way we talk about Snooki's sexuality, for instance, or Kim's body influences the discourses surrounding other reality stars like Susan Boyle or Kelly Clarkson (both of whom rose to fame on talent-based reality shows through their ability to sing). It further informs discussions of Jessica Simpson's baby weight struggles, which spirals into unrealistic standards for all women in the public eye (see Kate Middleton<sup>51</sup>, subject of baby weight loss scrutiny *on the same day* she gave birth, Nessif, 2013).

Still, there are some who say that women call it upon themselves – that their emotionality and openness make them “more compelling” subjects than men (Negra & Holmes, 2008, p. 15). This point is not only essentialist, but it also masks some of the larger issues faced by women today. Women in Texas are fighting to win back reproductive rights they had won in the 1970s (Baker, 2013). Over 60 million girls are missing in India (Hundal, 2013) while in Canada teenage girls are killing themselves in

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<sup>51</sup> Kate Middleton serves as an interesting counter-example to Snooki and Kim Kardashian in that she is also famous seemingly “for nothing” but her status, behavior and overall persona make her much a more acceptable woman in the public sphere.

sexual shame (see Rehteah Parson's case, [CBCnews.ca](http://CBCnews.ca), 2012; Amanda Todd case, Crawford, 2013). Changing our minds about the merits of Snooki certainly will not bring an end to female persecution in the world, but changing the way we talk about women publicly has the potential to at least change the way we think about their worth.

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## Appendix: Links to Articles Discussed

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