

**What Not to Wear:**  
**Policing the Body through Fashion Criticism**

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## Abstract

Earlier studies investigating reality fashion television revealed that while participants and audiences are aware of mechanisms of surveillance and shame; scholarship also documented that critical distance from the program's methods are not necessarily ideologically liberating for participants or audience. Indeed, as I argue and document in this current study, participants in reality fashion television shows remain caught in a pernicious power dynamic that is part and parcel of these shows. Specifically, by exploring examples from three popular fashion reality television programs—*America's Next Top Model*, *Project Runway*, and *Fashion Police*—and by considering theories of fashion, gender, and power, I question the problematic ways in which popular media talk about fashion and clothing choices. Further, by drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, I critically examine the judgments and assumptions that fashion critics impose on participants whose sartorial appearance they may find wanting. More generally, my study investigates the limitations of the widely accepted belief that fashion is a form of self-expression while I end with some more positive examples of fashion advocacy.

## Introduction:

### Fashion as Self-Expression

In her article “Reconsidering Reflexivity: Audience Research and Reality Television,” Katherine Sender examined the popular fashion reality television shows that stage personal makeovers, such as *What Not to Wear* or *Starting Over*, showing that they use shaming and humiliation to effect change in the participants. Moreover, Sender’s study shows that audiences’ perception of such surveillance and critical distance from the program’s methods are not necessarily ideologically liberating. Indeed, as I will suggest in this current study, participants in fashion reality television often remain caught in a pernicious power dynamic that is part and parcel of these shows. Specifically, by focusing on three popular fashion reality television shows, and by considering theories of fashion, gender, and power, I question the ways in which popular media talk about fashion and clothing choices; further, I critically examine the judgments and assumptions that fashion critics impose on participants whose sartorial appearance they may find wanting. More generally, my study seeks to investigate the limitations of the widely accepted belief that fashion is a form of self-expression.

Underpinning my study is the belief that clothing for both men and women is culturally defined and shaped. Cultural norms and expectations related to the meaning of being a woman are closely linked to appearance. British feminist film studies scholar Laura Mulvey has shown that these standards are reflective of the male gaze, which women have been conditioned to desire and to adhere to as conventional femininity pushed on them through representations of women in film and other mediums (Mulvey, 1975). She suggests that the approval of men is rewarded by our society with acceptance and privilege. Taking inspiration from Mulvey, I seek to challenge the notion that fashion is about self-expression, and to that end I propose to examine the ways in which

fashion critics discuss fashion and bodies when women choose to step outside of the tight parameters of conventional beauty standards associated with typical femininity. These non-conforming fashion decisions are often stigmatized and women who refuse to follow the dominant trends are subject to negative criticism; these non-conformist women are routinely proclaimed to be unattractive, or undesirable, or unprofessional because they are not participating in fashion correctly, refusing to follow prescribed fashion rules.

Scholars have begun to conduct research exploring the problematics of these fashion prescriptions, which exert implicit as well as explicit pressure on the construction of identities and bodies. Laura Clarke and Meredith Griffin's study, which concentrates on women between the ages of fifty and seventy, examined how women experience ageism in relation to the ageing process. They study its effect on women's bodies and appearance, and the way that this process affects the relationships in their lives including personal and professional ones. This study uncovered that women's experience of ageing appearances influenced the way in which they participated in a beauty regime. The study contends that women's experiences with their beauty regime are part of a "fight against invisibility" (Clarke & Griffin, 2008: 653). In a similar vein, Jane Workman and Kim Johnson conducted a study discussing our natural inclination to "group [someone or something] into cognitive categories based on their similarities" (Workman & Johnson, 1994: 208). The study suggests that two fundamental bases for categorization are gender and age. For example, when people are categorized into male and female, and subsequently masculine or feminine, people will behave toward that person on the basis of the expectations they hold for that label rather than the expectations they hold for that individual.

Through different choices in clothing, hair and makeup styles, or through the way women choose to emphasize (or de-emphasize) their body, they make decisions about how to present

themselves to the world. Fueled by these theories and insights, my study seeks to explore, more specifically, whether any of the choices surrounding appearance seem out of the question because they do not conform to conventional beauty standards which women may see as crucial for gaining respect, attention, and affirmation through the discourse of fashion and fashion criticism. Instead, their presentation of self through dress is a form of impression management wherein they present themselves in a certain way to prevent humiliation or rejection.

To illuminate this concept of impression management, in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1995), sociologist Erving Goffman examines the ways in which people present themselves when meeting someone or a group of people face-to-face. Goffman likens real life to the stage, where people have their ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ personas, which are very different. The ‘front stage’ persona is categorized as when someone is in a social interaction or has an ‘audience’, whereas the ‘back stage’ persona is described as when they can relax. Goffman theorizes that people use “impression management” in social interaction in order to prevent awkwardness and embarrassment, which is managed by having the same “definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1959:13). In other words, people enter social interactions with an expected outcome and therefore play their appointed role, and expect others to do the same. Goffman describes appearance as playing an important role in the ‘front stage’ persona. Goffman’s theories apply to my study as he states that appearance and dress communicate to the audience because they have recognized meaning. This points to clothing being a signifier as opposed to an expression of the wearer.

Social requirements force consumers into conspicuous consumption. For example, someone might spend the last pennies in their savings to buy nice clothes instead of groceries so that they can look good for a job interview because, so the logic goes, if they look good, they are



more likely to be hired and promoted. Through consumption of fashion, they are also bending to societal requirements. In the context of the fashion criticism, as performed in reality television makeover shows, participants often feel they must comment disparagingly because they don't want to seem like they don't have enough status or cultural capital to be able to participate. In addition, the fashion system requires certain economic and material conditions; first, it requires consumers with enough economic capital and desire to spend their capital on self-adornment; and second, it requires enough variation of different styles of dress and trends in order to compel consumers (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Social media works as a platform for millions of consumers to display their wealth and for others to classify their tastes.

The tone surrounding public discussions of fashion suggests that the function of clothing goes beyond simply covering the body for reasons of modesty or cold climate. Rather, fashion demonstrates that the choices we make surrounding our clothes have political, cultural, social, economic, and even religious implications. Certainly, fashion has been elevated as a form of self-expression, but it is also a way that wearers placate the desires and expectations of the people around them. While this understanding of fashion has been explored in cultural criticism, it is evidenced by and underlies the very criticisms of fashion we encounter every day, consciously or otherwise. This project is important as it seeks to illuminate the divergent opinions and experiences when it comes to fashion, and the meanings that are belied by those expressing fashion criticism.

Research into fashion and the body, and research into shame have been conducted in separate studies, whereas combining the study of fashion, body, and shame has yet to be addressed within fashion studies. Recent studies reflect the increasing significance both of the experience of shame in popular culture (Ronson, 2016), and also of fashion phenomena for studies of bodies, gender and religion (Twigg, 2013; Entwistle, 2015). Consequently, this project investigates a

cluster of relevant themes including the following: the feelings of shame tied to fashion, the obstacles surrounding participating in fashion, and the powerful fashion critics who determine what is and what is not appropriate fashion. Specifically, in the following, I question what it means to be considered *fashionable* and whether or not fashionability is a positive or negative descriptor. I examine criticisms of individuals who don't 'do fashion' right, even in the face of their efforts to do fashion justice, and I question why even those who hold the power of fashion criticism, such as myself in my position as a stylist, are often left feeling intimidated by a systemic popular media apparatus that seems to act very much as a disciplinary social tool.

In the following, I propose to investigate three fashion television shows that have been enormously popular, cultivating mass audiences over a number of years. My corpus of analysis includes first, popular fashion makeover show *What Not to Wear*, in which participants typically go from frumpy to chic, and from flighty to more responsible; second, *Project Runway*, in which contestants compete for the best design with weekly eliminations of the design perceived to be the weakest by a panel of judges; and third, *America's Next Top Model*, a show in which a panel of judges critiques hopeful models, often by juxtaposing losers and winners and often with sadistic ridiculing of perceived fashion faux pas. In all three shows, as we shall see, the narratives are concerned with eradicating participants' errors; in some shows, the concern is also with transformations that are both physical and spiritual; a journey enabled by experts who guide the participants rewriting their bodies and selves; these experts predictably communicate the rules of fashion and exert the tools of shame and humiliation—as well as of praise—in order for participants to find success physically and spiritually by following the hosts' fashion rules. These shows often rely on a before and after formula as part of the conversion experience, and participants are routinely proclaiming themselves to be more attractive and happier and more

competent persons by the end of the show. The moment of the reveal is typically a narrative highlight of such shows, adding to the show's mass entertainment success. Indeed, the success of these shows has been enormous—suggesting, moreover, that not only do the participants undergo transformations but so does the viewing audience in whom the various hosts and panels of judges instill the fashion rules and prescriptions.

Consequently, in this major research essay, I propose to investigate critically the perniciousness and pervasiveness of fashion criticisms that are launched against individuals on fashion reality television. I do so by examining concrete case studies alongside fashion theory, and I explore how such fashion criticism is designed to dismantle individual readers' and viewers' value systems. I explore how such critiques lead to conformity through external policing that eventually becomes internal policing or disciplinary self-policing. In the end, my critical approach to these reality television shows is to also offer an alternative to shaming and humiliating participants—and I end by advocating for models that steps outside of the formulaic rules of shows dominated by traditional beauty ideals and problematic fashion policing. I end by embracing fashion models of diversity and inclusion.

## Chapter 1:

### Theorizing Fashion Criticism: Concepts and Methods

Fashion theorists such as Elizabeth Wilson and Joanne Entwistle argue that fashion plays a significant role in constructing subjects as social beings (Wilson, 2003; Entwistle, 2000). Clothing furthers social interaction, which we see underscored in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the online interactions of social media users. This is an important idea as it points to the critical significance of fashion and fashion criticism. Dress is an indicator of our personal worth, values and beliefs as well as those of the culture in which we live, as Patricia A. Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab argue, as they write: “we often expect others to be able to understand what we are communicating through these sartorial devices, and we in turn read the clothing messages sent by others” (Cunningham & Voso Lab, 1991: 2). Their study argues that dress is a means of communication; our dress communicates our values and identity to others, while we also read the identities of others by reading their dress. Though such communication might point to self-expression, points even more to the relevance of Michel Foucault’s theory of power and control, as we shall see below. People are in strict control over the ways in which they present themselves and their personal image as a medium of expression, as they are acutely aware of being observed (Foucault, 1979).

Consequently, fashion theory centrally underpins my study, and my key concepts are all related to fashion. For the purposes of my study, I use fashion theory to define *non-fashion* as individual indifference to fashion as well as the rejection of fashion. Fashion may be rejected for a variety of reasons such as moral, activist, feminist and class (Davis, 1992). Shame and fashion has much in common with such critiques of fashion. Those participating in non-fashion often use arguments, such as anti-capitalist, feminist or environmentalist arguments, to challenge fashion trends or capitalist values. According to early 20<sup>th</sup> century fashion theorist Georg Simmel, making

a conscious choice to dress in non-fashion is simply another expression of fashion that serves to both differentiate and assimilate groups of people (Simmel, 1904). In other words, assimilation into a group can also take the form of a non-fashion choice, where the goal of that group is to challenge mainstream fashion trends (Schiermer, 2010).

Similarly, Cunningham and Voso Lab write, “clothing helps to define our identity by supplying cues and symbols that assist us in categorizing within the culture” (Cunningham & Voso Lab, 1991: 11). Fashion and anti-fashion strategies are always deeply social, in that they are performed to audiences, with the aim of being recognized and valued by others. A person’s values are communicated partially by the individual’s attire because it communicates a message about who the person is. Clothing, such as a bikini, or a pair of jeans, can be understood in terms of the symbolic value attributed to material objects, such attributions being guided by class, lifestyle and personal choice (Bourdieu, 2010). Therefore, one’s attire and presentation of self are strongly connected to economic, symbolic, and cultural capital as opposed to self-expression, a point that requires further investigation within the context of consumption.

*Fashion and Conspicuous Consumption:*

When we consider fashion as a form of social behavior, we observe that it is about making comparisons, as opposed to being about self-expression. These comparisons could be between individuals or groups, and the comparisons are about gaining social status in comparison to others (Bourdieu, 2010; Goffman, 1959). Georg Simmel argues that for the individual, fashion serves the purposes of both differentiation and of belonging (Simmel, 1904). Simmel’s theories suggest that fashionable dress is about both belonging to a group and distinguishing oneself from others. The purchase of fashion items, and participation in fashion criticism through social media provides the

public with a medium to display cultural capital. This term, coined by Pierre Bourdieu, attempts to expand the category of capital to something more than just the economic and to identify culture as a form of capital. The term cultural capital refers to non-financial assets that involve educational, social, and intellectual knowledge (Bourdieu, 1997). These are the abilities and the knowledge that inform people as they participate in social life. Everything from good manners and social graces to being well informed about current events can be considered cultural capital. Knowledge about design and fashion also contribute to one's cultural capital, and this knowledge is underscored by the participation in fashion criticism.

Thorstein Veblen refers to consumers who buy expensive items to display wealth and income rather than to cover their real needs as participating in conspicuous consumption. Veblen analyzes the relation between one's physical circumstances and their subjective values, and states that the working class does not want to redistribute wealth in such a way as to dismantle the upper class, but rather they seek to imitate them (Veblen, 2010). Purchasing clothing, and especially luxury designer goods, provides the opportunity to participate in conspicuous consumption. Garments and accessories are not simply clothing, now they become symbols of knowledge. Yes, purchases may contribute to one's personal style, but they also communicate that one can afford to purchase these items and that they have the education — and therefore taste — to select goods of such quality. Essentially their socioeconomic background and education — their cultural capital — allow them to make 'better' choices due to their cultural capital. Concurrently the purchase of luxury items allows one to elevate regular consumption to a form of conspicuous consumption. Veblen looks at the cultural relation that existed in a pre-currency primitive society, and examines the patterns that still exist in the contemporary age and how they relate to the relationship between those with money. Consumption is an indication of leisure, or more pointedly the ability to have

leisure, and therefore functions as a signifier of status. Rather than the differences between classes being outlined purely on an economic level, Veblen demonstrates how it extends to an ideological base. Consumer behavior and choices are used to maintain, or gain, higher social status through the act of demonstrating it.

### *Fashion Criticism:*

Fashion criticism is a subset of the fashion industry. The fashion industry is the global industry that is devoted to the designing, producing, and selling of clothing. While some observers distinguish between the fashion industry and the apparel industry, this essay will use only the term fashion industry to refer to the design, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, retailing, advertising, and promotion of all types of apparel. For the purposes of this essay, I consider fashion criticism as any channel by which people express opinions about dress. Fashion criticism is often seen in the form of linguistic analysis and interpretation of fashionable dress, but can also be observed in a variety of discussions around fashion formally and informally as an aesthetic analysis of it and its wearer. Because of the prevalence of fashion throughout society and history, we are surrounded by fashion criticism. This criticism has been described by scholars such as Choi Kyung-Hee and Lewis Van Dyke as lacking in both theory and methodology when compared to other areas of creative criticism. Fashion criticism “is often found in persuasion and application methods of ideology in which a following or a consensus is sought” (Kyung-Hee & Van Dyke, 2017: 12).

Historically, fashion criticism has taken the form of fashion plates during which centuries of western society dictated appropriate dress through fashion magazines. More recently, new mass media forums and platforms such as reality television, blogs, and social media have given the

public the tools to criticize fashion trends and events instantaneously in any place and at any time” (Kyung-Hee & Van Dyke, 2017). Because we encounter a great deal of fashion imagery in our daily lives, “we often encounter media-led fashion journalism, full of no more than praiseworthy personal opinions or excited badmouthing without a proper critical vocabulary of fashion” (Kyung-Hee Choi & Van Dyke, 2017). In other words, fashion criticism is led by a stream in which fashion is looked at as a commodity to be sold. This essay argues that there is another stream of criticism wherein people examine not only the commodity but the wearer. One cannot ignore the prevalence of phrases such as, “those pants make your legs look longer” or “that dress makes your waist look smaller” which are forms of discussion not only about garments but about bodies—critical discourses and practices that require investigation below.

Fashion scholar Monica Tilton has argued that there is no established form of criticism in fashion that is comparable to the established ways in which art or literature are critically examined. In her article “Fashion criticism unravelled: A sociological critique of criticism in fashion media,” Tilton provides a sociological analysis of the relationship between the fashion industry and fashion media. Tilton traces the constraints imposed on speaking about fashion and fashion criticism by the “mutual structural-economic-dependency” (Tilton, 2016: 211). Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an undeniable link between the fashion industry and fashion media, which places limitations and regulation on the ways in which readers and viewers can evaluate criticism. This is to say that there has been no formal system or analysis of the fashion criticism industry and therefore no regulation.

Fashion criticism has had many iterations and evolutions, but all are based on language that describes what one should wear to look one’s best. An early example of fashion criticism is found in the so-called sumptuary laws of the medieval era. Sumptuary laws were regulations put



in place by church and state in order to regulate consumption for reasons of morality and to differentiate the social classes. Historically, since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, these laws worked to restrict elaborate and extravagant dress in order to make clear the necessary and appropriate distinctions between levels of society. Sumptuary laws are a far cry from the ‘democratized’ system of today wherein everyone has a voice on social media, but both serve as voices that tell people what to wear - or what not to wear. Sumptuary laws facilitated identifying social class, and reinforced notions of discrimination through dress. Because these laws were based on a class system, being well dressed was a direct reflection of privilege (Black’s Law Dictionary, 1999).

Similar fashion criticisms can be observed through the use of fashion plates at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The use of books of fashion plates was common in order to stay up to date with trends of the time. Consumers and dress makers would consult with them in order to decide what their new clothes might look like, to make choices about their clothing, hair and makeup styles, and how to present themselves to the world. Women were expected to conform to beauty standards as it was crucial for maintaining their place in society. Clothing was key even to an advantageous marriage. These fashion plate books, much like the fashion magazines and blogs of today, provided women with a guide for what they should be wearing in order to fit in socially. From sumptuary laws to fashion plates, to magazines to blogs, these are all instances of using clothing and fashion for social interaction by gaining approval and direction from an outside source.

Another example of more contemporary fashion criticism is the abundance of popular television based on notions of helping people to ‘dress better’. Some of these fashion criticism programs may seem like a way to parody the elite for example through red carpet reviews of best and worst dressed, other programs are founded on criticizing women’s bodies (for example: “that

dress will make your waist look smaller”). My research examines how these instances show language that condemns bodies and clothing, and negates the trope that fashion is about self-expression. I investigate how these have become a major influence in how the general public speaks about fashion. Rather than upholding fashion as a tool to express individuality, this tone shames people into assimilation. The climate of contemporary fashion criticism established on reality television and disseminated to social media tools like blogging and twitter does not celebrate difference.

The advent of social media such as blogs, snapchat, and most notably instagram create platforms for fashion criticism wherein everyone with online access can be a judge. These platforms have comment sections, and methods of up-voting images and posts which anyone and everyone can participate in. While this may be viewed as a democratizing force, it also highlights the negative ways in which people have learned to talk about fashion. In their article “An inclusive system for fashion criticism,” researchers Choi Kyung-Hee and Lewis Van Dyke point out the lack of engagement with fashion as art or self-expression as a

tacit understanding of fashion criticism [that] is hidden in the subversion and fragmentation of commentaries. In fact, the low barrier to digital entry, like blogs, often brings about timely, easily digestible content to arouse the audience’s interest rather than well-studied, qualified information (Kyung-Hee & Van Dyke, 2017: 19).

Blogs are a prime example of this phenomenon. Clothing wearers, and more specifically women have access to fashion inspiration today through the plethora of fashion blogs available to them. In their article ““Having it All” on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-

Branding Among Fashion Bloggers” Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund discuss blogging from a critical perspective. The authors suggest that while many see blogging as part of a body of feminist cultural and media entrepreneurship considered “post-feminist,” in reality blogging “obscures the labour, discipline, and capital necessary to emulate these standards, while deploying the unshakeable myth that women should work through and for consumption.” (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Blogging may be seen as a tool for self-expression —and even as post-feminist — but it is somewhat limited by its emphasis on the failure of content creators to provide more ‘accurate’ images of women. Post-feminism is understood as “a contemporary cultural sensibility proclaiming that women are ‘now empowered,’ and celebrating and encouraging their consequent ‘freedom’ to return to normatively feminine pursuits” (Dosekun, 2017) and to reject feminism as no longer needed or desirable. Bloggers create the illusion of post feminism by romanticizing their careers, and describing it as “predestined passionate work” (Duffy & Hund, 2015: 2).

And yet, elements of manipulations are evident in the dramatic lighting and elaborate editing of fashion photographs; in an abundance of contradictory messages often framed by questionable references to “authenticity”; and in the problematic and widespread emphasis on femininity as a physical property. Social media influencers and bloggers’ mixed messaging creates a growing imperative for women to self-objectify, to consume fashion and beauty products, but label these actions as “effortless”. By describing being an influencer or blogging as “predestined passionate work” putting it forth as freely chosen, and self-pleasing, bloggers uphold and perpetuate stereotypical expectations of women. In post-feminist discourse “the maintenance of the feminine body is steeped in the rhetoric of choice as an endless series of supposedly positive and empowering, autonomous consumer decisions for women and girls” (Blue, 2013: 665). Social

media influencing and blogging tropes downplay the fact that women continue to face gendered inequality by equating femininity with consumerism (Tasker & Negra, 2007).

This rampant consumerism plays a role in suppressing fashion as self-expression, and terminating productive discourse around clothing. On social media, users who have the largest following are “able to manifest wide-scale participation, causing greater tangible results such as adoption of a fashion expression that has been praiseworthy” (Kyung-Hee & Van Dyke, 2017: 20). When it comes to influencers and to print, writers, content creators, and magazines are often bound by sponsored content. This inescapable connection between fashion producers and fashion criticism through sponsored content and advertising taints the credibility of writers whose names have recognition, whereas anonymous users online have influence based on their lack of sponsorship.

### *Fashion Criticism as Assimilation*

The culture of dismantling dress and bodies in fashion criticism is a form of assimilation. Prescriptive instructions that “proper dress is required” are pervasive; such commands can be found on invitations, on the doors of private clubs, chic restaurants, and fashionable bars, and even at the entrance to places of worship. My research compels me to question the meaning of this highly prescriptive phrase. For example, in *Fashion: From class differentiation to collective selection*, sociologist Herbert Blumer argues that “the fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world” (Blumer, 1969: 286). In other words, those who are adopting trends don’t seek fashions that differentiate between classes, but use fashion as a tool that changes with the current world.

An example of clothes being about the gaze of others as opposed to self-expression is found

in the policing of women's bathing suits. In the summer of 2016, there was international discussion surrounding the "burkini"—thrust into the spotlight when Surf Lifesaving Australia introduced a program to integrate Muslim boys and girls into surf lifesaving after the Cronulla riots in Australia. The event had attracted a young Muslim girl who wanted to compete in a burkini. As evidenced globally in various political events such as September 11, the Cronulla riots, and the banning of religious veils in France, there has been an obvious stigma surrounding garments directly associated with being and identifying as Muslim. Though anyone can choose to wear a burkini, many saw the garment as symbolising Islam, and public debates ensued in many world cities. These debates confirmed that clothing carries political, cultural, social, religious meaning. The burkini debate speaks to the argument that people are expected to conform to the standard of dress, dress codes and moral values as opposed to for oneself.

In her book *Fashion, the Body & Age*, Julia Twigg studied clothing considered acceptable for people as they age; she discovered that the enormous social pressure on older women to adopt self-effacing, covered-up styles (Twigg, 2013). When we examine fashion criticism we can investigate people's feelings and reactions when a person chooses to step outside of the tight parameters of conventional standards associated with masculinity, age, religion etc. and examines how these traits can be stigmatized and stereotyped. Unlike in evolutionary psychology that suggests that this attracts mates, Twigg examines the limitations of agency and choice that is excluded from the narrative of consumption culture which tells us that fashion is about self-expression. Twigg points out that "It is notable in modern society how similar people in fact appear" (Twigg, 2013: 24). Twigg argues that wearing the appropriate clothes for the occasion is more important to people than self-expression or standing out.

This theme is also central to Ben Barry and Dylan Martin's study "Gender Rebels: Inside the Wardrobes of Young Gay Men with Subversive Style." The study follows three young gay men and surveys their dress practices through the lens of gender performativity, and highlights instances in which they have abandoned accepted norms such as gender binaries. This research illuminates the negotiations that specific groups of people make when choosing their clothes, and examines how many of the choices surrounding appearance seem out of the question because they do not conform to conventional beauty standards which people may see as crucial for gaining respect, attention, and romantic affection. Each reading instead addresses different notions of performativity and how usually one's presentation of self is a form of "impression management" wherein they present in a certain way to prevent humiliation or rejection (Goffman, 1959). Barry and Martin remind us that neoliberal consumer culture uses the narrative of self-expression to push fashion consumers to shop; however, the experiences of the participants in their study suggest that younger gay men have an entirely different experience than the older women in Twigg's study. By standing out, breaking boundaries and expressing their individuality through dress, these queered subjects are inherently dressed 'inappropriately' and defy societal expectations surrounding gender norms. Consequently, ideas surrounding performativity are relevant to fashion criticism and social media. In the end, fashion choices aren't just about style, or about designer clothes, but about the disruption that these choices provoke. A person's wardrobe is reflective of what the wearer is able to choose, afford, and consume. In such situations, older women may succumb to what they experience as an instinctive pressure to protect themselves, choosing clothing that is "appropriate" while young gay men may rebel to make a political statement. In this way, clothes are politically charged and steeped in power, which requires a model for interpretation.

### *Fashion and Disciplinary Power*

French philosopher Michel Foucault has provided a useful model for questioning and interrogating modern social power structures. Foucault describes the panopticon as a design for a type of modern prison: there is a central source of power – a tower from which all cells can be viewed and the people in the cells can be seen at any time. Whoever is in the tower cannot be seen, and so those in the cells know that they can be watched at all times, but they don't know when they are being watched. Foucault used the panopticon as a way of describing modern society, wherein subjects are encouraged to monitor their own behaviour; they are trained to self-monitor and self-regulate, with the body internalising social discourses and prescriptions (Foucault, 1979). Since disciplining power shapes bodies through discourse and discursive practices including fashion, it is important to examine the specific dynamics of fashion discourses in popular media and their effect on the body and the choices of fashion consumers and wearers.

Consequently, I use Foucault's panopticon as a theoretical framework for my research to investigate concrete power structures within fashion criticism. Specially, I examine feelings of shame as they are tied to fashion choices, and the obstacles people place around participating in fashion (consumption, lack of representation, ethical production, etc.). Who has power? What does it mean to be considered 'fashionable'? What do specific sets of fashion prescriptions tell us about the groups and societies that create and implement them? In his book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, Jon Ronson explores phenomena of political correctness and of being publicly shamed in 21<sup>st</sup> century social media. Ronson does so by interviewing recipients of high-profile public shaming. The shamed people are not fashion icons but rather regular consumers of fashion who have made grave errors in judgement that have been exposed. Once their offense is revealed, public outrage demonizes them, often resulting in serious consequences. Because of the increased ease

of access to social media, it is easier to become aware, outraged, and to react. Ronson argues that because of this access, the previously silent majority are mercilessly shaming others and using it as a tool of social control (Ronson, 2016). With this understanding of my critical methodological tools of analysis laid down, it is time to identify my corpus of analysis and show how my critical and theoretical methods of analysis apply to my three case studies, which will now be introduced in the next chapter.



## Chapter 2:

### Case Studies: *What Not to Wear*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Project Runway*

Because reality television constituted a turning point in fashion criticism, it offers an ideal case study. Fashion reality television series offer diverse forums where fashion critics dictate their viewers—typically mass audiences—what to wear or what not to wear. Moreover, these series also endeavour to dismantle the method in which individuals have chosen to present themselves. These disciplinary efforts are pervasive in reality fashion television.

Reality television saw a boom in popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While there were many programs that saw success such as *Big Brother*, *American Idol*, and *Survivor*, the early 2000s also saw the launch of several programs directly focusing on the fashion industry which fundamentally changed the tone of fashion criticism. From 2002 - 2004, three particularly successful shows premiered; *What Not to Wear* (2002), *America's Next Top Model* (2003) and *Project Runway* (2004). Each of these shows has run longer than 9 seasons, or are still currently being produced. The longevity and success of these shows has been influential on the tone of fashion criticism, as it took this discussion and converted it into a form of public entertainment as opposed to an evaluation. Often these shows' entertainment value is based on the destruction of participants' self-expression. Because of the success of these programs, their influence can be seen in the ways in which the public now participates in fashion criticism through social media, requiring a thorough investigation of this discursive and cultural fashion phenomenon.

In the following I examine the impact of these three programs on contemporary discussions of fashion and the body that has led to primarily negative language surrounding western women's presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). As we shall see, these programs often use language that

intentionally degrades and breaks apart the value of different bodies and inspires language that encourages rampant spending and renewal, as opposed to self-expression. Consequently, my method of analysis is critically focused on relationships of power.

*Methodology: Tracking Disciplinary Power*

By examining these shows using a checklist of questions and keywords related to revealing the workings of disciplinary power, I hope to illuminate the shows' influence, and to dismantle the power they have over self-expression and notions of "looking one's best". In order to create my checklist, I focus my theoretical framework on Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance that functions like a Panopticon or prison in which the prisoner end up internalizing the supervising and controlling gaze (Foucault, 1979). In other words, I aim to determine the ways in which criticism disseminates, is internalized, and develops into self-monitoring. These are key factors in which fashion shaming has trickled down from television to social media.

The questions that are key in my examination and analysis relate centrally to the power of the experts, as I aim to probe their level of authority. It is key to understand how a given program presents its experts, as they are the authorities who represent and enforce the rules. How, then, does a show present its experts as authoritative judges? And how do they represent, legitimize, and enforce the fashion rules? What discursive strategies are used to instill these rules in participants? The answers go straight to the disciplining and transforming of subjects through fashion. I am also interested in the way shows encourage individuality to further their goals of creating disciplinary identities through fashion transformation (see Appendix 1 for the checklist of questions).

By examining each show using my set of questions, we are able to see how hosts and panels of judges are presented as authorities when discussing notions of what was or was not good fashion, and how well participants “did fashion”. Through this qualitative research method, applying my theoretical—notably Foucaultian and Fashion Studies—concerns to my selected corpus, I now examine specific examples of fashion criticism, examining its panopticon-like power dynamics. With this brief introduction, I now turn to my three case studies and offer a discussion of the format and some results.

### *Case Study 1: What Not to Wear*

The first program I examine is *What Not to Wear* (2003-20013). This program centers around two fashion stylists, Stacy London and Clinton Kelly, who are brought on by the friends and family of individuals who are not deemed to be participating in fashion correctly. After secretly filming and analyzing the individual, the stylists (together with a team of hair and makeup advisors), dramatically alter the ways in which the individual participants presents themselves through dress. For this program I chose to examine the second season of 2004 as opposed to the first, as the hosts were replaced after season 1 and play a significant role in the tone of the show for the duration of the following 9 seasons.

The power dynamics juxtapose the always appropriately dressed and coiffured hosts with typically colourful and ebullient, and often resisting participants who are deemed to be in need of sartorial (and sometimes social) rehabilitation. The fashion stylists who offer melioration to the participants work to overcome participants’ resistance to this sartorial normalization process. In a 2004 episode of *What Not to Wear* the stylists describe an older female participant’s style as “Frumpy. Very frumpy. And funny-looking socks” (“Anne”). The stylists claim to want to help

the subject achieve her full potential, while simultaneously putting her down using denigrating language. As Stacey London says, “We’ve seen a lot of mom jeans on you. The same black shoe over and over. [It] makes me a little sad” (“Anne”). This language is a prime example demonstrating assimilation of bodies, and the changing of someone’s appearance and claiming it will improve their happiness or quality of life. In another episode, stylist Stacy London says of the participant,

*[She] thought she had to wear fairy wings to get attention. After a week with us, she realized that she possessed the kind of natural beauty that some women only dream of. All we did was enhance that. When I first saw her at her reveal, I thought, ‘She’s breathtaking. She looks like a young Natalie Wood!’ (“Mirella”).*

What stands out is that the participant did not volunteer for this ‘opportunity’, but was shamed into participating by the stylists and other people in their lives. The stylists are presented as experts who can help someone achieve better fashion and acceptance by giving them rules about the ways in which they present themselves. These rules almost always contradict ideas surrounding self-expression. The imposed rules and involuntary nature of this program harkens back to notions of sumptuary laws, and self-monitoring.

One specific rule that is reiterated in each episode concerns choosing a straight-leg jean to make subjects’ legs appear longer, and to select a high-heeled shoe to elongate the body. Notions surrounding comfort, personal style, and happiness are only discussed after the makeover in the context of describing how a subject’s life has been improved. We see this in one episode when Clinton Kelly discusses the participant saying, “She would dress head-to-toe in one color, like lime

green. She really thought she was getting it right” (“Crissa”). This example suggests that it does not matter what participants desire, or like, or prefer to self-express, but rather that she is following the fashion rules; her happiness matters less when she selects her clothes. In another example, London describes a participant saying,

*Leanne was a practicing witch. She wasn't Wiccan, but she believed in witchcraft. I found her style so stereotypical of what a witch might look like, but [we discovered that] underneath she was this beautiful, modern, contemporary woman waiting to come out. I was like, 'We're kind of magic!'" ("Leanne")*

Presenting the stylists as artists or possessing of magic affirms concepts presented here of upholding reality television stars as the authorities when discussing fashion and bodies. By constantly iterating that these personalities are the authority on what looks good, the programs position themselves into a place of power over not only the participants but the viewer. This power is asserted through the rules and language that viewers can then adopt and repeat or impose on themselves and those around them—a pattern also found in my next case study.

#### *Case Study 2: America's Next Top Model (ANTM)*

The second program examined, *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present), is an American reality television program created and hosted by fashion model Tyra Banks. The program presents a scenario in which several young women (regularly called "girls" on the show) compete to win a modeling contract by competing in various challenges. Each season of the show is referred to on screen as a "cycle", and has 9-14 episodes.

Just as *What Not to Wear* instills its rules through authoritative experts, America's Next Top Model (ANTM) demonstrates how fashion criticism on television presents itself as an authority, whose tremendous fashion influence is felt not only through television but on social media. This program has many unique terms and phrases such as 'cycle' which is still in use years after its first inception. An example of a phrase coined by Tyra Banks is to "Smize" or to "Smile with your eyes," in the thirteenth cycle of the program. Since its original use and introduction, the term has become part of the daily lexicon of Banks, show participants, viewers of ANTM, and on social media. More examples of terms created and disseminated by this program that have filtered down to social media are "Tyraspeak" meaning phrases coined by Tyra Banks, and "Ty-over" referring to the makeovers given to show participants by Banks. While these may not be inherently shaming phrases, their widespread use by fans through social media is evidence of the show's influence on fashion criticism, and again points to power being asserted through language that viewers can then adopt.

These instances not only provide examples of the language that this series disseminates to the masses but also reveals its power of erosion on contestant's self-expression through makeovers. In season 1, Banks states that "[contestants] should know [their] real measurements and [their] fake measurements" when meeting with casting agents, affirming that they should lie about the dimensions of their bodies to seem smaller than they are ("The Girl Who Becomes America's Next Top Model"). This point is further demonstrated when judge Janice Dickinson (who is described by Banks as an expert judge and supermodel) states that "America's Next Top Model is not a plus-sized model!" ("The Girl Who Gets Rushed To The Emergency Room").

Furthermore, the makeovers given to contestants are often done by force with threats that models must change their looks on a whim to suit the needs of brands and agents. While many

participants refuse the changes dictated to them by Banks, most do obey her commands and go through with their “ty-formations”. One participant describes herself post makeover by saying “I look like an albino prostitute.” through tears (“The Girl Who Gets Rushed To The Emergency Room”). In this same episode the judges are referred to as ‘experts’ more than 7 times to assert their dominance over the “girls” (participants).

This dominance is affirmed in episode 6 when Dickinson says,

*[About Kesse's photo] This looks like she escaped from a mental institution. This is the worst photograph I've ever seen! You look deranged! Your arms look amputeed [sic], your legs look amputeed [sic], and it looks like you have a penis! I'm sorry.*” (The Girl Who Deals With A Pervert).

Dickinson’s cruel language is used to ridicule the contestant, and to entertain viewers. There is no attempt at fashion criticism, but instead a blatant destruction of a female body.

Another example of judges critiquing women’s bodies in ways that contradict notions of self-expression occur when contestant Elyse Sewell is discussed. A consistent plot line through the program surrounds rumours of Sewell’s eating disorder. Contestant Adrienne Curry says of Sewell, “She's killing herself. There's no other way to put it. This girl is killing herself.” (“The Girl Who Everyone Thinks Is Killing Herself”). Judges, however, give Sewell mixed messages regarding her body, at some points affirming her thinness, while at other times expressing that she should be more womanly. After one photoshoot challenge, Banks states, [To Sewell] “I think you look so sexy, and your booty looks kind of big and juicy. That's great!” (“The Girls Get Really Naked”). By creating a plot line about Sewell’s eating disorder while simultaneously

affirming her looks through her success, the program demonstrates the contradictions of the demands imposed on women's bodies.

### *Case Study 3: Project Runway*

My third case study is *Project Runway* (2004-present). Similar to *America's Next Top Model*, *Project Runway* is hosted by a "supermodel", Heidi Klum, who heads a panel of fashion industry influencers, including judges, designers, and fashion personalities such as Tim Gunn, Michael Kors and Nina Garcia. The show begins with a cast of designers who are faced with challenges in order to compete to be the top designer and gain exposure for their line. Each designer is paired with a model for the duration of the season, and different episodes feature guest judges.

*Project Runway* asserts its own dominance as Heidi Klum and her panel of judges decide "who is 'in' and who is 'out'". This expression, which has become the show's catch phrase, speaks to the research I am conducting as it seeks and states to judge and exclude. Tim Gunn, Chief Creative Officer at Liz Claiborne, Inc. acts as a mentor to the participating designers as they take on their weekly fashion challenges, and whose design are sent down the runway to be judged. Similarly to *What Not to Wear*, *Project Runway* discursively denigrates older bodies and older women's knowledge of fashion. In episode 5, a young male designer says of an older female designer, "We'll probably find her wandering the streets, hair astray and overdone makeup, muttering to herself and wearing orthopedic shoes" ("Collaboration"). This example highlights the rampant criticism presented through fashion criticism on reality television, as the participant being described is not participating to have her personal style judged but rather her designs. This points to judgement and shaming becoming a tool to entertain viewers, as opposed to seeking out 'good fashion'.



This is further demonstrated when in the final episode, one contestant says, “And you think, for the last challenge Wendy, you could've put lipstick on.” (“Finale”). This statement proposes that a designer must present themselves in a certain way in order for them and their creative work to be taken seriously. This expectation that the contestant should work on her presentation of self for the final show exemplifies notions of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959).

As seen in three case studies above, reality television encourages and even expects participants and viewers to self-regulate and internalize discourses on the body. As seen in these overlapping examples, fashion discourses in popular media have an effect on the body and the choices participants and viewers make. Through these examples, we also see a broader picture of the ways in which fashion is dissected and fashion consumers shamed. These methods of evaluation expose the ‘othering’ that happens when we examine the quasi-universality of the criticism endured, and now requires a consideration of the implications of these findings and also my suggestions for the fashion industry in order to address the concerns identified.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **From Fashion Criticism to Fashion Activism—Some Suggestions**

Before turning to the fashion activism, we require a brief consideration of the critical implications of my findings and their relationship to the scholarly literature. Lack of diversity representation goes beyond reality television as suggested also in a study conducted by Eileen Diaz McConnell at Arizona State University. McConnell's study considered the growth of minority populations in a specific area of the United States, and revealed that "reporters were unlikely to provide comprehensive or balanced coverage about local racial/ethnic change" (McConnell, 2011). Instead, journalists provided far more statistics about Latinos and Asians than either Whites or Blacks and linked non-White population growth with negative issues. This investigation into these patterns of reporting is a demonstration of how cultural producers continue to participate in "discourses that sustain and disguise the racialized hierarchy in the United States" (McConnell, 2011).

By examining popular television shows from the early 2000s I was able to examine who we uphold as fashion experts and why, and whether any of the choices surrounding representations and criticisms of beauty and fashion are excluded because they are not homogenized. Bodies, ethnicity, and heritage do not always conform to conventional standards and palettes, and people may therefore see homogeneity as crucial for gaining respect, attention, acclaim and work within the fashion industry (Goffman, 1959). Expectations related to the meaning of being fashionable are closely linked to mannerisms and appearance.

By examining fashion criticism, my research draws attention to the value and power of shame as entertainment. Through this research, we are able to see the ties that reality television

has to the contemporary language and tone of fashion criticism on social media. When we consider elements that made these programs successful—namely, the operations of power such as asserting the hosts’ or judges’ expertness, the changing of people’s looks, and easily repeated catch phrases (or “iconic terms”)—we can also see how these programs do not affirm self-expression but perform the opposite: they strive to police bodies and notions of the self. In this context, consider as a comparative example the public shaming in Gamergate, the ugly and divisive battle within the video-gaming community (hereby referred to as the gaming community). Gamergate began with a sex scandal, when the ex-boyfriend of game developer Zoe Quinn penned a tell-all accusing her of lying, infidelity, and of using sex to have her work legitimized. As a result, Quinn received a flood of harassment including death threats, rape threats, and criticism of her looks and clothing which she details in her book *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight against Online Hate*. Gamergate, and the harassment that Quinn and other female game developers faced was an attempt to control who video games are for and brought to light how female characters are often dressed and portrayed solely as sex objects, or glorified props (Quinn, 2017). This is an important text as it examines the conflicting messages within the community of how women’s clothing is used to shame women both in reality and virtually.

Fashion and non-fashion strategies are actively used by women to express and gain forms of cultural capital within the sphere of social media, though these attempts are often dismantled. In such strategies, dress becomes a tool for establishing a variety of class, age and group-related social positions through displaying symbolic capital. Individuals participating in social media need to consider the reactions of both other social media users, but also of mainstream fashion criticism that is encountered on reality television. Thus dress and the ways in which we document and

discuss dress are crucial tools through which to claim status and respect on an everyday basis no matter how one chooses to participate.

Questions to do with cultural capital, status and class are particularly relevant in the context of social media where women face a wide variety of judgment challenges due to the high level visibility. Drawing from my examination of reality television programs, I argue that under such conditions of high visibility, dress imposes certain demands on women. However, these women also use social media as a tool in order to gain recognition and appreciation from various different audiences. Within such strategies, that which is considered fashionable and perceptions as to whether using fashion as a tool for self-expression is considered acceptable, create tensions between different groups separated by different factors such as age, socio-economic background, race, religion, etc. There are examples, however, in which different groups do present instances of resistance.

In their article “Queering Beauty: fatshionistas in the fatosphere,” Lauren Gurriere and Helene Cherrier look at representations and experiences of women who identify as fat and therefore outside of normative beauty ideals of our society (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). By interviewing women who identify as fat, the authors consider how these individuals challenge and resist typical beauty ideals which they identify as “straight beauty”. The term stood out to me as it analyzes beauty through the lens of queer theory and discusses not only the challenges of dressing a fat body, but also the lack of representation of typically othered bodies within most fashion media.

This article emphasizes and considers the lived experience of beauty as something subjective, communal, and resistant (Gurrier & Cherrier). Embracing a fat body challenges the mainstream, and confronts conformity. Similarly, it speaks to the exclusion of many from the

fashion system and representation. Exclusion is an interesting—though not unique—case study into the current climate of fashion, which sees the slow acceptance of ‘curves’ as well as the ‘elite’ celebrities adopting ‘low culture’. Historically othered fashion bodies are a prime case study when examining the conflicting theories of Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel and Herbert Blumer. While Veblen and Simmel believed that the elite determine fashions, and Blumer likewise argues that the elite have an influence over fashion, it is through a process of collective decision making that trends arise. This meeting of conflicting theories is clearly demonstrated by the evolution of Fat Fashion activism whose influence is the product of protest, but also of embracing one’s self. Herbert Blumer argues in *Fashion: from class differentiation to collective selection*, that “the fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world” (Blumer, 1969: 268). Those who adopt trends don’t seek fashions that differentiate between classes anymore. Consumers look at fashion as a tool they can use to move and change with the current world. The prevalence of the influence of Fat Fashion blogging points to these democratizing forces in fashion.

The purchase of garments that speak to a message is providing people with a medium to display their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010). This term attempts to expand the category of capital to something more than just the economic and to identify culture as a form of capital. The term cultural capital refers to non-financial assets that involve educational, social, and intellectual knowledge. These are the abilities and the knowledge that inform people as they participate in social life. Everything from good manners and social graces to being well informed about current events can be considered cultural capital.

It is important to consider theory surrounding both consumption and cultural capital when discussing fashion activism the idea of purchasing goods in order to be a part of an ideological movement seems contradictory. An example is the Lance Armstrong Livestrong bracelet line popular in the early 2000s. Purchasing one of these bracelets served to communicate both that the wearer cared about cancer research, as well as being in touch with fashion trends.

Fashion activism sheds light on the sartorial struggles of historically marginalized groups who have been misrepresented and underrepresented in fashion imagery. Considering consumption theories around class is important as many of the issues discussed in the articles relate to ideas surrounding class, and people who are not “straight” bodies being lesser than those who are.

As a fashion consumer and producer, this project made me examine more acutely ideas of identity and class that are tied less to socio-economics but rather of class being tied to the way one looks. As a thin white woman, I am realizing the number of challenges I have been blind to and ways in which I have simplified these issues in the past. Veblen’s idea that influences trickle down through the social hierarchy is not the only way to look at fashion. Those who adopt trends based on activism don’t seek fashions that differentiate between classes anymore. Instead, they seek to stand out as a forgotten or neglected class. People look at fashion as a tool they can use to move and change with the current world, and how they can align themselves with what is important to them.

Throughout history the influence of capitalism has established a culture within fashion wherein you can’t be doing it right unless you are part of the elite and uphold ideas surrounding cultural, economic and social capital. What this means for the people below this upper echelon of wealth (socialites, bloggers, etc.) is that there is a forever moving goal post. When this goal post

encounters social activism it is made even more complicated. People are now exposed to fashion and fashion discussion in so many ways including reality television, and social media which are platforms that people are also using to be social activists.

These instances of activism suggest that being fashion forward and rebelling against conventional attractiveness places people at risk of being indirectly victimized. I further contend that people like the subjects in Barry and Martin's study, who do not attempt to be conventionally attractive and who do not make typically 'appropriate' choices in their clothing, are also seen as a threat because their fashion choices suggest cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997). While evolutionary and feminist psychologies are the dominant theories surrounding female aggression, Emily Gordon theorizes in her 2017 article "Why Women Compete with Each Other", that women aren't competing with one another but rather they are constantly seeing in others the traits they feel that they lack. Many women look at other women and see a version of themselves that is more attractive, more intelligent, or in other words has more cultural capital. The real person standing in front of them is invisible, and the criticism that people cast at others is more reflective of the insecurities they have themselves.

### *Moving Away From Shaming: Suggestions for Social Media*

Selfies seem to be congesting everyone's social media platforms. Be it Facebook, Twitter, or – most notably – Instagram, one can't seem to escape the incessant omnipresence of iPhone self-portraiture. Everyday activities are now invaded by the possibility of a selfie. Their presence is becoming so pervasive that it could be considered a cultural norm. Through this research I wanted to investigate the experience of a woman living in today's image obsessed culture. Though the self-portrait is not a new phenomenon, the selfie has certainly blasted its way into the collective

consciousness because of the rise of social media. Celebrities like Kim Kardashian use social media as a tool to demonstrate their consumption, cultural capital, their beauty, and many other things that I myself find unattainable. The prevalence of these images bombarding young women is unavoidable and oppressive.

The idea of a curated Instagram page is widespread today, despite Instagram seeking to recreate the snapshot aesthetic of artists like Nan Goldin who was at the forefront of snapshot photography. Unlike the simple images Kardashian posts to her followers, the immediate impact of Goldin's photos is to look away. Unlike selfie culture which draws you in to keep scrolling through images, the reaction to Goldin's photos is visceral. Her images are so intensely intimate that one cannot help but to feel as though they are intruding on a very private moment. Her subject matter is so intense and foreign to most that one feels as though they should not be seeing what they are seeing. Goldin's snapshot images of her friends, drag queens, drug addicts, lovers, and family, are all searing portraits that, as a group, make a document of the artist's life. They are not planned, they are not edited, they simply capture moments that each appear vital to her story. The snapshot aesthetic of Goldin's photos gives them the feeling of being very accessible. Unlike selfies, the photos, however beautiful, are almost utilitarian; a documentation of the flaws that exist within our society and within the artist.

There is an eerie element to social media which takes this accessible feeling, and exploits it. The generation of young girls who have grown up with role models like Britney Spears, declaring their virginity through music and the press – but dressing, acting, and singing songs that were explicitly sexual in nature. It was through these conflicting images of virginity and promiscuity that the selfie was born. The selfie straddles the contradictory expectations of women



that have always existed – to be simultaneously virginal and sexually available. The selfie can be sexy without being explicit, and has become a social signifier as a tease.

The difference between Goldin's photos and Kardashian's, is that selfies aren't about capturing a moment, or about photography, they are about the photographer. The photos are about what the person taking the photo is able to choose, afford, and consume, rather than the message they provide, the moment that has been captured, or the beauty of the photography (Bourdieu, 1998). Selfies have simply become another echelon of elitism within social media.

Through my research, I have endeavored to illuminate the changes that could be made in the social structure surrounding fashion criticism by simply altering the way that we interact with self-portraiture. Rather than simply creating selfies and waiting to be judged, women today approach self-image with a sense of craft. Real experience and emotions are meant to be captured, not hair and nails slaved over for hours, or expensive handbags and shoes. We are not meant to be constantly edited, lit, glamorous or idealized, but it is "precisely because of [our] imperfection, they can point to a way as to how we might humanize our society: their imperfections is that of men, not of systems" (Paz, 1974: 23).

## **Conclusion:**

### **Critiquing Fashion Criticism**

In this essay I have considered fashion criticism as a strategy used by various women to gain recognition and respect from varied audiences. These strategies are both about dress and bodily dispositions, and also about the display of knowledge and understanding of social media tools. They are deployed to defend a person's choice in how they participate in the fashion industry as a whole. As I have shown by adopting a critical perspective, fashion criticism has evolved into a form of entertainment rather than a way to discuss fashion or to provide individuals with a method of self-expression. This evolution has carried forward a tone and language to discuss fashion and bodies through operations of power that are disseminated to the masses via television and social media. The tone is problematic, in that it perpetuates ideas of submission, assimilation, and exclusion, ultimately, negating the ideals of fashion as a method of self-expression.

I began this research by asking how fashion participates in the process of self-expression. Indeed, this Major Research Project was based on the premise that material items and the language used to talk about them or appearances are important in western culture. In the course of my research, and through my case studies, I established that the tools given to viewers to evaluate themselves and others are highly manipulative and formulaic. Reality television shows themselves rarely offer a self-critique of these power structures that play themselves out in the daily decisions about fashion and are performed and iterated as identities in self-images via self-portraiture and selfies.

My work also outlined the relevance of the evolution of reality television and its prevalence in the realm of social critique and language. The relevance of reality television in fashion criticism

which can be seen in its popular success in the early 2000s and its continued success and prevalence. Moreover, we can see that fashion and self-representations become more and more important as self-portraiture infiltrates our daily lives. As such, not only was it suggested that fashion and self-portraiture could be used as a tool of empowerment in social experiences, but that it could also create and reproduce differences and inequalities based on factors such as body-type or socioeconomic class. The fashion industry would have consumers believe that fashion participates in communicating a sense of 'self,' and that this daily construction is a process of individualization. To counteract these prevailing fashion policing strategies in this essay, I have done more than reveal the pernicious power dynamics embedded in the operations of fashion criticism. I have also suggested possible alternatives.

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## List of Television Programs Examined

### “Season 1.” *Project Runway*, season 1, episode 1-11, Bravo, 2004. Television.

“Innovation.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. December 1, 2004. Television.

“Vision.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. December 8, 2004. Television.

“Commercial Appeal.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. December 15, 2004.

Television.

“Collaboration.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. January 5, 2005. Television.

“Model Clients.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. January 12, 2005. Television.

“Making a Splash.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. January 19, 2005.

Television.

“Design a Collection.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. January 26, 2005.

Television.

“Postal Uniform Challenge.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. February 2, 2005.

Television.

“Design for the Red Carpet.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. February 9, 2005.

Television.

“Reunion.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. February 16, 2005. Television.

“Finale.” *Project Runway*. Bravo. NY, New York. February 23, 2005. Television.

### “Cycle 1.” *America’s Next Top Model*, season 1, episode 1-8, UPN, 2003. Television.

“The Girl Who Wants It Bad.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. May 20,

2003. Television.

“The Girl Is Here To Win, Not Make Friends.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. May 27, 2003. Television.

“The Girl Who Gets Rushed To The Emergency Room.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. June 3, 2003. Television.

“The Girl Who Drives Everyone Crazy.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. June 10, 2003. Television.

“The Girl Who Everyone Thinks Is Killing Herself.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. June 17, 2003. Television.

“The Girl Who Deals With A Pervert.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. June 24, 2003. Television.

“The Girls Get Really Naked.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. July 1, 2003. Television.

“How The Girls Got Here.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. July 8, 2003. Television.

“The Girl Who Becomes America's Next Top Model.” *America’s Next Top Model*. UPN. NY, New York. July 8, 2003. Television.

“Season 2.” *What Not to Wear*, season 2, episode 1-48, TLC, 2003. Television.

“Gina.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. August 29, 2003. Television.

“Oretha.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. September 5, 2003. Television.

“Laura.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. September 12, 2003. Television.

“Mary.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. September 19, 2003. Television.

“Ellen.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. September 26, 2003. Television.

- “Dave.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. October 3, 2003. Television.
- “Shifra.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. October 10, 2003. Television.
- “Kimberly.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. October 17, 2003. Television.
- “Eric.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. October 24, 2003. Television.
- “Amanda.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. October 31, 2003. Television.
- “Niya.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. November 7, 2003. Television.
- “Ross.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. November 14, 2003. Television.
- “Donia.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. November 21, 2003. Television.
- “David.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. December 5, 2003. Television.
- “Misti.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. December 12, 2003. Television.
- “Elizabeth.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. December 19, 2003. Television.
- “Anne.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. December 26, 2003. Television.
- “Alisha.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. January 9, 2004. Television.
- “Ken.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. January 16, 2004. Television.
- “Laura Miranda.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. January 23, 2004. Television.
- “Michele.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. February 6, 2004. Television.
- “Irene.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. February 13, 2004. Television.
- “Cynthia.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. March 5, 2004. Television.
- “Crissa.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. March 12, 2004. Television.
- “Kathy.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. March 19, 2004. Television.
- “Marie.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. March 26, 2004. Television.
- “John.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. April 2, 2004. Television.
- “Debbie.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. April 9, 2004. Television.

- “Jeanne.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. April 16, 2004. Television.
- “Twins: Veronica and Valerie.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. April 23, 2004. Television.
- “Michael.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. April 30, 2004. Television.
- “Belinda.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. May 7, 2004. Television.
- “Carlos.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. May 14, 2004. Television.
- “Kimberley H.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. May 21, 2004. Television.
- “Kimberley P.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. June 4, 2004. Television.
- “Shannon.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. June 11, 2004. Television.
- “Terry.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. June 18, 2004. Television.
- “Mirella.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. June 25, 2004. Television.
- “Leanne.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. July 2, 2004. Television.
- “Diana.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. July 11, 2004. Television.
- “Megan.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. July 16, 2004. Television.
- “Lisa.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. July 16, 2004. Television.
- “Will and Nicole.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. July 23, 2004. Television.
- “Erinn.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. August 6, 2004. Television.
- “Melissa.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. August 20, 2004. Television.
- “Aysha.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. September 3, 2004. Television.
- “Tiffany.” *What Not to Wear*. TLC. NY, New York. September 10, 2004. Television.

## Appendix A:

### Checklists of Questions

Each of the three programs listed was evaluated using the following checklist of questions, designed to probe the levels of authority:

Does this show present “experts” or “expertness”?

1. Does this show present fashion rules?
2. Does this show have “iconic terms”
3. Does this show actively change participant’s looks?
4. Has this show led to spin-offs/copy-cat shows?
5. Does this show claim to encourage individuality?

Secondly, each program was evaluated using a separate checklist in order to establish the ways in which they aim to manipulate and influence viewers. This second checklist brings into question how participants are controlled within this system of the program’s formula.

1. How often does an episode make mention of bettering the body? (as seen, for example, in references to a garment that “makes your legs look longer” or “flattering” or that “gives her a waist”)
2. How often is the ‘experts’ knowledge affirmed by the show? (as seen in references to “world-class stylist” or “editor of *Vogue* Australia” or “model for Christian Dior”)
3. How many times are clothing and bodies mentioned positively or negatively?
4. How many times does the show mention “individuality” in relation to dress?

5. How many times does the show make mention of bodies/clothing cost/appearance of cost? (for example: “this looks expensive” or “this is an investment piece” or references to being a “runway model versus catalogue model”)

Each checklist was used when examining each episode of each first season and creating a timeline.