THE KARDASHIAN KOMPLEX

THE KARDASHIAN KOMPLEX

Boris Fernandez Jacober

INTRODUCTION

Writing on a popular subject is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because the popularity of the subject allows spending more time analyzing it than introducing it. But it is also a curse because popularity brings polarization: many prefer spending their time on issues commending social intervention. The Kardashian-Jenners, or Kardashians,[1] are an American-Armenian blended family. The *Kardashian* side is composed of the children of Kris Jenner and the late Robert Kardashian:[2] Kourtney, Kim, Khloe, and Rob. The *Jenner* side is composed of Kris' children with Caitlyn Jenner, ex-Bruce Jenner:[3] Kendall and Kylie. This complex family is at the center of their eponymous TV show, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (KUWTK), broadcasting since 2007. Each member owns several brands and endorses various products. Most of them are active on social media, have their own blog, and sometimes produce their own TV show spin-off. Their celebrity is so enduring and far-reaching, that their name signifies much more than individuals. They are an empire.

It has become a common critique to say that the Kardashians are *famous for being famous*. Yet, this critique is often applied to many other reality TV stars. Every week, millions of viewers tune in to watch people with no exceptional skills, go about their rather common (but privileged) everyday life. The lives shown in KUWTK are relatable, real and banal. But there is something about them that the world cannot seem to get enough.

THE KARDASHIAN ERA

The exact beginning of the Kardashian era is difficult to determine. Compared to other reality TV stars, they rose to stardom at a regular rate. One could argue that their reign started when they *broke* into *the mainstream* by featuring on the cover of Vogue with Kanye[4] in April 2014—a moment that many readers called *the end of Vogue*. Others argue that it started when KUWTK first aired in October 2007. The same year, Twitter was invented[5] and the first iPhone has commercially launched: two symbiotic technologies, still impacting our relationship to time and media. Or even earlier, when Kim sold the exclusive rights of her previously leaked sextape for US$5 million in May 2007.[6] Diehard fans would even advance that it started sometime around the early 2000s, as a result of their wealthy and famous entourage: their celebrity-lawyer father, their Olympic gold medal winner stepfather, close friends such as Lindsay Lohan, Nicole Richie, and Paris Hilton.

AMERICAN SWEETHEARTS

Geographically, it would be too simplistic to reduce *celebrity culture* to an American phenomenon being only mirrored in other countries. Both the understanding of the English language and media development (such as literacy, television broadcasting, and internet access) must be taken into account.

In his book *The Diamond Age* (1995), science-fiction writer Neal Stephenson coined the term *Anglosphere*. It defines a group of English-speaking nations with cultural and historical ties to the United Kingdom.

---

1. For the sake of readability, I use their most known surname in its pluralized form (Kardashians) to describe the family members. I also use their first name when I individually refer to them. For example, Kim is short for Kim Kardashian West.

2. Celebrity-lawyer notably known for his defense of O.J. Simpson in 1995.

3. Olympic gold medal winner, who underwent a gender transition from male to female in 2017, changing her name from Bruce to Caitlyn.

4. American rapper Kanye West, husband of Kim Kardashian West and father of their three children.

5. The service was created in March 2006 and launched in July of the same year. However, its tipping point was the 2007 South by Southwest conference (SXSW), whose Twitter-implementation allowed for the platform to triple its daily usage (from 20,000 tweets to 60,000).

6. The sextape, made by Kim and American singer Ray J in 2003, was leaked to the public in February 2007. Kim initially filed a lawsuit against the pornographic production company Vivid Entertainment who distributed the film. She later dropped the suit and allowed Vivid to distribute the tape for a US$5 million settlement.

Drawing on this concept, I propose the term *extended Anglosphere*: a global aggregation of *individuals* possessing some degree of English literacy. It includes native and non-native English speakers. English literacy allows consumers to watch, read, listen to, and interact with celebrity culture via mass media. Some countries also benefit from the local translation of English productions and celebrity news, allowing for a bypass of English literacy. The development and democratization of automatic translation technologies contribute to making English literacy less essential in the consumption of mass media.

New digital media further bypass the written and spoken language. Instagram, for example, is fueled by visuals and relegates texts to the background. On this platform, Kim and Kylie (who rank in the top five most followed accounts)[7] publish pictures of their outfits, family, friends and childhood memories. Another example is the rising usage of *emojis*, an ideogram version of Esperanto. They are the fastest-growing language,[8] and the Kardashians are heavy users of it. They convey an emotional tone to a text but are also used on their own for storytelling.

Despite this global reach, the Kardashians are very much American products. As Karen Sternheimer notes,[9] celebrities' narrative[10] have historically been manipulated by studios and corporations in order to appeal to the American public, by presenting themselves as *patriotic* and *capitalist workers*. By appearing patriotic, celebrities seduce a wider audience and gain both media coverage and adhesion. The Kardashians reflect this paradigm by displaying profoundly American values such as individualism, consumerism, *family* and *hard work*. Their lavish lifestyle, an essential aspect of their show, is explained as a well-deserved reward for their strict work ethic.[11] From a sociological point of view, their *cosmopolitan* lifestyle is a form of intense socialization where individuals (and their 'social capital') are greatly interdependent. Their entourage, made of other celebrities, often becomes colleagues in business ventures or partners in romantic relationships. They lifestyle fascinates middle and lower class by its appeal and it disgusts them by its concentration and immoral excess.

ALL WORK AND NO PLAY

In 2007, as the first season airs, the Kardashians appear as a regular upper-middle-class family. In the first episode, Kim seeks professional advice from her mother, who acts as her manager. In particular, one line from Kris will engrave itself in Kardashian history:

> "When I first heard about Kim's [sex] tape, as her mother, I wanted to kill her. But, as her manager…"[12]

Throughout the rest of the season, we follow Kim's aspiration to celebrity. She attends paid events and is highly aware of any and all online and gossip press references to her. It is only a matter of seasons before the two sisters, Kourtney and Khloe, join in on the path of fame. The show documents their rising celebrity in sync with their indulgence with bigger houses and pricier cars. While the traditional narrative of hard work and faith justify their upward

7. Setting aside the app's official account, ranking as number one due to its default *followed* status for all new accounts. "Instagram accounts with the most followers worldwide as of May 2019 (in millions)," Statista, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/421169/most-followers-instagram/.

8. "Worried face: the battle for emoji, the world's fastest-growing language," Simon Parkin, The Guardian, last modified September 6, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/06/emojis-shigetaka-kurita-mark-davis-coding-language/.

9. Karen Sternheimer, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

10. A narrative is the story-telling of connected events (real or fictional) presented in a chronological format.

11. Amanda Scheiner McClain, *Keeping Up The Kardashian Brand: Celebrity, Materialism, and Sexuality* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 60–64.

12. Kris Jenner, "I'm watching you," Episode 1 Season 1, Keeping Up With The Kardashians.

mobility, the wealth, social network and class status they benefit from are left unspoken of.

The Kardashians' image and narratives circulate not only through KUWTK and their social media accounts but also through a network of brands. This business empire includes: eight TV show spin-offs, Kimojis[13], a clothing store, autobiographic books, a selfie book, paywall content apps, a souvenir shop, make-up lines, nail polishes, shoe lines, jewelry lines, tanning products, hair extensions, a prepaid debit card, a sock line, fragrance lines, a children's boutique, a cookbook, a pop song, a radio show, two talk shows, an online shoe boutique, and most recently, a church. For Rein et al.,[14] the celebrity industry is at the center of an industrial structure. Contrary to popular belief, the entertainment and the sports industries are situated at its periphery. They argue that the celebrity industry is supported by the following eight *sub-industries*:

→ The entertainment industry, e.g. movie studios, record labels, festivals.
→ The communication industry, e.g. press groups, television networks, social media platforms.
→ The publicity industry, e.g. advertising and marketing agencies, PR firms, publicists.
→ The representation industry, e.g. agents, managers, promoters.
→ The appearance industry, e.g. personal stylists, make-up artists, cosmetic-surgeon.
→ The coaching industry, e.g. advisors and teachers for fitness, dieting, speech.
→ The endorsement industry, e.g. clothing and toys manufacturers, franchises, philanthropic foundations.
→ The legal and business services industry, e.g. agencies providing legal, accounting and investment management services.

KUWTK shows us the work involved in being a celebrity and living off of it. It documents the sisters' work on their beauty and their mom's (or *momager*) attention to their image. Researcher Elizabeth Wissinger pinpointed the term as *glamour labor*:[15] the combination of work on the body (through diet, exercise, cosmetic surgery, etc) and work on the image (social media presence, appearance, product endorsement, etc). The sisters advertise their fame and bodies as being the result of a strict work ethic. However, in the USA, where obesity is considered as a national epidemic, and healthcare a private matter, *fitness* of bodies are becoming symbols of class status. Health, or the appearance of it, becomes the ultimate form of celebrity: being famous for being oneself.

READINGS Celebrity culture runs deep in our contemporary life. However, the study of celebrity has always been tinted by a moralist veil: should we really look at the rich and famous instead of focusing on social justice work? Thankfully, many researchers agree that cultural and economic wealth are interwoven with celebrity culture, and this touchstone of our cultural landscape should not be ignored.

This thesis offers a reading of the Kardashians that is both practical and theoretical. It builds upon a transdisciplinary approach to research practice. It is a work of cultural studies, network theory, and to some extent, fan fiction writing. It links together hyper-femininity, feminisms, cultural studies, media and communication studies, and economy. It tries to stick

13. Kim's app of personalized, branded emojis.
14. Irving Rein and Philip Kotler and Martin Stoller, *High Visibility* 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 46.
15. Elizabeth Wissinger, "#NoFilter: Models, Glamour Labor, and the Age of the Blink," *Interface, 1*(1), Special Issue *Theorizing the Web* (2014), doi:10.7710/2373-4914.1010.

its nose in the micro-events of celebrity culture, while at the same time stepping back to view the bigger picture.

To this end, I have chosen various theoretical approaches to the Kardashians. They allow us to think of celebrity culture in its specific social-political context. How can we map this context, when it plays over so many dimensions? *Who*, or *what* interacts with the Kardashians? How can we use theory to think the Kardashians? Or rather, how can we use the Kardashians to think theory? By the multiplicity of these approaches, I hope to prevent the fetishization of a *scientific study* of the Kardashians, arguing instead for a meta-theoretical *reading* of the Kardashians.

FEMININITY

I chose to focus this research on individual bodies and their presentation. The reality TV genre and the entertainment industry are both highly feminized fields.[16] I argue that TV shows such as KUWTK are the reflection of such configurations. Practices and characteristics of things *feminine*[17] are always linked to their interpretation in a specific society. Although the concept of femininity is socially constructed, it is now widely understood that its roots are both social and biological.[18] Feminist movements have a long history of analyzing femininity. In her book *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serano classifies two historical views on gender-expression:

→   The *unilateral* feminists, who view femininity only as a monolith of practices imposed onto women. They believe women must free themselves of femininity to achieve gender equality. Their beliefs often result in hostile attitudes towards both feminine women and feminine gay men.
→   The *deconstructive* feminists, who believe femininity is always context-dependent (using the concept of performativity).[19] They believe femininity "can be *good* (when used to subvert the binary gender system) or *bad* (when used to naturalize that system)."[20]

In both *unilateral* and *deconstructionist* feminisms, femininity is seen as something artificial and contriving *for women*. Serano argues:

> "The feminist assumption that *femininity is artificial* is narcissistic, as it invariably casts nonfeminine women as having *superior knowledge* while dismissing feminine women as either *dupes* (who are too ignorant to recognize they have been conned) or *fakes* (who purposely engage in *unnatural* behaviors in order to uphold sexist societal norms). This tendency to dismiss feminine women is eerily similar to the behavior of some lesbian-feminists in the 1970s who arrogantly claimed that they were more righteous feminists than heterosexual because the latter group was *fucking with the oppressor*. It is an extraordinarily convenient tactic to artificialize, and even demean, an inclination (such as femininity or heterosexuality) when you personally are not inclined toward it."[21]

She recognizes that "femininity is in many ways influenced, shaped and enforced by society." But she makes the point that something about it *must feel right* for "feminine folks who exhibit no desire whatsoever to fit

16.   Deborah Dean, "Recruiting a Self: Women Performers and Aesthetic Labour." *Work, Employment and Society*, *19*(4), December 2005, 761–74, doi:10.1177/0950017005058061.

17.   I use the term *femininity* in its semiotic acceptance: what is *feminine* is what is not *masculine*, and vice versa.

18.   Hale Martin and Stephen Edward Finn, *Masculinity and Femininity in the MMPI-2 and MMPI-A*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

19.   Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1st ed. (Abington: Routledge, 1990).

20.   Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Women on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007), Chapter 19.

21.   Ibid., Chapter 20.

into straight society, such as femme dykes (who proudly express their femininity despite being historically marginalized within the lesbian movement because of it) and *nelly queens* (who remain fiercely feminine despite the gay male obsession with praising butchness and deriding *effeminacy*)." Misogyny, she adds, has "clearly gone underground, disguising itself as the less reprehensible derision of femininity."[22] Finally, as most of the victims of femme-hating attitudes are women, Serano concludes her argument with a universal call to empower femininity.

HYPER-FEMININITY

The Kardashians embody a specific form of spectacular femininity, situated at the crossroad of Hollywood movie star and social media influencers: *hyper-femininity*.[23] In her study of the Kardashians' influence on South African women, Simidele Dosekun lists some of those characteristics: "a glamorous style, marked by elements such as dramatically long hair extensions, heavily and immaculate make-up, accouterments such as false eyelashes, false nails, very high heels and so on."[24] In the case of the Kardashians, those features can become even more intrinsic, through the usage of breast implants, liposuction, dieting, and other methods to enhance a hyper-feminine body type.

Kourtney, Kim, Khloe, Kendall, and Kylie each endorse product by modeling. They have interests in the beauty industry: Kim and Kylie have their own make-up lines, while Khloe has a denim jeans brand, and Kendall is a fashion model. The reference to the Kardashian sisters in feminist thinking illustrates the complexity of their links with celebrity, beauty and media representation. I have chosen to discuss the Kardashian empire relating to two feminists movements: postfeminism and fourth wave feminism.[25]

Some cultural critics[26,27,28] have noticed similarities between their hyper-femininity and upwardly mobile black American women, or *boujee* esthetic.[29] Some of its specificities are:

→   a heavy and immaculate make-up,
→   specific hairstyles (intended for very curly hair),
→   large hoops earrings,
→   long and extremely sculptured acrylic nails,
→   usage of wig and hair extension,
→   romantic relationship with black athletes.

POSTFEMINISM

The Kardashians often refer to their self-commodification as a feminist choice and confess feeling empowered by it. In contrast, they stay silent on

22.   Ibid.

23.   *Hyper-feminine* being the exaggeration of everything feminine.

24.   Simidele Dosekun, "Keeping up, from Lagos", filmed on November 26, 2015 at *KIMPOSIUM!: A symposium about all things Kardashian*, Brunel University London, video, 12:07, https://youtu.be/thb0k54S7bo?t=727/.

25.   I chose to use the term *fourth wave feminism* for its widespread usage and self-explanatory capacity. However, I am conscious that *sorting* feminists struggles in various chronological waves also leads to simplification and erasure. Cf. Evans and Chamberlain, "Critical Waves."

26.   Sesali B. (@BadFatBlackGirl), "Flirting With Blackness," *Feministing*, last accessed May 9, 2019, http://feministing.com/2015/07/17/flirting-with-blackness/.

27.   Lena Potts, "The Kardashian-Jenners and their Black children," *Tart*, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://medium.com/tartmag/the-kardashian-jenners-and-their-black-children-c0741484aeb9/.

28.   Savannah Muñoz, "Kim Kardashian and the Politics (and Privilege) of Being Racially Ambiguous," *Substance*, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://substance.media/kim-kardashian-and-the-politics-and-privilege-of-being-racially-ambiguous-bfa9cf1a2636/.

29.   Originating from the French *bourgeois*, the term *bougie* came to define a newcomer approach to middle-class materialism (confounded as upper-class), usually through conspicuous consumption. Its *boujee* spelling has been popularized by rapper Migos, defining more specifically upwardly mobile black American women, with a sense of *hood* solidarity and/or origin.

nonwhite, non-American and working-class women's struggles. For this reason, many critics qualify them as *postfeminists*. According to Angela McRobbie, postfeminism is a cultural environment in which elements of feminism have been taken into account, but those elements are simultaneously seen as irrelevant and a thing of the past.[30] Postfeminism turns out to be a widely accepted version of feminism. Brands capitalizing on the social plus-value of those feminist ideals have been accused of *purplewashing*.[31] The *post* in *postfeminism* seems to imply that feminism has become irrelevant, or has entered a new stage similar to other *post*-theories (such as *postcolonialism*). Postfeminists consider previous achievements of feminists as *positive* for society but do not consider *absolute* gender equality to be necessary or desirable. They dislike being labeled *feminist* because of the negative stigma attached to the term.[32] In a 2016 article titled "Why I Don't Label Myself a Feminist," Kim perfectly illustrated postfeminism when she wrote:

> "But why do we have to put labels on things? You're Republican, you're Democrat, you're bisexual, you're plus-size, you're poor, you're a criminal, you're a mother, you're a feminist. I'm a human being, and I have thoughts, feelings and opinions about a lot of different things. I don't need to be defined by those beliefs, just as much as I don't want to be set apart from–or viewed as being against–those who DO define themselves by those beliefs."[33]

FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM

Focusing on intersectionality, fourth wave feminists advocate against assault and harassment (*rape culture*), defend bodily autonomy and fight for a greater representation of minorities and ostracized groups. Its unequivocal inclusion of trans and non-binary people has made it connected to MOGAI[34] (Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments, and Intersex) struggles. Its usage of social media for organization and visibility is often considered the main aspect that distinguishes it from previous *waves*.[35] Fourth wave feminists recognize the importance of femininity as a potential tool of empowerment.[36]

At the time of this thesis, its most widely known global campaign is the *Me Too* movement.[37] Inside the fourth wave feminism, the Kardashians are often cited in relation to their proclaimed body positivity, sex positivity, and trans-awareness. In her 2017 study, researcher Abbey Rose Maloney found that "the Kardashian-Jenners are serious media influencers who share a semi-positive, non-purposeful feminist message."[38] However, following Donald Trump's presidential election, Kim increased her advocacy of feminist struggles. She started explicitly labeling herself as a feminist,

30. Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism and popular culture," *Feminist Media Studies*, no. 4, 2004, 255, doi:10.1080/1468077042000309937.

31. Similar to *whitewashing*, *purplewashing* is the practice of a company (or a party, a person, etc) to present itself as feminist, as a way to downplay its negative reputation or justify harmful goals.

32. Ibid., 257.

33. Kim Kardashian West, "Why I Don't Label Myself a Feminist," Blog Post, accessed with *WayBack Machine* archived version of August 16, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20160816023853/ https://www.kimkardashianwest.com/behind-the-scenes/1270-kim-kardashian-feminist-label/.

34. Alternative to the (less inclusive) LGBT initialism and its extensions.

35. Kira Cochrane (@kiracochrane), "The fourth wave of feminism: meet the rebel women," The Guardian, last modified December 10, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/ fourth-wave-feminism-rebel-women/.

36. Zing Tsjeng, "The revolution will be feminised," Dazed, last accessed May 9, 2019, http://www. dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/18641/1/the-revolution-will-be-feminised/.

37. The goal of the *Me Too* movement is to invite people to share their experience of sexual assault and harassment, with the hope of shining light on its widespread prevalence and promotion of empowerment through empathy.

38. Abbey Rose Maloney, "The Influence of the Kardashian-Jenners on Fourth Wave Feminism Through Digital Media Platforms," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 8(2), 2017, 48–59.

took on to social media to share how her self-commodification is her own choice, and to spread messages of feminist solidarity. In a typical case of purplewashing, she released a new line of kimojis with messages such as *My Body My Choice*, *Nasty Woman* and *Full Time Feminist*.

CULTURAL STUDIES

The public foster many different types of relationship with celebrities. In my thesis, I will focus on what Graeme Turner calls *celebrity watchers*.[39] Celebrity consumption and production happen at the level of studio executives, as well as fan accounts on social media. Both consumption and production are "marked by contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences."[40] For example, I believe that the Kardashians are part of a wider culture of the *American Dream* propaganda and that they promote both consumerism and eating disorders.[41] However, I have *consumed* their content both for this research and for pleasure. It is essential to keep in mind that *being critical* of the Kardashians is not incompatible with *consuming their content*.

The capacity and desire to be critical is highly fluctuating between members of the audience. In his book *Claims to Fame*, Joshua Gamson categories the public in five audience types:

→ Traditional: they regard celebrities' narrative as true to life, and have a low level of awareness regarding promotion strategies. Their relationship with celebrities is often made of modeling, fantasy, and identification.

→ Second-order traditional: just as the *traditional*, they believe that celebrities are mostly deserving of fame and fortune, although they know (or suspect) that publicity mechanisms play some part in their fame. They believe some celebrities are presenting false narratives, but they trust their capacity to discern authenticity. They too have a modeling, fantasy and identification relationship with stars.

→ Postmodernist: they believe celebrities' narratives to be more or less fictional, and reject the *naturally rising celebrity* story. They are actively interested in the techniques of artifice per se.

→ Game-player, *gossiper*: they regard celebrities' narratives as mostly semi-fictional, but are *not* interested in establishing a clear distinction between *fake* and *real*. They are *medium* to *highly* aware of the production processes of the celebrity industry. Their consumption behavior may look like that of fans, but their involvement is purely based on the potential *information material* that can be exchanged as a social resource (gossip).

→ Game-player, *detective*: they present the same profile as the *gossiper*, but their usage of celebrity production is that of a playground for investigation and speculation. Celebrities are not seen as models but as opportunities for playtime.

"The celebrity system survives precisely because it can sustain such a broad spectrum of modes of consumption."[42] Nonetheless, it is important to remind ourselves that such categories are only conceptualized for clarity. The real involvement of watchers often overlaps multiples of those neat boxes. It can also vary according to the watcher's relationship with different celebrities, shows, the knowledge possessed, as well as change throughout time and desire.

39. Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* 2ⁿᵈ ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 121.

40. Ibid.

41. On their social media account, Kourtney, Kim, and Khloe regularly promote various *weight-loss* products bearing names such as *Fit Tea*, *Flat Tummy Tea*, *Detox Tea*, and *Appetite Suppressant Lollipops*. Those products are usually not approved by the FDA and often get flagged by the ASA for false health and nutrition claims.

42. Ibid., 123.

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Some researchers working on specific celebrities noted that, as time passed, studying their subjects, they started developing the same feelings of intimacy with stars that fans often refer to. This phenomenon occurred with little regard to their knowledge of celebrity production mechanisms.[43] Media studies call them *para-social relationships*. They are similar to traditional relationships made of communication, intimacy, and recognition. However, they are almost only *mediated* and *unreciprocated*: the watcher knows everything of the celebrity, but the celebrity knows nothing of the individual watcher. Cultural studies have historically defined the term with a pejorative connotation, often calling it an *indirect* or *second-order* type of relationship. But, as many societies moved away from a communal form of organization, most of the relationships became highly mediated (by letters, phone, screen, etc).

Social media have been redefining relationships, and our vocabulary is currently adapting to these new forms of intimacy. One can already witness a generational shift in the binary of *content creators* v. *the audience*. In his book *Kids These Days*, Malcolm Harris notes that:

> "Between Youtube, camera-enabled smartphones, music editing software, and online platforms, most teens have everyday access to tools that were hard to imagine–never mind get your hands on–just a couple of decades ago […] [They] can now make and distribute professional-caliber media from home."[44]

Economist and marketing specialists are already betting on influence—rather than affluence—as the main criteria for selecting celebrities. However, in their study *Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age*, Brooke Erin Duffy and Elizabeth Wissinger point-out to the *winner-takes-all* economy of influencers:

> "Influencers circulate a patterned set of mythologies about creative work in the social media age. Such narratives about the fun, free, and authentic nature of their self-starter careers conceal less auspicious realities, including the demands for emotional labor, self-branding labor, and always-on mode of entrepreneurial labor."[45]

ECONOMY

In many ways, the Kardashians illustrate the self-branding capacities that neoliberalism demands from workers. But their businesses are not client-driven. Their everyday *athleisure*[46] outfits translate the self-sufficiency of the glamorous freelance women, shifting from business meetings to afternoon workouts. They are individuals, but also brands, businesses, and personas: their life is but a press release. Too old to be *digital natives*,[47] they are perfect examples of *digerati*—people highly skilled in the processing and manipulation of digital information.

As freelancers, their business model shares similarities with the gig economy, i.e. being paid on a task basis. But, as Nick Srnicek argues, the term *gig economy* puts too much focus on freelance workers when they only represent a marginal portion of the working force. Instead, he proposes the term *platform capitalism*.

43.   Ibid., 102–105.

44.   Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2017), 132.

45.   Brooke Erin Duffy and Elizabeth Wissinger, "Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age," *International Journal of Communication* 11, 2017, 4652.

46.   Combination of *athletic* and *leisure* wear, it is a recent category of workout-style apparel (but more fashionable) meant to be worn in and out of the gym.

47.   Used to describe a person growing up in the digital age, as opposed to acquiring familiarity with digital systems as an adult. Kendall, Kylie, born in 1995 and 1997 respectively, are digital natives.

"Platforms are characterized by providing the *infrastructure* to intermediate between different user groups, by displaying *monopoly tendencies* driven by *network effects*, by employing *cross-subsidization* to draw in different *user groups*, and by having a designed *core architecture* that governs the interaction possibilities."[48]

The concept can be applied to companies such as Google, Airbnb, and Monsanto. However, and joining communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi,[49] I argue that it can also encompass legal entities such as the Kardashians.

→ The *infrastructure* is their media empire: KUWTK, each family member's various social media account, their many brands and the entirety of their public communication.
→ The family has a habit of promoting each other across each other's media outlets, and continuously self-referencing itself: two exemplary monopoly tendencies.
→ The mainstream coverage of the family unavoidably diminishes the visibility of other celebrities and the growing number of watchers reinforces the social pressure of consuming their *universe*. Newcomers are persuaded to *join the network* for the social benefits of *becoming a member of the Kardashian family*.
→ The Kardashians platform facilitates interactions between various user groups: themselves, other celebrities, brands, products, fans, bystanders, haters, buyers, cultural critics, etc.
→ The cross-subsidization of the Kardashians is the price structure that allows them to distribute most of their content for free, and to finance their lifestyle and content production with additional paywall content, product placement, brand endorsement, paid appearances, etc. In KUWTK, some of this cross-subsidization is rendered visible: the sisters regularly discuss the terms and price of various partnership.
→ Finally, the core architecture is the *organizational complex*, that I will define in the following chapter.

A KARDASHIAN NETWORK THEORY

The 21st century has seen many changes happen in communicative technology. Social media algorithms and their entanglement with the news industry are reshaping *the way* we get informed and *whom* we get informed about. As soon as someone is quoted, recorded or photographed, their story becomes a narrative. The changes mentioned before have allowed for narratives to circulate (and be generated) differently, both in space and time. An example is the way Facebook's *News Feeds* algorithm distributes posts, as described by Chris Hughes, co-founder of the social network:

Facebook engineers write algorithms that select which users' comments or experiences end up displayed in the News Feeds of friends and family. These rules are proprietary and so complex that many Facebook employees themselves don't understand them. In 2014, the rules favored curiosity-inducing *clickbait* headlines. In 2016, they enabled the spread of fringe political views and fake news, which made it easier for Russian actors to manipulate the American electorate. In January 2018, Mark announced that the algorithms would favor non-news content shared by friends and news from *trustworthy* sources, which his engineers interpreted–to the confusion of many–as a boost for anything in the category of *politics, crime, tragedy*."[50]

48.   Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 27.
49.   Zizi Papacharissi, *A Networked Self and Platforms, Stories, Connections* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
50.   Chris Hughes, "It's Time to Break Up Facebook," The New York Times, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/opinion/sunday/chris-hughes-facebook-zuckerberg.html.

The circulation of the Kardashians' narratives indicates that they have found something profoundly in line with contemporary mediums. They possess a narrative network that calls for new vocabularies to think about it. Before analyzing its content, we need to understand its form and its use.

TIMELINE LITERACY

At first sight, this media empire seems to survive merely on the appearance of its cast, and on banal actions set in an extraordinary lifestyle. Then, who is to guarantee its authenticity? Rather than being ignored by the Kardashians, this question is central to the show. When preparing for a public speech, the sisters often declare *speaking honestly* and *connecting with fans by being sincere*. In one episode,[51] Kim takes an X-Ray of her butt after reading in the press that many believe it to be *fake*. Their usage of cosmetic surgery (and sometimes denial of it) is often a topic of discussion on gossip websites. Along with their explicit usage of retouching technologies, they maintain a complex relationship with binary concepts of *truth* v. *fake*.

Their upper-class environment and their proximity to Hollywood encourage a flow of relationship and interaction with other celebrities. Kim and Kanye's friendship with fashion designers Olivier Rousteing (Balmain) and Ricardo Tisci (Burberry and previously Givenchy) helped to cement their relevancy as fashion influencers. The size of the family, its *cultural* longevity, and its existence throughout many brands constitute the form of the Kardashian empire. This density, reinforced by cross-referencing throughout the show, often renders them unintelligible to outsiders. Non-watchers are left out of the intricacies of the show, being too mesmerized by the *excesses* of their celebrity lifestyle. A similar polarization between watchers and outsiders happened during the broadcasting of *Gossip Girl*. The teen drama TV series related the mundane dramas of upper-class New York students but was aired during the aftermath of the 2007 American subprime mortgage crisis. Like with KUWTK, the TV show was often referred to by its watchers as a *guilty pleasure*.

As Arthur Asseraf points out in his essay *Fast media, slow media*, the key aspect that sets KUWTK apart from similar reality TV shows is its relation to time. He argues that we have to understand the Kardashian universe as an inter-scalar script playing over at least three time-layers:

→   The sisters are each active on their various social media accounts and interact with other users and celebrities on those platforms. They often use live-streaming, allowing fans to comment on their actions in real time.
→   The second time-layer is the slightly delayed coverage of their latest activities by the press. This usually happens in a matter of minutes for gossip websites (especially concerning controversial news) to some days for the mainstream coverage.
→   Finally, the TV show forms the third layer: it is a televised *documentary* aired two to three months after actions. It provides retro-actively "the 'definite' narrative record."[52]

In phase with our various (and increasing) coexisting media speeds, the 21st century calls for a new form of time literacy. I argue that KUWTK is one of the entry points to this *timeline literacy*.

51.   "The Former Mrs. Jenner," KUWTK, Episode 3 Season 6.
52.   Arthur Asseraf, "Fast Media, Slow Media: Losing Time With the Kardashians," *Critical Quarterly*, *4*(60), 41–42.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMPLEX

Like all types of corporation, the Kardashian empire possesses a specific hierarchy. This architecture, rather than being its form, is its usage of information. I call it *the Kardashian Komplex*.[53] Martin Reinhold describes the organizational complex as:

> "the aesthetic and technological extension of what has been known since the early 1960s as the 'military-industrial complex'. [...] Far from simply staging a spectacle that screens out the structural logic of corporate power by coaxing the spectator-user into a state of passive distraction, architecture works here actively to integrate spaces and subjects into naturalized organizations, specifically to the degree that it is 'reduced' to corporate image."[54]

The architecture of a complex is designed to adapt to the various distances of its inhabitants. There is no outside to a complex, but a feedback loop. Nonwatchers of KUWTK are not standing *outside* of the Kardashian Komplex: their non-consumption, or rejection, is taken into account and informs the way the complex *acts* and *thinks*. Because there is no center, each *module* of the Kardashian Komplex—a family member or one of their brand—is capable of growth. This growth happens in a *partially independent* manner to the rest of the structure. E.g., Kim's decision to add a new fragrance to her perfume line will increase her revenue and impact the complex by furthering its media coverage. The complex presents a high level of intercommunication: the constant exchanges between the Kardashians ensures that they never overstep their media coverage, e.g. by *never* launching a product *the same day* another family member appears in an interview.[55]

In its definition, Reinhold uses the term *subject* rather than *users*. Indeed, individuals (including the family members) are not *using* the Kardashian Komplex as much as they are *subjects*, being *used* by the complex.

PRACTICES

For pedagogical purposes, I introduced the concept of *timeline literacy* and *Kardashian Komplex* before discussing the *content* of the Kardashian narrative network. By cross-subsidizing, the Kardashians interact with *existing content* and create *new ones* while profiting from the whole process. I have chosen to focus on three of these contents: fashion, cosmetic surgery, and gestational carriage. The Kardashian Komplex does not *consume* and *sell* fashion, cosmetic surgery, and gestational carriage. It *practices* them. In each case study, I will 'reverse engineer' these networks of narratives to illustrate their processes.

I. FASHION

On the 4th of June 2018, Busy Philipps steps to the stage to hand the first CFDA (Council of Fashion Designers of America) *Influencer Award* to Kim. Wearing a dazzled turquoise Christian Siriano suit and a high ponytail, Philipps approaches the microphones:

> "You are the influencers' influencer. Your impact on how women dress, and what they want to look like, has had a real cultural significance.

---

53. The letter *K* in *Komplex* is a nod to the entanglements between the family's identity (all the sisters' first names starting with *K*) and their business empire (with most of their products following the same rule).

54. Martin Reinhold, *The Organization Complex*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 25.

55. Kim Kardashian West, "Pretty Big Deal with Ashley Graham," Interview by Ashley Graham, Youtube, October 4, 2018, video, 22:43, https://youtu.be/264aaUUvB9U?t=1363.

There is a direct line between you posting a photo of yourself, and then 112 million people around the world wanting the color of your hair, your make-up look, the top you're wearing, the bag you're using… And that's just from your personal Instagram alone. That's not even taking into account the internet echo-chamber of what then becomes countless online stories and think-pieces about what you're wearing, and why you're wearing it, and what it all means… And more importantly probably, where we can buy it. You have given rise to a revolution in women's bodies and shapes, radically redefining the aspirational female form. Your ownership over your own body, and how it is seen, your openness with your femininity and your sexuality is truly empowering, and the ultimate feminist statement."[56]

Adorned in a Rick Owens white crop top and long skirt ensemble, Kim receives the award before confessing: "I'm kind of shocked that I'm winning a fashion award when I'm naked most of the time."[57] To understand the CFDA's creation of the *Influencer Award* (and its attribution to Kim), we have to understand the many recent shifts in fashion history:

→   The production of garments has been greatly facilitated by the invention of new weaving technics, synthetic fibers, blends, changes in agriculture (natural fiber and animal product), etc.

→   Processes of economic and cultural globalization have accelerated the exchange of raw materials (and driven its price down), as well as reorganized the distribution of labor. The main pattern followed by retail-fashion brands has been to relocalize most of the production process to countries offering low-cost labor with less workers' protection and accountability (the sweatshop model), enabling a faster and cheaper production of the garments.[58]

→   The upscaling of fashion brands and improvement in the stock distribution has allowed clothes to be received and sold in more brick-and-mortar stores, and with shorter delays.[59]

→   The shortening of time between a brand's public presentation of its new collection and its availability has allowed for the creation of a tighter fashion agenda: the traditional Fall/Winter v. Spring/Summer division has seen the arrival of the Cruise and the Pre-Fall collections, or even the twice-a-week release for the largest fashion companies (giving the term *fast-fashion*).[60]

→   The development of e-commerce platform, delivery services, and consumers' behavior patterns have mutually contributed to the growth of online shopping. The possibilities offered by standardized platforms and affiliated links has seen a rise of sponsored content online, allowing customers to easily find and shop items featured in a video or a paparazzi picture.[61]

The creation of an Influential Award by the CFDA illustrates how fashion businesses are now acknowledging and working with the many possibilities of online content and its celebrities. Making Kim the first honoree serves not only to signal this economical recognition but also to promote the award and the CDFA itself—via Kim's Instagram account, KUWTK, the paparazzi and guarantee press coverage.

56.   Busy Philipps, "2018 CFDA Fashion Awards: Kim Kardashian West Receives Influencer Award," Youtube, recorded at the 2018 CFDA Fashion Awards, Brooklyn Museum, New York, video, 1:04—2:12, https://youtu.be/ysAec0JWKuc?t=64.

57.   Kim Kardashian West, Ibid., 2:52.

58.   Sarah Shannon, "Fast Fashion Slow to E-Commerce," Business of Fashion, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/fast-fashion-slow-to-e-commerce.

59.   Ibid.

60.   Ibid.

61.   Ibid.

Kim's relation to fashion and clothes has always been one of love. Her first job was at a clothing store. She then opened a *closet business* helping celebrities (including long-time friend Paris Hilton) to clean out their unwanted items and sell them on eBay. In 2006, with her sisters, she opened her own womenswear boutique, DASH, and confessed planning to use KUWTK as a way to promote the store. In one episode notably, her family confronts her about her shopping addiction.[62]

Her fashion sense appeared to become more defined when, in 2012, she started dating Kanye West (who had many friendships with fashion designers). In one episode of KUWTK, Kanye and his personal stylist go through Kim's closet, in order to get rid of many items they deem ugly or out of fashion.[63] Since then, Kim almost exclusively wears body-con dresses and ball gowns for red-carpet events, and tight-fitting outfits—with signature cinched waist and fitted hips and bottom—for daily activities. Influenced by designers Rick Owens, Martin Margiela, Olivier Rousteing (Balmain), Phoebe Philo (previously at Céline), and her own husband (Yeezy), she is known for her *tonal* outfits (a single color from head-to-toe), and recurrent usage of black, white and skin-tone colors.

Many of her public appearances have exploited the controversial capacity of tight-fitting garments, see-through fabric, absence of bras and low-necklines. Although she is far from being the first celebrity to use nudity and self-commodification for publicity, she is the scapegoat of many critics for:

→   Acting in such manners while being a mother and/or a role model for young girls;
→   Not having any other cultural role than self-commodifying;
→   Raising the bar/putting pressure on other pregnant women by performing femininity while pregnant (e.g. wearing heels).

Using these same arguments, defenders view her as:

→   Proving motherhood/celebrity should not be considered as incompatible with one's choice to self-commodify;
→   Proving self-commodification is worthy of recognition by and for itself;
→   Proving pregnancy does not need to be a private and reclusive timeframe in one's life, and pregnant-bodies are beautiful (e.g. her tailored gowns were still form-fitting, thus showcasing her pregnant belly).

Kim's daring looks have inspired many fans to recreate her outfits, often looking for cheaper alternatives. Capitalizing on these new trends, many fast-fashion companies started offering (sometimes explicitly) similar items only a few days after their high-fashion counterpart's appearance in the press.

On February 19th, 2019, fashion *watchdog* Instagram account Diet Prada investigated the following case:[64] on February 17th, Kim tweets a picture of herself, wearing a vintage Spring/Summer 1998 Thierry Mugler cutout dress, about to go to the annual Hollywood Beauty Awards. The following day, fast-fashion brand Fashion Nova shocked the internet when it made available to pre-order a knock-off of the dress.

Two hours before Fashion Nova's announce, their featured model (Yodit Yemane) published an Instagram video *story*[65] of the photoshoot, zooming on a computer screen where the photographer is checking the pictures. But some noticed that, in small numbers, the software used by the photographers displays the date and hour of each picture, and they

62.   "I'd Rather Go Naked… Or Shopping," KUWTK, Episode 3 Season 3.

63.   "Kardashian Therapy – Part 1," KUWTK, Episode 15 Season 7.

64.   Diet Prada (@Diet_Prada), Instagram photo, February 19, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BuDB6RxlPab/.

65.   Ibid.

appear to have been taken four days before Kim's night out. Moreover, the photoshoot files folder is called "Kim dress."

A public outcry arose in fashion circles about fast-fashion capitalizing on vintage high-fashion creations as soon as celebrities publish their outfits. Many suspecting Kim to facilitate such knock-offs, she proceeded to tweet about it, stating:

> "It's devastating to see these fashion companies rip off designs that have taken the blood, sweat and tears of true designers who have put their all into their own original ideas."[66] "I've watched these companies profit off my husband's work for years and now that it's also affecting designers who have been so generous to give me access to their beautiful works, I can no longer sit silent."[67] "Only two days ago, I was privileged enough to wear a one-of-a-kind vintage Mugler dress and in less than 24 hours it was knocked off and thrown up on a site–but it's not for sale. You have to sign up for a waitlist because the dress hasn't even been made to sell yet."[68] "This is a way to get people to sign up for their mailing list and make people believe there is some kind of relationship between me and this fashion site. There is not."[69] "My relationships with designers are very important to me. It's taken me over a decade to build them and I have a huge amount of respect for the amount of work that they put into bringing their ideas to life."[70] "I often plan for weeks, sometimes months, and even a year in advance, and I'm grateful for every fashion moment those designers and their dresses have helped me create."[71] "So, as always, don't believe everything you read and see online. I don't have any relationships with these sites. I'm not leaking my looks to anyone, and I don't support what these companies are doing."[72]

For podcasters Joan Summers and Matthew Lawson of *Eating For Free*, the Kardashians master the technique of deflecting the public attention.[73] By posting this tweet, the media narrative switches from being *Kim v. Fashion Nova* to *Kim calls out fast-fashion knock-offs*. Moreover, the companies and brands involved (in this case, Fashion Nova) are never named, and one could imagine because of a contractual obligation. Some months before, during an interview with Ashley Graham, Kim confessed saying to Kanye about a similar knock-off case with her sister:

> "What we should do is have [the dresses] pre-made, we know what we're wearing, and sell them on the site right after [publishing a picture wearing them]."[74]

This isn't the first time a fast-fashion brand was able to *recreate* a dress Kim wore, hours only after she posted a picture of it. Which bears the question: if the Kardashians know how much consumers want to be able to shop cheaper version of their outfits, and when fashion design has so few anti-copying protection, why wouldn't they profit on this phenomenon? The family, as a media platform, allows for interactions between their fans and companies selling ripped-off designs. The Kardashians themselves

66. Kim Kardashian West (@KimKardashian), Tweet, https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1097903481518616576.
67. Ibid., https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1097903657377361922.
68. Ibid., https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1097903684527091712.
69. Ibid., https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1097903715493720064.
70. Ibid., https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1097903956150210562.
71. Ibid., https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1097903979885805568.
72. Ibid., https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1097904082335854592.
73. Joan Summers and Matthew Lawson (@eatingforfree), "Late Lunch: Fashion Nova Is Shady, But Kim Kardashian Is Shadier!," Eating For Free, Podcast, audio, 19:20, http://eatingforfree.libsyn.com/late-lunch-fashion-nova-is-shady-but-kim-kardashian-is-shadier/.
74. Kardashian West, "Pretty Big Deal with Ashley Graham," 18:14.

do not need to produce the design of the clothes, nor actually produce the items. They simply need to put those *user groups* in contact using what their empire is built on: media coverage. The press is given three consecutive narratives:

→ Kim wears a shocking vintage Mugler dress.
→ Fashion Nova manages to copy Kim's dress in less than 24 hours.
→ Kim calls out fast-fashion brands.

Kim's successful smartphone role-playing game, *Kim Kardashian Hollywood Game*, is another example of platform behavior: players compete to become celebrities (by modeling, befriending other celebrities and dressing hip) in a cartoony-world, with the help of the Kim and her sisters. The Kardashians looks are replicas of outfits they have worn to various events, sometimes days only after their real-life publication. Players are invited to shop at, pose for and use products of partnered brands Balmain, Karl Lagerfeld, Nars Cosmetics, etc, often with direct links to the brands' real websites.[75]

II. COSMETIC SURGERY

When KUWTK first airs in 2007, Kylie is ten years old. During the first seasons, she and her sister Kendall (two years older) rarely appear at the center of the episodes' narrative. But their rising fame—and appeal to younger fans, eager to identify with teenage celebrities—rapidly allows them to endorse products and co-design clothing collections. Throughout Kylie's numerous appearances in 2014, observers started noticing that her lips were getting more voluminous. The rapid change on the seventeen-year-old's face gave rise to an *online challenge* called the *Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge*, in which users record videos with dramatically enhanced lips using a simple vacuum technic.[76]

At the time, asked about it, Kylie replied that she did not use any kind of cosmetic surgery, but simply overdrew her lips using a lipliner. The following year, in an episode of KUWTK and encouraged by her sisters, she shares her insecurities due to her previous lips' appearance and reveals to using temporary lip filler.[77] During the summer break (in which the season was paused), she announced that she will be launching her first lipstick line, titled *Kylie Lip Kit* (lipliner and matching lipstick), exploiting the narrative of empowerment by overdrawing lips.[78]

The family's official narrative, displayed in this open-heart episode, is worth dissecting. Since approximately a year before its recording, media and fans were discussing Kylie's usage (or non-use) of cosmetic surgery and reacting to the *Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge*. Kourtney Kardashian's breast implants, at the age of 21, were "no secret" to anyone. At the beginning of the episode, Scott Disick (Kourtney's then-partner and baby-daddy) praises the existence of boob-jobs. We then follow Khloe, about to get stretch-marks on her butt laser-removed, in the presence of Kendall and Kim. She states "when you are photographed all the time, it's natural to have insecurities or want to have things changed about yourself." As usual with the show, the exit-frame features the name of the cabinet, in this case, a Beverly Hills dermatologist, which could mean the service was provided (at a reduced price, for free or even paid for) in exchange of it being advertised in the TV show.

75.   Maria Bobila, "Do Brands Benefit From Being In *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood?*," Fashionista, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://fashionista.com/2016/06/kim-kardashian-hollywood-brands/.

76.   Justin Wm. Moyer, "Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge: The dangers of 'plumping that pout'," Washington Post, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/04/21/kylie-jenner-challenge-the-dangers-of-plumping-that-pout/.

77.   "Lip Service," KUWTK, Episode 9 Season 10.

78.   Lindsey Sierra, "Kylie Jenner Is Launching Her First-Ever Lipstick Line This Fall—Get the Scoop!," E! Online, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.eonline.com/news/687042/kylie-jenner-is-launching-her-first-ever-lipstick-line-this-fall-get-the-scoop/.

Later at dinner, Khloe, Kendall, and Kim share a paparazzi shot of Kylie and proceed to discuss her lips. The sisters appear to understand Kylie's previous insecurities, and respect her choice to get *lip plumping*, although Kendall confesses "I just don't want her to take it too far because she is a beautiful girl and I don't think she *needs* anything." Kendall's usage of the verb *need* implies that there are people who *need* cosmetic surgery, while others do not. We don't know, however, if she views this *need* as a need to fit society's expectation, a need to resolve one's insecurities or both.

Some days later, Kylie is having a launch party for her own hair-extensions brand. In an interview, a journalist asks her opinion on the controversy surrounding her lips, to which she doesn't seem to give an answer before asking to change the subject. Once the interview is finished, she joins her sisters and declares "I'm not ever gonna deny or confirm any-thing, it's too much." Facing the camera, Khloe shares her opinion: "If you have done something, it is right to cope up to it. If you avoid questions, you're gonna look like a liar."

After another interview in which Kylie manages to deceive another lip-inquiry of a journalist, she confesses to us, viewers (a solemn piano-tune playing in the background):

> "I have temporary lip-fillers, it's just an insecurity of mine and it's what I wanted to do. I'm just not ready to talk to reporters about my lips yet because everyone always picks us apart. I wanna admit to the lips, but people are so quick to judge me on everything…"

During another dinner, Kim and Khloe comment on how the controversy surrounding Kylie's lips develops. Kim recalls an interview she did in Australia, in which she managed to deflect a question related to Kylie's lips, but confesses to "feel like a liar, because, we're [used to] totally being honest." Khloe answers that she could never lie if someone asks her about it, to which Kim adds "I would never lie!". In this scene, it appears that the sisters do not consider deflecting a question, or answering a partial truth, as a lie.

Later in the episode, Kim decides to pay Kylie a visit and have a talk about her lips. When she arrives, Kendall is also present, and the three of them sit on the living room couch. Kim advises Kylie: "Do what makes you happy—*to an extent!* I don't want you to go crazy—but own up to it! *We've all had our own insecurities, there is nothing to be ashamed of*, it's just handling it the right way. If someone asks you about your lips, just be honest, tell them it's really not that big of a deal." Kim then proceeds to share her own insecurity relating to her butt and her weight, and the media controversy around her potential butt implants (that she denies having had). She adds "I cannot leave my house without my spandex." Kylie herself, later confesses: "Having older sisters with some of the same insecurities as me, helps me a lot and makes me feel like it's ok." Kim concludes: "Just makes sure you keep everything subtle and don't go overboard. I'm always there if you want my opinion." The episode con-cludes with Kylie confessing:

> "Now I feel comfortable enough to face some of the things I was insecure about before, and it feels good."

The Kardashians recurrent usage of concepts like *truth*, *honesty*, and *lies* are central to the show's narrative. Because of the many cast/family members, and their personal development throughout the years, we witness complex and context-dependent usages of said words. The sisters imply that their fame is intrinsically tied to their (perceived) honesty and openness, by sharing various aspects of their private life *with* their fans. However, they do not see *deflection*, *half-truth* and *lying by omission* as *lies*. They confess to using such technics in order to *protect* another sister's narrative while acknowledging their limits.

In the episode, the biggest taboo is not Kylie's usage of cosmetic surgery, but the insecurity which made her resort to it. The feeling of being insecure about something is treated (by Kylie) as a feeling to hide or to be ashamed of. By inviting her sister to "own up to it," Kim seems to imply that she (and her other sisters) have a policy of being honest and opening up to their fans about their insecurities. Part of the appeal of celebrities is their beauty: many fans experience dissatisfaction with their bodies, and longing for a *better* body—benefiting of beauty privilege or more satisfied with their body-image. The Kardashians habit of sharing their body-image insecurities lessens their prestige as *perfect and happy celebrities* but also reinforces their appeal by making them *relatable*, closer *to us*, and worthy of our *compassion*. Thus, Kylie's reluctance to reveal her (body-related) insecurity translates a desire of appearing more *star-like* and *confident* than *vulnerable*.

Throughout the years, the Kardashians have been known to use their body-dissatisfaction for product endorsement. Kylie's lip injection revelation has been accompanied by the narrative that using lip-liner to overdraw her lips allowed her to gain confidence (to some extent). In this case, the narrative was later re-used (three months after the episode's broadcasting date) to announce her upcoming *Lip Kit*. In a similar fashion, and often throughout social media, the Kardashians have been product endorsers for latex waist trainers, weight-loss teas, gummy hair vitamins, and most recently, acne medication. KUWTK often featured the family getting facial and skin treatment, without explicit disclosure of advertising or contractual practices.

This has rather complexified their relationship to the body positivity movement. While the movement, very active on social media, advocates for greater acceptance and love for one's body, the usage of cosmetic surgery is perceived as a capitulation and reinforcement of societies beauty standards. However, many body-positivists argue that cosmetic surgery is usually used to achieve a greater love of one's body, and the movement has the moral obligation to encompass the many different technics used by people to a positive body image.[79] A rising movement inside body positivity, called *plastic positivist*, often refers and relates to the Kardashians. Its goals are to deconstruct the taboo surrounding cosmetic surgery (often by highlighting its strong prevalence in celebrities and the media landscape), fight against the shaming of people recurring to cosmetic surgery, and acknowledge the long history of surgical reconstruction and alteration of the human body.[80] The Kardashians are cited as examples of rare and perfect *plastic beauty* and applauded for their openness concerning their skin treatment and surgical interventions. However, in the previously mentioned episode, Kim's advice *not to go too far* and to *keep it subtle*, reveals a moral-limit surrounding beauty and cosmetic surgery. It is unclear if she reinforces the hegemonic feminine status of women constantly under men's (and each other's) scrutiny, or the traditional and hypocritical canon ideal of *natural and effortless* v. *fabricated* beauty.[81]

The sisters' insistence on their openness (as Khloe said, *keep it real*) also serves to indirectly deny all the current rumors surrounding their usage of cosmetic surgery. The official narrative thus is: the sisters do not lie about their usage of cosmetic surgery, but the question has to be asked bluntly enough by a journalist to prevent *deflection*, *half-truths*, and *lies by omission*. However, as is the custom, journalists have to pitch

79. Devika Syal, "Criticizing Plastic Surgery Is Just Another Form of Body Shaming," Helloflo, last accessed May 9, 2019, http://helloflo.com/criticizing-women-getting-plastic-surgery-another-form-body-shaming/.

80. Maggie Kelly, "Plastic and proud: Meet the unreal faces of the 'plastic positive' movement," Mamamia, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.mamamia.com.au/plastic-proud-meet-unreal-faces-plastic-positivite-movement/.

81. Zan Romanoff, "How The Kardashians Reflect Changing Ideas Around Plastic Surgery," BuzzFeed News, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/zanromanoff/how-the-kardashians-reflect-changing-ideas-around-plastic/.

their interview to the celebrity's publicist, and sometimes hand a list of the questions that will be asked. The publicist will only allow the interview to happen or be distributed if certain questions or topics are not mentioned, a practice almost impossible to circumvent by journalists when the interview's exclusivity could be given to any another media outlet.

The Kardashians put, according to the show, a tremendous amount of time and work into their bodies. The rare body fat distribution centered around the breast, hips, and butt, yet almost in-existential on the arms, waists, and face, looks for many like a *real-life photoshop-job*: voluptuous and skinny. One of Kim's most controversial photo shoot, *Breaking The Internet* for Paper Magazine, was precisely successful because it played on her uncannily perfect body, and had everyone wondering if and how much retouching was involved. Featuring a frontal and a back nude, it created a wave of reaction and a frenzy for anyone to *Google* the pictures. Jean-Paul Goude, the photographer, is known for is heavy use of image retouching and fetishization of black women bodies. Kim's skin tone, semi-squatting position, large buttock and balancing a glass of champagne is a recreation of an earlier picture by Goude, titled after its black model, *Carolina Beaumont*.

While Kylie's lip injections are now public knowledge, the rest of their body (except for Kourtney's breast) remains in a blurred area, with many suspecting butt lifting, liposuction, and implants. Big lips, big asses, and thick thighs: for many, the success of the Kardashians comes from their appropriation and promotion of *black features*, while they benefit of society's broader acceptance as a *white family*.[82] Their Armenian genetic heritage is often brought up to justify their hourglass shape and skin color.[83] Their recurrent black traditional hairdos (Fulani, Kanekalon and Yaki braids, Bantu knots and extremely curly textured), and black husbands, boyfriends and baby daddies (Kris, Khloe, Kim, Kylie and previously Kourtney) has part of its viewership *calling them out* for exploiting black American culture for its current *exotic and hip* perception by white society, while failing to use their platform to raise awareness regarding the various forms black people are oppressed in America.[84]

III. GESTATIONAL CARRIAGE

Kim's first and second pregnancy, showed throughout season eight and eleven, were marked by some serious health complications. She showed symptoms of *preeclampsia*, a condition putting the baby's and Kim's life at risk. During her first delivery (for her daughter North), she suffered from *placenta accreta*, which means her placenta was attached too deeply in her uterine wall,[85] forcing her obstetrician to scrape her placenta from her uterus. As the couple wanted a third child, and following Kim's doctor advice against another pregnancy, they opted for a gestational carrier: a person to carry Kim and Kanye's fertilized egg. The egg being provided by Kim, and the sperm by Kanye, the resulting baby had no genetic inheritance with the gestational carrier. The couple, happy with this experience, decided to renew it for their fourth child, this time contracting another gestational carrier.[86]

Worldwide, gestational and surrogate carriage are considered very differently by the law. To name a few, In China, Turkey, and most nations of Europe, it is strictly forbidden. In Brazil and Uruguay, it is authorized if one of the parents has up to two degrees of consanguinity with the carrier. In India, South Africa, Australia and the United Kingdom only 'altruistic forms' are authorized, meaning no financial exchange is allowed. The United States

82.   Sesali B., "Flirting With Blackness."

83.   Muñoz, "Kim Kardashian and the Politics (and Privilege) of Being Racially Ambiguous."

84.   Potts, "The Kardashian-Jenners and their Black children."

85.   Source: American Pregnancy Association.

86.   Newsbeat, "Kim Kardashian and Kanye West expecting fourth child," BBC News, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-46874577/.

are mostly divided on the question: some states forbid it, some authorize only 'altruistic forms', most have no regulation whatsoever, and some clearly authorize commercial arrangements. As a result, the existence of commercial surrogate and gestational pregnancy has geographical implication, resulting sometimes in *fertility tourism*. In California, where Kim and Kanye live, both altruistic and commercial arrangements are legally authorized.[87]

Other celebrities, such as Sarah Jessica Parker, Nicole Kidman, and Tyra Banks, have also used surrogates and gestational carriers. For chronological purposes, as Kim announced only at the beginning of this year (January 2019) the couple's decision to re-use a gestational carriage process for their fourth child, I will focus on the first gestational carriage (for their third child). Conversations between Kim and Kanye regarding the decision to recur to a gestational carrier notably are not showed on KUWTK—probably because of Kanye's desire not to feature in the show. During the pregnancy, and for the sake of the carrier's security, Kim and Kanye wanted to keep the process private. However, the information was leaked on various website, and the ensuing crisis-control was one of the main features of season 14.

In episode 16 of the season, interviewed on a red carpet shortly after the identity of the carrier was revealed, Kim declares: "We've never confirmed anything. So I think when we are ready to talk about it we will, and that's that." Confessing to the KUWTK camera-crew (and thus, the audience), she adds:

> "I've done everything in my power that I could possibly do to contain my surrogacy. The only thing I can control at this point, since there are so many rumors, is just *when* I confirm it. It's not like we're trying to hide anything, it's just that we'll share it in our own time when we're ready to share it."

As in Kylie's lip case, this statement serves to reinforce the narrative that the Kardashians are honest: they do not lie to the public (except for the types of lies mentioned earlier), but they insist on their entitlement to be in control of their life's narrative. At the time, Kim's refusal to confirm both information arose public curiosity and created many speculations both online and in the printed press. Then, the highly waited-for pieces of information were slowly distributed throughout the show (aired between three and four months later), in highly staged interviews (Ellen, E! News), and on Kim's own blog. Although Kim pays lip service to the difficulty of keeping the whole process secret, I argue that the leakage was extremely beneficial to the Kardashian Komplex. The different time-gaps between the *gossip press*, Kim's official revelation, and the show's broadcasting were fully exploited.

The couple's—or rather Kim's—narration was very much centered on Christian values of *selflessness* and *gratefulness*.[88] In the second last episode of season 14, on Kim's invitation, the carrier (wearing heels) pays a visit to the family. Cameras record the meeting without showing the carrier's face, but we learn through her introduction that she is named LaReina. Sitting on the beige living room couch, she confesses:

> "I like being pregnant, I know it sounds really weird. The pregnancy itself, it just feels natural, like I'm supposed to do it [...] I know from the very beginning this is not my baby, my joy and my satisfaction is with whoever I'm having the baby for. It makes me feel important because I feel like, wow, I did something so good, this is beautiful, I would do this again, a thousand more times."

87. Helier Cheung, "Surrogate babies: Where can you have them, and is it legal?," BBC News, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-28679020/.

88. "I am seriously so grateful for her. That someone is so selfless and kind to do this". Kim Kardashian West, "Baby One More Time," KUWTK, Episode 10 Season 14.

However, gestational and surrogate carriages are very expensive processes. Kim and LaReina's arrangement was not qualified as *altruistic*— a form of carriage where only medical and pregnancy-related fees are covered. As the press revealed, it was a *commercial carriage*, in which the carrier was compensated for her labor—the time, energy, sacrifices, emotional and physical challenges she had to face throughout the process.[89] As soon as the information of the couple's choice was revealed in the press, many professionals were brought into the public discussion to weigh in on the matter. A first-time surrogate/gestational carrier is usually paid a standard fee between US$ 30,000 to 35,000.[90] In Kim's and Kanye's case, the surrogate was experienced, and thus paid an amount of US$ 45,000.[91] During the nine months of pregnancy (plus the extra weeks pre-insemination and post-birth, amounting to a total of ten months), the carrier has to follow a strict lifestyle in agreement with the couple: no other form of labor is allowed, a specific diet has to be followed (organic for example, or even be provided the service of a private chef), sessions of personal training, etc.

Kim and Kanye were open about the clinic they contracted—again, raising the question of an eventual financial sponsorship. These are some of the additional financial compensations recommended by the clinic, *Family Creations LLC*:[92] US$ 5,000 if a twin pregnancy occurs, 2,000 if the delivery requires a C-section, and 4,000 if the carrier loses reproductive capabilities. In Kim and Kanye's case, many observers were shocked at the small compensation received by the gestational carrier, compared to the massive wealth of the power-couple. Stephanie Caballero, attorney and founder of the *Surrogacy Law Center*,[93] explains:

> "You don't get more to carry a celebrity's child. […] Here's the thing: if you pay a surrogate, let's say who's giving birth for Kim and Kanye, US$ 100,000, that looks like coercion. I mean anybody, you would raise your hand and say, 'Sure, six figures? I'll carry your baby!' And you don't want somebody to come forward like that. You want a woman who has raised her hand and said, 'This is something that I want to do. I have uneventful pregnancies; I love being pregnant. I want to help somebody and give them a baby.'"[94]

Notably absent from the show and Kim's and Kanye's public narrative, the option of adopting a child is never brought up. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, many celebrities adopted children from overseas and often other ethnic races, while many denounced a form of colonialism, white savior complex, and publicity stunt. Today in America, adoption is still marked by discrimination, joint or second-parent adoption being legally conditional to the marriage of heterosexual couples in some states.[95] According to the Adoption Exchange Association, each year, 2,000 children in California are in need of an adoptive family.[96] Kim and Kanye's gestational carrier choice is always justified in regard to Kim's health condition and previous pregnancy complications. But attentive watchers might remember the time Kim, on vacation in Thailand, declared on KUWTK wanting to adopt Pink, an orphan girl from a poverty-stricken region, an idea that Pink gently refused.[97]

89. Allie Jones (@allierileyjones), "Here's Why Kim Kardashian's Surrogate Is Making Only $45,000," The Cut, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.thecut.com/2017/09/kim-kardashian-pregnancy-surrogate-third-child.html.

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. "Payment Schedule," Family Creations LLC, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.familycreations.net/surrogacy/payment_schedule.php

93. In Carlsbad, California.

94. Jones, "Here's Why Kim Kardashian's Surrogate Is Making Only $45,000."

95. "Foster and Adoption Laws," Movement Advancement Project, last accessed May 9, 2019, http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/foster_and_adoption_laws/.

96. "California foster care and adoption guidelines," AdoptUSKids, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/how-to-adopt-and-foster/state-information/california.

97. "A Thailand Vacation – Part 3," KUWTK, Episode 16 Season 9.

When paparazzi pictures of the gestational carrier were leaked, the public attention focused on what those portraits revealed: a black woman in her 20s, living in San Diego. Information of her pay brought many commenters to accuse Kim of another form of black exploitation: upper-class white couples preferring to rent black women's bodies (for a fee considered too low) instead of adopting children, reinforcing the hegemonic myth that family equals bloodline.[98] In public debates, two (sometimes intersecting) phenomenons were brought in: organ trade and sex work.

Similarly to gestational carriage and surrogacy, organ trading presents health risks for the *donor*, although those risks are often very difficult to quantify on long-term. Most countries forbid commercial organ trading, with the notable exception of Iran. However, most countries allow *altruistic* donations of organs, often bypassing financial arrangement by systems of anonymization. The main argument of opponents to commercial surrogacy/ gestational carriage and commercial organ trading is the impoverished profile of *donors*: debt and health complications (often going hand-in-hand) are often cited as the main reasons why *donors* choose to sell their organs (in the case of organ trading).[99]

Women's prominence in sex workers representation has created a long history of solidarity (and hate) along with feminist movements. The autonomy of women over their own bodies and their agency to create commercial consensual sexual intercourse and reproduction processes are particularly central to many feminist legal battles. Sex workers' advocates and gestational carrier advocates argue that legalization of commercial exchanges allows for a dismantling of already-existing black markets.[100] Acknowledging the link between oppression and lack of financial agency from impoverished groups, they argue that the law shouldn't further oppress those groups by criminalizing their few sources of independence and empowerment. However, a general consensus agrees on the need to educate participants on their rights and develop pro-active structures to prevent possible forms of exploitation.[101]

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have situated the existence of the Kardashians as both individuals and as a cultural empire, in both time and space, in relation to celebrity culture and media narratives. I have listed some of the theories that run parallel to their universe: femininity and hyper-femininity, post-feminism, fourth wave feminism, cultural studies, media and communication studies, and economy. I presented the Kardashian network theory and detailed its form, use, and content. I argue that these concepts allows us to better map and understand the Kardashians' interaction with the world.

Many countries throughout the world are facing similar changes simultaneously: new gender relations,[102] new experiences of womanhood,[103] feminization of labor,[104] new conditions and pressures for social mobility,[105] etc.

98. "Kim And Kanye hired a African-American surrogate," Lipstick Alley, Forum discussion, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.lipstickalley.com/threads/kim-and-kanye-hired-a-african-american-surrogate.1248633/.

99. Yosuke Shimazono, "The state of the international organ trade: a provisional picture based on integration of available information," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, *85*(12), December 2007, 901–980.

100. Richard F. Storrow, "Quests for Conception: Fertility Tourists, Globalization and Feminist Legal Theory," *The Hastings law journal*, *57*(2), December 2005, 295–330.

101. Virginie Rozée Gomez and Sayeed Unisa, "Surrogacy from a reproductive rights perspective: the case of India," *Autrepart*, *2*(70), 185–203, doi:10.3917/autr.070.0185.

102. E.g. the growing number of stay-at-home dads, men's loss of breadwinner identities and rising of body-objectification, increasing pro-gay attitudes. Cf. respectively: Pew Research Center, "Growing Number of Stay-at-Home Dads," Pompper, "Masculinities, The Metrosexual and Media Images," and McNair, "Striptease Culture."

103. E.g. reproductive rights, freedom, gender roles.

104. Angela Dziedzom Akorsu, "Feminization of Labor," The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies, published on April 21, 2016, doi:10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss027.

105. OECD, "A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility," published on June 15, 2018, doi:10.1787/9789264301085-en.

Neoliberal policies are making work less reliable,[106] workers are impelled to invest in their visibility,[107] while businesses are becoming platforms.[108] The rapid modification in our media landscape is forcing companies, brands, celebrities and individual to compete by acquiring a better timeline literacy. I argue that the Kardashian Komplex is a reflexion of such a capitalist project, that demands to be understood in its own terms.

Many gendered practices of the Kardashians are linked to financial, educational and medical access: cosmetic surgery, professionally coached diet and work out, gender transition and gestational carriage. Others are mostly democratized, but their usage is linked to cultural influence: fashion, make-up, and hairstyling. I argue that the Kardashians' narratives about those practices are shaping our society's understanding and usage of them. The Kardashian Komplex uses feedback loops with the audience in order to adapt and generate new narratives and benefit from those interactions.

In my thesis, I have focused on three of those practices: fashion, cosmetic surgery, and gestational carriage. In these three examples, the Kardashians adjusted their narrative according to the public's response, using the various timescales of their media outlets:

→   Kim responded to fast fashion companies replicating her outfit;
→   Kylie explained why she used lip injection and tried to deny it;
→   Kim narrated why she used a gestational carrier.

I found that their narratives are often centered on their care for others (fans, celebrities, sisters), and their integrity (sincerity, hard work, feminist values). What does the mass consumption of such narratives say about our society? This thesis is the articulation of a desire to understand how an image-driven world functions, and why femininity is narrated by this organizational complex.

> "Watching Bear Grylls kill an alligator, drink his own urine or eat giant beetle larva is fascinating and entertaining. But watching the Kardashians conduct their daily, intimate, feminine lives, and seeing how they perform their glamour labor is more relevant. Kim and her family won't teach us how to survive in the wilderness, but they may give us insight into what it means to live in a world where image is crucial, and how to share intimacies and support each other as women in that world."[109]
>
> – Meredith Jones

Boris Fernandez Jacober

106.   Harris, "Kids These Days," 69.
107.   Ibid., 86.
108.   Srnicek, "Plateform Capitalism."
109.   Meredith Jones, "What's Wrong With Studying the Kardashians?," The Guardian, last modified on September 24, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/jan/14/whats-wrong-with-studying-the-kardashians.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbey Rose, Maloney, "The Influence of the Kardashian-Jenners on Fourth Wave Feminism Through Digital Media Platforms," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 8, no. 2 (2017), 48–59, https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/communications/journal/wp-content/uploads/sites/153/2017/12/05_Feminist_Maloney.pdf.

Browner, Stephanie, "Are You Still a Slave? Liberating The Black Female Body," Panel at *The New School*, Eugene Lang College, https://youtu.be/rJk0hNROvzs.

Chen, Vanessa, "Keeping Up With the Kardashians and Jenners: An Analysis of The Postfeminist and Neoliberal Tendencies and Biopolitics In Contemporary Social Media Practices Through a Consideration of The Popular Culture Exemplar: The Kardashian-Jenner Family," Dissertation (Bachelor), Trinity College Dublin, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/36878812/Dissertation_Keeping_Up_With_the_Kardashians_and_Jenners_An_Analysis_of_the_Postfeminist_and_Neoliberal_Tendencies_and_Biopolitics_in_Contemporary_Social_Media_Practices_Through_a_Consideration_of_the_Popular_Culture_Exemplar.

Chozick, Amy, "Keeping Up With The Kardashian Cash Flow," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2019, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/style/kardashians-interview.html.

Cueto, Barbara, and Bas Hendrikx (eds.), *Authenticity? Observations and Artistic Strategies In The Post-Digital Age*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2017.

Dahl, Ulrika, "Turning like a Femme: Figuring Critical Femininity Studies," *NORA (Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research)* 20, no. 1 (2012), 57–64, doi:10.1080/08038740.2011.650708.

Erin Duffy, Brooke, and Elizabeth Wissinger, "Mythologies of Creative Work in The Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and 'Just Being Me,'" *International Journal of Communication 11*, no. 2017 (2017), 4652–4671, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7322.

Etcoff, Nancy, *Survival of The Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*, Anchor Books, New York, 2000.

Guarisco, Maria, "Kepping Up With Postfeminism: The Branding of The Kardashian Sisterhood," Honors Degree, Franklin & Marshall College, 2016, http://hdl.handle.net/11016/24153.

H. Bratton, Benjamin, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2015.

Harris, Malcolm, *Kids These Days: Human Capital and The Making of Millennials*, Back Bay Books, New York, 2017.

Jenner, Kylie, "Kylie Jenner on Love, Stormi and Her Billion-Dollar Beauty Business," Interview by Remy Rippon, *Vogue Australia*, August 18, 2018, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.vogue.com.au/celebrity/interviews/kylie-jenner-on-love-stormi-and-her-billiondollar-beauty-business/image-gallery/db671ca1115a278d012b9a20383aa0c2.

Kardashian West, Kim, "Kim Kardashian West at Code/Mobile 2014," Interview by Kara Swisher, *Code/Mobile*, October 29, 2014, https://youtu.be/OpUEUB1mq7o.

Lang, Eugene, "A Public Dialogue Between Bell Hooks & Laverne Cox," Presented at The *bell hooks: Transgression* Panel, The New School, October 13, 2014, https://youtu.be/9oMmZIJijgY.

Lueck, Jennifer Anette, "Friend-Zone With Benefits: The Parasocial Advertising of Kim Kardashian," *Journal of Marketing Communications* 21, no. 2 (2015), 91–109, doi:10.1080/13527266.2012.726235.

Martin, Reinhold, *The Organization Complex*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2003.

Michael, Nadia, "Is Feminism Keeping Up With The Kardashians?," Dissertation (MBA), Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, 2013, http://hdl.handle.net/2263/42027.

Nef, Hari, "#FreeTheFemme: The Aesthetics of Survival," presented at the TEDxConnecticutCollege, New London (CT), April 16, 2016, https://youtu.be/0D9QIG36J9Q.

Nicole Webb, Henry, "Celebrity Versus Non-Celebrity: Parasocial Relationships With Characters In Reality-Based Television Programs," Master's Thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2011, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/3440.

Papacharissi, Zizi, *A Networked Self and Platforms, Stories*, Connections, Routledge, New York, 2018.

Penny, Laurie, *Cybersexism: Sex, Gender and Power on The Internet*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013.

Romanoff, Zan, "How The Kardashians Reflect Changing Ideas Around Plastic Surgery," *BuzzFeedNews*, September 15, 2017, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/zanromanoff/how-the-kardashians-reflect-changing-ideas-around-plastic.

Russell Hochschild, Arlie, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983.

Scheiner McClain, Amanda, *Keeping Up The Kardashian Brand: Celebrity, Materialism and Sexuality*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2014.

Sehdev, Jeetendr, *The Kim Kardashian Principle: Why Shameless Sells (and How to Do It Right)*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2017.

Serano, Julia, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and The Scapegoating of Femininity*, Seal Press, New York, 2007.

Srnicek, Nick, *Platform Capitalism*, Wiley, Hoboken, 2016.

Sternheimer, Karen, *Celebrity Culture and The American Dream*, Routledge, New York, 2011.

–––, *It's Not The Media: The Truth About Pop Culture's Influence on Children*, Westview Press, Boulder, 2003.

Summer, Joan, and Matthew Lawson, "Late Lunch: Fashion Nova Is Shady, But Kim Kardashian Is Shadier!," Podcast, *Eating For Free*, http://eatingforfree.libsyn.com/late-lunch-fashion-nova-is-shady-but-kim-kardashian-is-shadier/.

Tiqqun. *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of The Young-Girl*, Semiotext(e), Cambridge, 2012.

Turner, Graeme, *Understanding Celebrity*, 2nd ed., SAGE Publications, Los Angeles, 2014.

Valenti, Jessica, "Fourth-Wave Feminism," Interview by Deborah Solomon, *The New York Times Magazine*, November 13, 2019, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html.

Whitefield-Madrano, *Autmun, Face Value: The Hidden Ways Beauty Shapes Women's Lives*, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, New York, 2016.

Wissinger, Elizabeth, "#NoFilter: Models, Glamour Labor, and The Age of The Blink," Jenny Davis and Nathan Jurgenson (eds), *Interface* 1, no. 1, Theorizing the Web 2014 Special Issue, doi:10.7710/2373-4914.1010.

Wrye, Harriet Kimble, "The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Psychoanalytic Perspectives Introductory Remarks," Studies in Gender and Sexuality 10, no. 4 (October 16, 2009), 185–189, doi:10.1080/15240650903227999.

Young, Molly, "At Home With Kim Kardashian West," *Elle*, March 13, 2018, last accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a19379177/kim-kardashian-west-elle-april-cover/.

The CCC Master-Thesis 2019 is the result of the two-year educational process that trains the students in methods of doing "research by the means of the arts", understood as a network of practices while being in (geo-)politics of the 21st century. The transdisciplinary and bilingual CCC-Curriculum consists of Writing Research Practice and Situated Art Practices seminars that discuss the students' individual research while Critical Studies, Curatorial Politics, Political Studies, Theory Fiction seminars and the Reading Group foster the collective formation of new vocabularies.

Le Mémoire de Master CCC 2019 est le résultat d'un processus éducatif de deux ans qui forme les étudiant-e-s aux méthodes de «recherche par les moyens de l'art», entendue comme un réseau de pratiques tout en vivant dans les (géo-)politiques du 21ème siècle. Le plan d'étude transdisciplinaire et bilingue du CCC consiste en des séminaires de Pratique de la Recherche/Écriture et de Pratiques Artistiques Situées qui discutent de la recherche individuelle des étudiant-e-s, tandis que les Politiques Curatoriales, Études Politiques, Études Critiques, Théorie-Fiction et le Groupe de Lecture favorisent la création collective de nouveaux vocabulaires.

THE KARDASHIAN KOMPLEX   Boris Fernandez Jacober

TUTEUR-TRICE DE MÉMOIRE/THESIS ADVISOR   Kodwo Eshun

ÉTUDIANT-E-S DIPLÔMANT-E-S/   Vinit Agarwal, Shima Asa, Yasmeen Chaudhry,
GRADUATING STUDENTS 2018/19   Nadia Elamly, Boris Fernandez Jacober, Léa Thaïs Genoud,
                                                   Gaël Goy, Max Léo Hauri, Hamlin Robert Jackson,
                                                   Julie Marmet, Roland Virgile Mbessa, Chloe Sugden,
                                                   Felix Toro, Laila Mendieta Torres, Sanja Vasić,
                                                   Fatima Wegmann Guinassi

ÉTUDIANT-E-S M1 STUDENTS   Julie Tiffany Bellard, Giacomo Galletti, Loana Gatti,
                                                   Mathilde Gaugué, Alexander Gence,
                                                   Rebecca Glyn-Blanco, Clara Nissim, Julie Robiolle,
                                                   Caspar Shaller

COMITÉ DE SOUTENANCE ORALE/   Federica Martini (HES-SO), Clémentine Deliss,
COMMITTEE OF THE ORAL DEFENSE   Marwa Arsanios et/and Faculté CCC Faculty

SESSION DE SOUTENANCE ORALE/   18-20 juin/June 2019
ORAL DEFENSE

FACULTÉ/FACULTY 2018/19   Professeur-e-s/Professors:
                                                   Doreen Mende (responsable/responsible), Kodwo Eshun,
                                                   Dora García, Pierre Hazan, Anne-Julie Raccoursier,
                                                   Gene Ray

                                                   Professeure invitée/Guest-professor:
                                                   Çağla Aykaç

                                                   Assistantes/Assistants:
                                                   Camilla Paolino, Julia Pecheur

Layout   Lucas Cantori and the Students/et les Étudiant-e-s

Impression/Print   Atelier typo/pao - HEAD Genève, mai/May 2019

Reliure/Binding   Finissimo - Genève