

**The Myth of Women Having It All:  
Gender Performativity in American Media**

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**University of Central Oklahoma**

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Gender Performativity in American Media**

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A THESIS

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### Abstract

The effects of the cult of domesticity, which have been fought against since the first suffragette movements, have permeated the history of the culture of the United States. In what follows, I will examine the ways the cult of true womanhood influences the media's treatment of women in the twenty-first century, and how this oppression of women, particularly oppression of women of color, has been furthered by these outlets. To do this analysis, I will use Pinterest, blogs, and books picked for book clubs.

Barbara Welter's famous article from 1966, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" details the rise of the cult of domesticity and gender performativity in the United States. Welter asserted that in order to have worth in American society as a woman, one must adhere to the duties of the Bible, which for many involved marriage and bearing children. Although marriage was not the only option, it was a woman's duty to have a higher purpose to uphold society the way it was constructed; if not as a wife, then a woman would help the less fortunate and the children. This meant women would do the work related to the social construct of the home, so men could continue to run society's business dealings. Much of the literature/media of the day pertaining to women was centered around upholding these gender, spiritual, and familial roles.

It should be noted that Welter's explanation of the cult of domesticity and gender performativity specifically pertains to White, mostly middle- to upper-class women who were practicing or claiming to be Protestants, but that does not mean its influence did not affect women of other intersectionalities in America. Welter's article, though discussing a cultural phenomenon which in many ways led to first wave feminism in the United States, was written during the height of second wave feminism. Shari Kendall and Deborah Tannen in their chapter "Discourse and Gender" from *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* explore how research has

shown that America's use of language/discourse affects gender performativity and maintains normative patriarchal hierarchy in society, from the time of second-wave feminism to fourth wave feminism and postfeminism. This gender performative discourse is learned from childhood, and again, seems to be characteristic of White, middle-class Americans more than Americans of color and/or working classes. This study seeks to examine how the cult of domesticity and gender performativity continues to influence the lives of American women of all intersectionalities through social media, lifestyle blogs, and popular literature studied in book clubs, and how it particularly has a negative impact on women of color and women of lower socioeconomic status.

To study this phenomenon, I will first examine the ways in which social media sites such as Pinterest portray the ideal "woman who has it all": a job, a family, and a social life. I will focus on how these sites reinforce the gender performativity of being a healthy woman, a mother, and a wife even with a career and relationships outside the family. Furthermore, I will investigate how Pinterest reinforces the cult of true womanhood to the detriment of women of all races and classes, because the "woman who has it all" stereotype is typically a White, middle-class wife and mother with a career. To do this, I will use a new Pinterest account with no prior search history to search for ideas related to health, motherhood, careers, and womanhood. I will then argue how these search results confirm how Pinterest, despite empowering many women to chase their health, career, hobby, and motherhood goals, often ignores the reality of women of color and lower socioeconomic status, thus promoting a new form of the cult of true womanhood: the woman who is the perfect career woman, wife, and mother.

In Chapter Two, I will highlight how many lifestyle blogs written by Americans, while on the surface may appear to be supporting the ideas of postfeminism, often demonstrate there is

still a need for feminism within their posts about being a mother, wife, and/or career woman. To find blogs to analyze, I will utilize three blogs I discovered within my Pinterest results for Chapter One that were made by Americans, regardless of gender, and cover different topics. I will then analyze three posts from each blog based on a) whether or not the creator wrote them and b) a theme related to how the blog was found on Pinterest and/or a theme related to the cult of domesticity. These analyses will aid me in emphasizing how the “ideal” woman for American society has shifted from a woman who takes care of her husband, children, and the household to a woman who maintains her own physical and mental health, has a career, *and* takes care of her husband, household, and children.

Finally, I will explore in Chapter Three what impact book clubs have on gender performativity of American women, particularly those who have careers and children. I will utilize previous research on women’s book clubs and analyze book clubs which are meeting or have met online within the past five years. I will then assert that these book clubs, while allowing women to express themselves creatively and/or intellectually outside of their career and their family, also reinforce the idea that a) women can “have it all” and b) still uphold the gender roles of the patriarchy. For control purposes, I looked at the book picks of two all-women’s clubs, two all-men’s clubs, and two book clubs open to everyone and analyzed their results based on the year 2021 unless otherwise necessary. Just like Pinterest and blogs from working mothers, these book clubs are important in empowering women to network among themselves and reclaim the importance of domestic work, but they also tend to leave behind women of color and/or women of lower socioeconomic status due to lack of time and financial resources, as well as lack of shared experience. As a result, those of intersectionalities besides White, middle- to upper-class married women feel as if a sort of “double standard” is placed upon them when it comes to

gender performativity in America, thus furthering the need for feminism in the United States and beyond.

The research done in this study affirms gender performativity in American media negatively influences women, especially women of color and of lower socioeconomic status. These findings suggest that Americans are attempting to dissolve the binary between men and women through giving women more opportunities to be successful outside of the home. However, these opportunities, rather than dissolving the binary and making women equitable to men in American society, put more pressure on women by mixing the “new” expectations of being a financial provider of the family with the “old” expectations of tending the household. Further research is needed on how gender performativity in media like Pinterest, blogs, and books studied in book clubs affects women of all intersectionalities, particularly women of the LGBTQ community.

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, gender norms in America have changed dramatically due to the push for women's and LGBTQ rights. From starting the 1900s with no voting rights to the statistic from the Council on Contemporary Families in 2021 that reports "about 70% of U.S. moms can expect to be primary financial providers before their children turn 18," women in the United States have seen their roles shift in society from primary caregiver to primary caregiver *and* financial provider (Glass et. al).<sup>1</sup> Despite these strides in women's rights, the gender norms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while not as prevalent as they once were, are still subtly (and sometimes overtly) a part of American society. Utilizing feminist, social media studies, and ethnographic lenses, this study aims to look at how patriarchal gender roles still affect American women in everyday life, including women of color and lower socioeconomic status, through media outlets such as Pinterest, blogs, and books chosen for book clubs.

Barber Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood" is foundational to second-wave feminism as well as to this study, with its core argument that American patriarchal society is supported because of the oppression of women through four traits: "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). These ideals of what a "true woman" should be continue to be seen today in America through media. However, the definition of what a "true woman" should be is also different than what it was during both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, women

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Glass, Ph.D., R. Kelly Raley, Ph.D., and Joanna Pepin are professors of sociology. Glass and Raley are professors at University of Texas, Austin, and Pepin is an assistant professor at the University of Buffalo, SUNY. Glass et. al discovered that "About 71 percent of mothers who are college graduates will at some point bring in more than 60 percent of household earnings, and a whopping 76 percent of mothers who attend college but do not obtain a degree will serve as primary breadwinners for their household for some period of time." Furthermore, many mothers who become the primary financial providers for their household will average "nearly 6 years" as the primary financial providers of the household. For more information, see "CCF Brief Report: Mothers Are the Primary Earners in Growing Numbers of Families with Children."

are encouraged to have a family and a career, while still being the primary caregiver of children and manager of the household. Thus, although American society has changed the narrative of what the ideal woman is, in some ways this change has put more responsibility on women in the household.

Similarly, Shari Kendall and Deborah Tannen's chapter in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, "Discourse and Gender," emphasizes how the language we use in American society maintains the power imbalance between women and men, both in the private and public spheres. In other words, remnants of the cult of domesticity are maintained through our gender-inflected language. They also note that language does differ between women of different races, classes, and sexualities, which has led to the creation of another binary among women due to heterosexual, middle- to upper-class White women's speech being more favored because it fits the normative gender expectations. Kendall and Tannen assert that the notion of anonymity online is false because language can be recognized as gendered due to grammatical/mechanical patterns. Given that this study is mostly centered around online media, it is important to note the use of language is different on online media because one of the primary ways of community online is through the written word. Thus, their findings point to how language shapes our society entirely, and as a result emphasizes that part of the reason why notions of gender have changed is due to our acceptance of new language pointing toward the idea that women can and should have all they want in life: their careers, hobbies, and families. In other words, when words like "strong" and "empowered" are used to describe women, they reiterate the idea that women can do anything and everything they set their minds to, which is often translated as, women *should* do anything and everything.

Because so much of my study deals with online media, one of the other lenses used will be social media studies. Caitlin Petre, Brooke Erin Duffy, and Emily Hund point out that the boundaries of social media platforms such as Facebook are vague, constantly changing, and undemocratic because they are often unfairly carried out. This makes it more difficult for cultural content creators to maintain visibility on the platforms, and the idea of the “empowered woman” who can do it all is heavily influenced by the narrative social media platforms control and curate. Therefore, social media studies and feminism go hand-in-hand due to the patriarchal influence over such platforms.

The last lens I will use to analyze media is ethnography. According to *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ethnography is where an ethnographer “studies a particular social/cultural group with the aim to better understand it” (Allen). In other words, ethnography is about the analysis of social/cultural group, and less about scientific data and hypotheses. Carol Stack, a White, single mother who performed studies on Black family life in the 1960s and 1980s, states that “the process of writing ethnography has turned inward toward subjectivity. We could argue that ethnography itself has been taken as illusion, the fiction of the writer herself” (81). Stack is essentially saying that ethnography can be looked down upon due to its qualitative, rather than quantitative, data. Furthermore, she is suggesting that ethnography can be biased because of the exploration of data based on the author’s worldview. Like Stack, I am a White, heterosexual, middle-class woman; however, unlike Stack, I am single and not a mother. While I am speaking from an auto-ethnographic perspective when I study women’s experiences in digital spaces, then, I also occupy the same outsider space as Stack when I move into discussing experiences outside my own. Thus, in doing this study of how patriarchal ideals still affect the portrayal of women in media today, I cannot fully understand the experiences of

mothers, whether single or unmarried, nor can I understand the everyday life of women of lower socioeconomic status or women of color. As a result, my findings here need to be further researched.

In Chapter One, I examine how social media sites like Pinterest perpetuate gender norms through content moderation and community rules set by leaders of these major companies. To perform this study, I created a new Pinterest account based on the stereotypes of what an adult White, heterosexual female in her twenties in America would want in her feed, which as previously stated, is my own positionality. The search algorithm, along with the guidelines given to content moderators and community users themselves, thus controls the narrative being presented within Pinterest to its mostly female users. In other words, Pinterest and other social media platforms help keep a patriarchal society in place through reaffirming gender roles for women as mothers and wives, with numerous suggestions on how to do better at cooking, organizing, dressing, exercising, and taking care of oneself. Furthermore, this “how to do it better” aspect of Pinterest underscores the idea that women can have everything they want in life (i.e., have a career, be a wife, be a mother, etc.) *and* do it well.

In Chapter Two, I explore a different type of social media, the blog. I chose to explore blogs because, like Pinterest, the activity of blogging is often seen as feminine due to many stay-at-home mothers engaging in it. These blogs were discovered based on the pins from the research on Pinterest in Chapter One, which points to the connection between these types of social media which might have been otherwise unnoticed without using ethnography. The blogs I analyze reinforce gender norms of mothers, wives, and women through food, child-rearing, and DIY work done through the complexity of meals, the long list of parent/child activities, and simple and challenging home projects like organizing a closet and building built-ins. All three blogs,

while different in themes, point to the larger problem of masculinizing and feminizing such activities, while also maintaining the idea that because women can do things like woodworking and teaching their child survival skills, they should do them on top of working, being a wife, and taking care of oneself.

Lastly, Chapter Three is where I discuss online book clubs and their picks from approximately 2020, 2021, and/or 2022, depending on the blog. I will look at how book clubs have both a negative and positive influence on American women, including those who have women and children. While these book clubs create a space for women to have intellectual and emotional conversations, they are also often viewed as more feminine, which is why I look at the book picks of two all-women's clubs, two all-men's clubs, and two book clubs open to everyone and analyze their results. Furthermore, the celebrity-run book clubs have more bestsellers than their non-famous counterparts, emphasizing the power of fame in the ability to stop perpetuating gender norms. Yet celebrities can further compound the notion that women can "have it all" through the books they write and the books they discuss. Book clubs can also alienate women of color and/or women of lower socioeconomic status because they often fit White, heteronormative, middle- to upper-class gender norms. Thus, people of intersectionalities beyond my own positionality often experience more criticism when it comes to gender norms, furthering the need for feminism in the United States and beyond.

In conclusion, this study's aim is to expose the continued gender norms in American media today, whether subtle or unsubtle. More research can and needs to be done regarding the impact gender norms have on American women, especially women who are a part of the LGBTQ community. Because this study underscores the American media's continued support of patriarchal ideals, it is important that we as a society continue to question those ideals through

pushing back against the stereotypes of what is “feminine” and “masculine.” By doing so, we can help assure that American women having the right to “have it all” does not mean they should be forced to have a career, be the primary caregiver of the children, and take care of the household; rather, men and women should share these responsibilities regardless of gender norms.

## Chapter One

### Reinforcing Gender Roles: Gender Performativity in Pinterest

While it may be obvious to say social media is one of the major influences on American culture in the past two decades, exactly how these platforms have perpetuated White, middle- to upper-class patriarchal norms is still being explored. To add to the conversation regarding the effects of gender performativity in social media on modern society, I conducted an experiment utilizing perhaps the most female-oriented/feminine-oriented social media platform, Pinterest.<sup>2</sup> Pinterest is known for its participation in fabriculture, or the focus on sharing crafting and DIY project ideas as a part of community building, which can lead to activism (Bratich and Brush). Yet, for the activism Pinterest may create through its community's own actions and ideas, its perpetuation of gender performativity and the patriarchy remains in part due to content moderators' and social media companies' control of the narrative. In other words, gender performativity and patriarchal ideas' influence remains within social media sites because these structures have yet to be demolished within the administrative positions of the companies which run these platforms. Regardless of social media's control of the narrative with the use of their community guidelines and content moderators, the ingrained gender norms throughout American society also influence how platforms like Pinterest are used to further the binary and the patriarchal system.

Ysabel Gerrard and Helen Thornham discuss how assemblage theory can be applied to social media platforms and how their content is moderated in "Content Moderation: Social Media's Sexist Assemblages." More specifically, they look at how social media's content

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<sup>2</sup> According to Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, Pinterest is a "highly feminized digital platform" and "the happiness it promises often intersects with women's work as homemakers and mothers" (233). The platform's intended audience is women because the popular topics on it are associated with women's gender roles, like crafting, cooking, and child-rearing.

moderation is sexist in its nature, as well as how it does not consider socioeconomic status, race, or political affiliations. They do this by examining each platform's algorithms in "keyword and hashtag searches" (1266), community guidelines, and the recommendations the platform gives based on the algorithms. They argue that the sexism found in these three parts of each platform, especially when placed together as an assemblage, keeps the binary in place and "work[s] to silence some of the most marginal and at-risk social groups, for whom social media promised the strongest community ties" (1281). In other words, despite the hopes of the creators of social media to create a place online where people could express themselves for who they are, much of social media continues to hold the power structures of society in place. As Elinor Carmi states in her article "The Hidden Listeners: Regulating the Line from Telephone Operators to Content Moderators," both switchboard operators of the 1900s-1950s and content moderators of today "orchestrate sociality" (1). This "orchestration" results in "questions about whether machines should do work that involves decision-making processes, which influence people's subjectivities, behaviors, interactions with others, and understanding of their everyday life (news, culture, and politics, etc.)" (2). In other words, Carmi brings to light the issues of relying so heavily on technology for social interaction and community building.

Furthermore, what and who gets punished when companies and influencers try to boost their views and/or sales depends on the media platforms' guidelines and discretion. For example, Petre et. al discuss how media platforms in the United States draw the boundaries of what is deemed morally acceptable and unacceptable using the ideas of Western familial and societal values. This includes using the idealistic patriarchal family structure, which involves an "authoritative father" running the household whose decisions are unquestioned. The father figure is the social media/media platforms, while the content creators, despite their size, are the family



of the father figure. This, combined with the content moderators who are forced to make decisions that “follow specific procedures such as filtering to make sure the system feels as if in ‘real time’” (Carmi 1), creates social media platforms who continue to raise up a definition of society that is still controlled by binaries such as rich/poor, White/non-White, and male/female. Simply put, technology creates another layer of complexity within and formed by the patriarchal social structure of Western Eurocentric society, a layer that needs to be more thoroughly examined to understand its implications for American society. Although this chapter (and by extension, the thesis) will show a larger focus on women and gender performativity in America, it is vital to my study to include the intersectionalities of race and class in my examination of the social media platform, Pinterest. This is not only because of the long-held belief of the United States being a “melting pot” of cultures, but also because of the globalization of American society. Through this study, I hope to reveal how the hidden and overt use of gender roles within a female-oriented/feminine-oriented platform like Pinterest perpetuates patriarchal society.

### **Methodology**

Like Gerrard and Thornham, I created a new Pinterest account which sole purpose was for research on this project. However, unlike Gerrard and Thornham, I did not start with a clean browser. To open the account, I utilized my University of Central Oklahoma email address.<sup>3</sup> The first piece of personal information I had to give as I set up my account was my age (twenty-six), followed by my gender orientation (female), language (English), country (United States), and

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<sup>3</sup> Since I already had a Pinterest account with a personal email address, I needed to use a different email address to open an account which was not already tailored to my own interests. I felt there was no need to open another personal email account when my original Pinterest account was not tied to my University of Central Oklahoma email address, and because the research is being done for my completion of a master’s program with the university, it seemed fitting to have all emails related to my research with Pinterest be sent to that account. From August 2021 to January 2022, I received 119 emails from Pinterest about the research account. Most weeks, I received an email about every day or every two or three days.

then by areas of interest.<sup>4</sup> I decided to answer the personal information up until the areas of interest portion truthfully because beyond the areas of interest, my demographics reflect the patriarchal ideals of gender performativity in the United States: I am a White, single, middle-class, heterosexual female in her mid-to-late twenties. Since I was looking for how social media portrays healthy women, mothers, and wives who may have careers outside the family and home, I chose these five topics: Fitness and Exercise, Nutrition, Storage and Organization, Self Care, and Women's Style.<sup>5</sup> There were several similar categories to choose from relating to all five of these topics,<sup>6</sup> so I chose these categories to avoid overlap in choice and to create a balance of topics with which a woman who may be a wife, be a mother, and have a career (or some combination of the three) can relate.<sup>7</sup>

Then, a month and a half later, I visited the Pinterest account for this research project and, without searching anything in the keyword search box or navigating away from the home page, documented in a spreadsheet the first thirty available pins on my home feed by title (if

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<sup>4</sup> Although the site does not ask for anything for specific to my region beyond my country, if one looks at Pinterest's Privacy Policy on their Community Guidelines page, it notes "We will still use your IP address, which is used to approximate your location, even if you don't choose to share your precise location." I argue this influenced my results alongside the information I gave the platform when signing up for the new account.

<sup>5</sup> Pinterest makes a user choose five topics when creating a new account to help its algorithm generate content geared toward the user's interest.

<sup>6</sup> For the Fitness and Exercise category, some overlap examples include Butt Workouts, At Home Exercises, Exercise Plan, Stomach Workout, etc. For the Nutrition category, examples include Dinner Recipes, Healthy Snacks, Healthy Recipes, Baking, etc. For the Storage and Organization category, examples include Room Organization, Tiny House Living, Bedroom, Bathroom style, etc. For the Self Care category, examples include Positive Quotes, Meditation, Bullet Journal, Sleep Hacks, etc. For the Women's Style category, examples include Nails, Women's Fashion, Black Hairstyles, Everyday Outfits, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Based on personal experience, the culture within the southern part of the United States is such that most heterosexual women, especially those from a religious background, are expected to marry and have children in their twenties. However, in Sean E. Brotherson and William C. Duncan's 2003 article "Rebinding the Ties That Bind: Government Efforts to Preserve and Promote Marriage," studies were already showing nineteen years ago that American women were getting married later in their twenties, rather than earlier. While this fact does not necessarily alter the target audience of Pinterest, it does suggest a changing definition of wife and mother, which in turn affects the content created and curated on the platform. For more information, see Brotherson and Duncan (460).

provided), description provided, author/pinner/posting account, and a detailed description.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the pins I catalogued did not have a title. The description provided on Pinterest for pins on an untouched account are often vague, and for many I substituted the original website from which the pin came for the “Description Provided” column of the spreadsheet. Once I cataloged these pins, I then pinned them to my “All Pins” board before creating five separate boards named after the topics I chose in the initial setup of the account. Finally, I categorized the pins from my “All Pins” board by the topics of my five boards and pinned them to those boards accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

During this process, I saw an option to “Add account” in the dropdown menu below “Your accounts.” When I clicked on this, the description of this option states “Connect Pinterest accounts with different emails for seamless account switching.” To my understanding, the phrase “seamless account switching” meant that connecting my personal Pinterest account with the research one would not cause the accounts’ pins to be blended in anyway; rather, that I could more easily maneuver between the two accounts on the same browser if I so desired because both could be logged into at the same time on said browser. However, after connecting both accounts, the option was available for me to pin an item to the other account, suggesting that both accounts’ boards were not separated from each other, and by extension, their data.

Therefore, I disconnected my personal Pinterest account and my research one.

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<sup>8</sup> Due to Pinterest constantly refreshing the content of its feed for each user, simply minimizing the Internet browser one is using for it could result in a refresh of the page. In my case, this meant the loss of the data I was attempting to catalog. Therefore, the data which helped shape this chapter was not the initial set I attempted to collect, but rather, the second. Because of this, I pinned six extra pins as backup in case I lost some data, but did not catalog them as they appeared on the initial feed page.

<sup>9</sup> I removed two of the six extra pins, the 20 Things that Waste Time During the Day and The Best Storage Ideas to Steal from Tiny Homes after originally pinning them to the Self Care and Storage and Organization boards, respectively. This was because I wanted to keep them separated from the initial set to a) avoid messing up the results I might get on this account should I need to perform keyword searches or any other data collection and b) because of the difference in presentation of the pin’s information depending on if it is on a user’s feed versus if it is pinned on a board. However, these pins remain on my “All Pins” board should I need them for further research.

## Results and Discussion

To best examine the results of my research, I made five sections within my results which reflect the names of my Pinterest boards and the content therein. Many, if not most, of the descriptions of the items pinned to my boards are a combination of how I cataloged them in the spreadsheet before pinning them to a board and how Pinterest presents them to a user once they are pinned to a board.

### *Storage and Organization*

The board that has the most pins categorized under its topic was “Storage and Organization,” with twelve pins. Five of these were advertisements rather than original content: a storage shed from Wayfair, a gutter protection system from LeafFilter, an ad for a washer and dryer set from Aaron’s, a quartz tulip table from France&Son, and a bathroom cabinet from Hilton Furnitures.<sup>10</sup> The storage shed and gutter protection system could be categorized further as part of yard maintenance or outside of the house maintenance, while the other three ads deal with things inside the home. While all these objects have to do with organization of some kind, because the storage shed and gutter protection system are items that are outside the home, they are often traditionally viewed in American society as part of the “man’s world” despite playing a role in caring for the property of a family unit. These ideas were seen in a study done by Scott Coltrane in 1989, in which he found that heterosexual married couples with children were more likely to have the father do exterior painting, car maintenance, car repair, watering the lawn, mowing the lawn, cleaning rain gutters, etc. (479). The dining room table, the washer and dryer

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<sup>10</sup> Rather than setting up new boards exclusively for pins which did not match the boards I created, I categorized these pins under the closest possible category to the board I had already created. As such, instead of placing a table ad or a bathroom organizer under a board labeled “Furniture and Décor,” I chose to categorize it under “Storage and Organization” given this topic is the one that deals with household items like furniture. This was also to help simplify the analysis of the pins within this chapter.

set from Aaron's, and the bathroom cabinet that is "space saving" are objects used inside the home, and thus stereotypically categorized as part of the "woman's world." Yet, based on Coltrane's findings, the laundry was more the mother's task, while bathroom tasks such as cleaning and kitchen tasks such as cooking were often shared between the mother and father equally.<sup>11</sup> Regardless, Coltrane concludes that dividing household chores based on gender results "masks diversity and disregards exceptions to normative patterns," thus making our understanding of the family in America more heteronormative and Eurocentric (489).

However, the Aaron's ad from 2021 with the washer and dryer set showcase what appears to be a father and son doing laundry together, with the description "Laundry so easy, even your littlest helper wants to be included!"<sup>12</sup> This implies that the modern American household is comfortable with and may even celebrate men and boys doing what is traditionally seen as "women's work." Yet this could also be marketing to women the idea of the men of the household taking initiative to help with responsibilities around the house like laundry. In essence, like a romance novel, ads like this on Pinterest help women escape just long enough to be willing to take care of those household responsibilities themselves.<sup>13</sup> This ad is in stark contrast to advertisements for laundry rooms of sixty years ago, which often showcased a woman doing the laundry (see fig. 1). One could argue that the Aaron's advertisement, while not overtly using the stereotype that women are the "laundry experts" because they are the caretakers of the home, does imply that there no longer must be an expert on laundry in the house, because the

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that these couples were in households in which both parents worked, whether part-time or full-time. Whether or not both parents worked seemed to have little effect on how household chores were handled, according to Coltrane's research (489).

<sup>12</sup> This description was not provided until I pinned it on the board.

<sup>13</sup> In "Women Read the Romance," the women who participated in the study about women reading romance novels note that the reason why they read romance novels is to escape, despite knowing that "the romances which so preoccupy them are little more than fantasies or fairy tales that always end happily" (58-59).

machine does the work for them. The ad further reinforces this idea by having a father and son figure do it rather than a mother and a daughter. Unlike figure 1, which showcases the work the mother does for the family regarding the laundry while reinforcing the idea that only men can invent technology to improve what has traditionally been known as “women’s work” in American society, this ad implies thanks to technology, housekeeping like doing laundry is no longer difficult work. Thus, the advertisements on this board do not overtly use the patriarchal stereotypes of laundry or the kitchen being women’s work, yet they do minimize the effort it takes to maintain a home to appeal to a society increasingly dependent on the convenience of technology.



Fig. 1 A Norge and Tide 1962 advertisement showcases that the mother is the one who is the “family laundry expert.” Advertisement is used under Creative Commons license (CC by 2.0).

There were two pins related to food and its storage. The pin “20+ Foods that must be re-packaged for long-term storage and how to repackage them” shows what appears to be grains,

seeds, and pretzels in mason jars from a blog called *The Survival Mom*, while the other pin has the title “Make Your Own Pantry Shelf” written in between a photo of freestanding, empty shelves in a room and another photo with those shelves filled with various storage bins.<sup>14</sup> What is interesting about both of these pins is they both trace back to women’s blogs, which suggests that blogs and Pinterest are much more connected than a user might realize.

Furthermore, there are three pins related to storage and organization in the garage, basement, and/or shop: a YouTube video of a whole-house water back-up storage system consisting of blue barrels resting on wooden shelves hooked up to the plumbing system; a photo of a cabinet on wheels with many compartments in a woodworking shop with a link to an article named “Beginner Woodworking Shop: Dedicate a Shop Space” from the website Woodworking Craft Ideas; and a picture of a garage with blue and multicolored folding lawn chairs hanging on the wall near the door and the garage door with a link to an article called “Relaxing Diy Garage Storage Organization Ideas 40” from the website Zyhomy. Within traditional American gender roles, all these projects would be considered “a man’s job,” despite two of these projects being technically inside the walls of the home. This is because within the modern home of a heterosexual couple, the term “man cave” has come to refer to the physical space which “belongs” to the male head of household, whether part of the house, like the garage or basement, or a separate building on the land which the couple owns, like a shop/shed. These spaces are often seen as masculine, I argue, due to the fact that Americans tend to view tools as masculine,

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<sup>14</sup> Originally, I pinned this pin on the board “Nutrition” due to the fact it is talking about food; however, upon further research of the article it links to, I realized the article was giving tips on how to maintain the freshness of food with proper storage. Thus, I felt it best to move it to the “Storage and Organization” board. The “Make Your Own Pantry Shelf” pin was supposedly originally posted by [ketty.thompson.blogspot.co.ke](http://ketty.thompson.blogspot.co.ke), but when I tried to look at the site, I could not get around the pop-ups. However, the website listed on the pin itself, [handmade-haven.com](http://handmade-haven.com), is a blog called *Handmade Haven* that gives tips on DIY projects and sells products. The creator of *Handmade Haven* is Ashley Basnight.

and often spaces such as the garage or shed are where tools are housed. For example, Amy Bix highlights that “Corporate publicity branded hardware as a naturally masculine domain, with male staff attending to male tool shoppers” (39). This “masculine domain” has thus extended to include spaces in which one might find tools. Like the advertisements in this category, these pins break the gendered stereotypes of DIY projects and spaces like the garage, basement, and the shop/shed as male-centered, as well as challenging my own connotations related to the phrase “Storage and Organization” with a feminine-oriented social network like Pinterest. This suggests what content moderators and users are viewing often have more to do with people, both female and male alike, desiring to build their own storage units and/or learning to maintain their own home’s internal plumbing and electrical systems rather than simply organization tips.

Like the advertisements on this board, the pins mentioned in the previous paragraph do not reinforce gender performativity outright. Yet the Handmade Haven blog linked to the “Make Your Own Pantry Shelf” pin, while its homepage features a woman of color, does not have the woman actively building anything; instead, it has her dressed in overalls and a tool belt posing at a work station, with tailored hair and makeup. In other words, the photo is more about the aesthetics of a DIY woman one might find on a makeover television show and less about the performing of the project itself. As a result, despite Pinterest not overtly reinforcing gender performativity, the websites its pins are linked to often reiterate gender roles subtly through suggesting that women can and should do all the “feminine” and “masculine” work of the household.

The last two pins in the “Storage and Organization” board were a photo depicting an entryway with a storage unit/bench being installed and “The Top 82 Bathroom Organizations



Ideas-Interior Home Design” with a photo of neatly labeled under-the-bathroom sink storage.<sup>15</sup> Although the first pin is technically a part of the home which is not considered a man’s “property” in gender performativity, it could be grouped with the other DIY projects mentioned in the above paragraph because of its digression from traditional gender roles. However, “The Top 82 Bathroom Organizations Ideas-Interior Home Design” labels some of the drawers as “his” and “hers,” implying a heterosexual relationship (and, perhaps, a married heterosexual relationship) between the people who own the items in the storage compartments. What is interesting about this pin is it is tied to a website called Next Luxury, which describes itself as “the magazine for today’s gentleman.” The connotation of the word “gentleman” seems to argue here that a man who traditionally performs his gender well will be neat and organized while at the same time caring out the role of protector to other woman and his family. In other words, this pin reinforces gender performativity by implying someone who is in a heterosexual relationship would be looking for such an organization pin.

### *Women’s Style*

The board with the next largest quantity of pins was “Women’s Style,” with seven pins. Four of the pins appeared to be advertisements based on my investigations of each site with which the pins had connections: a woman in a pink robe advertising for Shein; a woman in black, form-fitting pants with black heels and a black, off-the-shoulders crop top modeling for Zorket; a woman in a pink floral dress smiling and sitting at a table with a bouquet of white roses posing for Zaful; and a woman standing next to a tan chair wearing a white button-up blouse, tan slacks,

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<sup>15</sup> When I clicked on the website link for the entryway pin, it took me to a Bing page. Upon further investigation, I discovered the original pin was posted by Humanist Home and titled “DIY|| Make your own ‘IKEA Hack’ Mudroom Bench and Storage for under \$200 – Our Humanist Home.”

and a black shoulder bag for a website called *Luxe Fashion Blog*.<sup>16</sup> The other three appeared to be connected to original content sites like social media or a blog and less about selling items: one is a post by an Instagram account named Paula Argüelles where a woman is walking down a street, smiling and wearing a gray T-shirt, a leopard print white ruffled skirt, and a black crossbody purse and Converse with the caption “Leo spirit” and paw prints; one is a woman wearing a pink dress and black blouse as she slips on pink heels for an article titled “20 Tiny Ways That’ll Make Your Clothes Look Expensive” from a blog site called *Everything Abode*; and one is a worksheet which lists, along with a visual, different types of clothing for women in neutral tones the blogger Emily Lightly suggests a woman should have in her closet.

Because my “Women’s Style” board had several advertisements, Pinterest created another board for me called “Your Shopping List” without my knowledge which displays certain items I have pinned that are for sale on the Internet. These include duplicates of the high-waisted black pants from ZorKet, and one of the extra pins (see footnote 6), a woman wearing a beige off-shoulder button-up blouse from another online retailer called Fashilist. Since the advertisements for clothing are connected to solely online stores, this suggests the further influence of the Internet and by extension social media on societal norms of consumption. For example, Pinterest has a good marketing platform for consumption because

a state of inspiration can be evoked by an external stimulus (e.g., a recipe posted to Pinterest) when customers seek and are receptive to new ideas (e.g., planning a meal). Second, inspiration involves a motivation aspect that serves as a trigger to change a routine consumption practice (e.g., creating the meal posted to Pinterest). Thus, inspiration includes the transition from the “state of being inspired by” an external factor, to a state of “being inspired to” actualize a new idea” (Böttger 116).

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<sup>16</sup> It was difficult to separate the advertisement for *Luxe Fashion Blog* as part of the shopping portion of the “Women’s Style” board or as part of the social media/blog portion of the board. This is because when I attempted to visit the actual website, the page which pops up displays an error message which reads “This store is unavailable.” As such, it is unclear to me which subcategory of the “Women’s Style” board this pin belongs.

In other words, Pinterest creates inspiration for many people to do new things, which in turn causes them to purchase products they might not normally purchase, whether from exclusively online stores or brick-and-mortar stores. This process creates a market for often otherwise unsellable items on physical store shelves online. As such, fashion trends influenced by advertisements on social media sites such as Pinterest can help dictate gender performativity and patriarchal reach within society, especially if these trends are showcased through social media influencers like Paula Argüelles and spread to several platforms.<sup>17</sup>

Another intriguing aspect of the pins on this board is only one of these pins has no people in them. While it is not clear what race and ethnicity each person is in six out of the seven pins, it is apparent most of the women have a lighter skin tone, drawing attention to the reality that American fashion is still often dictated by white, Eurocentric trends, while also implying women with lighter skin tones are subjectively more beautiful and thus more desirable as models. Furthermore, three out of the seven pins have the models wearing the color pink, which has within the last one hundred years been associated with femininity and womanhood. The other four pins have examples of clothing which are very neutral (blacks, grays, whites, blues, browns). These neutral-colored outfits on the models cover most of the torso and legs, with the exception of the top paired with the high-waisted black pants from Zorket, which is a crop top that has no shoulders. Even the pin by Paula Argüelles shows a woman in a gray T-shirt rolled up to show her midsection, but hardly any of the midsection can be viewed in the photo. This illuminates the common idea left over from the cult of domesticity and rape culture in United States society that women should not seek to draw attention to themselves; through wearing neutral tones and clothes that do not reveal too much of the body, a woman can go unnoticed and

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on how companies like Google, Facebook, and Instagram handle influencers' attempts to gain views and likes, see Petre et. al.

thus avoid unwanted male attention. While it is true the connotation of “Women’s Style” suggests a more business/everyday approach to the topic of women’s clothing, it does not assume the users of Pinterest who choose this category do not wear high-fashion clothing.

As mentioned earlier, Carmi asserts content moderators of social media platforms “listen” to what is being posted across multiple pages and “separate between what [the platform] decides is the signal and noise, the appropriate and inappropriate” (8). Like telephone operators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, content moderators are trained to work “like machines” to create a “frictionless experience” for users of the platforms online, which “points to the power media companies have and their position in destabilizing important aspects of society” (2). In other words, content moderators’ jobs involve shaping what is seen by users on their social media feeds based on company protocols as quickly as possible, to make it feel as if a computer algorithm was handling all aspects of what a user sees. While Facebook is the social media platform on which Carmi focuses her research, her argument can be applied to my findings on this Pinterest board. Using her thinking, it is implied women in America (and more specifically, women within my region of the United States) click on this type of clothing more often with the keywords “Women’s Style” because of content moderators’ decisions based on guidelines and subjectivities during their monitoring. Therefore, the Pinterest curation of what is “Women’s Style” is based on more than just user pins and likes. As such, gender performativity gets reinforced because it leads users to believe these pins are what is considered socially acceptable to wear in society today.

### *Nutrition*

My “Nutrition” board had four pins, three of which were different types of salad: an unmixed pasta salad with the description “Healthy Chicken Pasta Salad with Avocado, Tomato,

and Basil” from eatwell101; a “Greek Salad” from Laura Strange’s blog *My Gluten Free Guide*; and another pasta salad in a black plastic to-go box with the description “17 Practical And Packable Lunches You’ll Actually Be Excited To Eat” from BuzzFeed. The fourth pin is a recipe for sweet chili ground beef and brussels from a blog called *Kinda Healthy Recipes*. Based on these results, I assert not only is Pinterest curating these results for me because I chose “Nutrition” as something I am interested in (which has a connotation that suggests I am interested in a healthier lifestyle than if I chose “Dinner Recipes” or “Baking”), but also Pinterest’s algorithm equates nutritious food often with meals such as salads rather than meals that involve a meat and one or two sides. Some researchers have been able to point to why these results would appear for me as a user.

Referring once again to Carmi, based on what the content moderators “listen to” everyday across multiple users and their boards in the United States regarding food and nutrition, one can conclude many of the (largely) female population of users would deem a salad as a “healthy” and “nutrient-filled” meal. Furthermore, with the pin which showcases the recipe for sweet chili ground beef and brussels, it lists the recipe is a meal-prep recipe which has 27 grams of protein and 270 calories. By displaying the low number of calories and the high amount of protein in the meal, along with suggesting this meal is easy to prepare for multiple meals throughout the week, the pin is appealing once again to the idea of convenience, which for the busy lifestyle of many Americans is a must. Therefore, I argue my results regarding nutrition are a product of the larger phenomenon of diet culture paired with convenience in America and corporations’ perpetuation of it through advertisement in all forms of media. This diet culture pressures women and men to have a certain physique based on standards set by media and advertising companies. For example, despite many women knowing that the women portrayed in

the media set unrealistic expectations of beauty, the women that Cairns and Johnston interview in their article “Choosing Health: Embodied Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the ‘Do-Diet’” were “resigned to these pressures as an inevitable burden of femininity” (163). In other words, through their resignation to the unrealistic representations of women in media, these women contribute to keeping diet culture alive. Because meals like the salads and the sweet chili ground beef and brussels pins are often viewed as nutritious and quick to make, many women who cook for themselves and their families will ultimately continue to seek out meals like this one to feel better about themselves as a woman and a mother, and thus continue the cycle of diet culture within social media. I will continue to discuss this concept further in Chapter Two with my analysis of blogs.

### *Self Care*<sup>18</sup>

The Self Care and Nutrition boards were tied with four pins each; however, two of the pins on the Self Care board were advertisements. One of these advertisements was from The Lactation Network, which claims to help parents with the things they need to be successful as parents who nurse their children.<sup>19</sup> The advertisement depicts a Black woman holding her baby while chestfeeding and talking to another woman.<sup>20</sup> The other pin was an advertisement for SquareSpace, a website creator for businessowners, bloggers, artists, etc. A video showcases

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<sup>18</sup> On Pinterest, when choosing the categories I was interested in, the phrase self care is not hyphenated. However, many articles and many people use the hyphenated version of the phrase. Due to the way it is written on Pinterest, I will only use the hyphenated version when quoting articles from outside Pinterest.

<sup>19</sup> Again, I acknowledge that the categories I chose while creating this account do not fit every pin perfectly. This pin is a good example of this.

<sup>20</sup> “Chestfeeding” is a term that is used by some physicians and parents due to it being more inclusive of transgender and nonbinary people. Based on this information, I opened another Incognito tab and typed in “feeding advice for new parents” to see how it would change my Google search results. What I found was that a lot less of the results said “breastfeeding,” but rather, “feeding” instead. For more information on the term “chestfeeding,” see Azura Goodman’s article “It’s Time to Add ‘Chestfeeding’ to Your Vocabulary.”

different projects done on Squarespace, particularly the work of a female photographer named Rachel Burke.

According to Tracy R. Nichols, Meredith R. Gringle, and Regina McCoy Pulliam, “Self-care activities are comprised of lifestyle behaviors which are associated with decreasing risk factors for multiple chronic diseases, inhibiting the progression of diagnosed diseases, and reducing overall stress” (167). Social media platforms and many other forms of media have made the term “self care” explode over the COVID-19 pandemic and the few years preceding it. This is because many Americans have come to the realization they have been overworked, underpaid, and mistreated by their profession due to our instant, real-time, and convenience-driven society. The Lactation Network advertisement was placed on the Self Care board because there was not a better categorization for it. In fact, a Google search for feeding advice for new mothers resulted in most of the website links on the first page talking about breastfeeding, rather than using formula. In other words, a mother taking care of her lactation is seen as an essential part of taking care of her infant (i.e. buying the correct pump, diet of the mother, nursing habits, etc).<sup>21</sup> Thus, lactation is not self care at all, but rather, more responsibility. What this suggests is that Pinterest’s algorithm a) believes I am a mother and b) equates self care with a woman taking care of her children, rather than herself.

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<sup>21</sup> In an Incognito tab, I searched in Google the phrase “feeding advice for new mothers.” See Fig. 2 and 3.

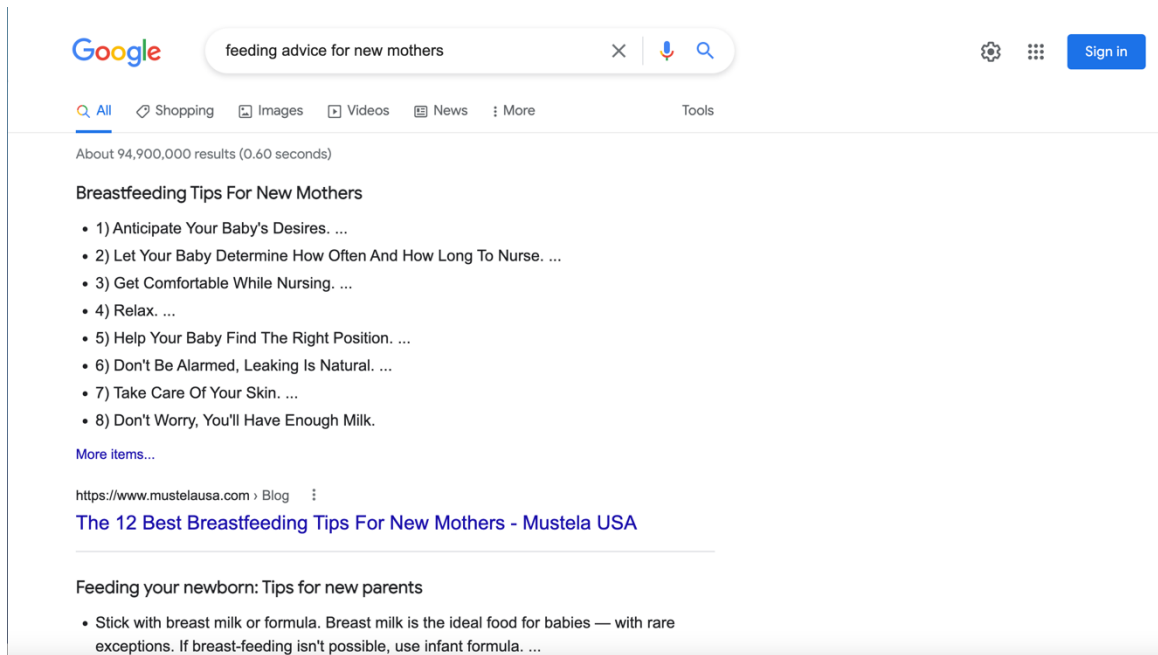


Fig. 2. A screenshot of an Incognito Google search of “feeding advice” for new mothers automatically gives the searcher a link for breastfeeding tips, listing some of them without the searcher even having to click on the site.

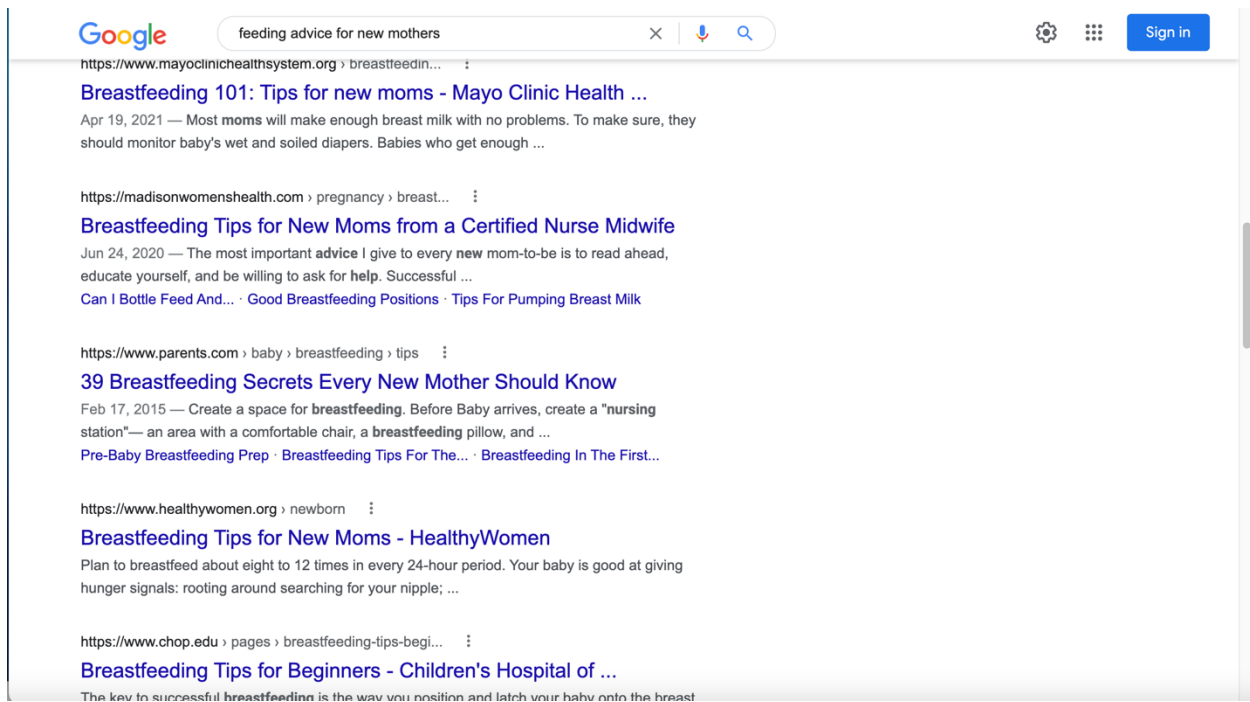


Fig. 3 Another screenshot of the same Incognito search from figure 2, figure 3 has links to websites with articles that all suggest breastfeeding over formula.

With the Squarespace advertisement, the reason for its placement on the Self Care board is twofold. The most obvious reason is there are no other boards I have created under which this



advertisement would fit, while the other reason is because the advertisement has quotes from users who state Squarespace has been the “catalyst in legitimizing my business” and in making “my projects feel professional.” The advertisement has only women in it, which suggests Squarespace has helped support women’s passions enough to be profitable and enjoyable, fulfilling the female users beyond just tending to their physical body’s needs for living. Furthermore, the mauve background and the use of only women in the advertisement points to Squarespace’s marketing toward more feminine users. In essence, a website builder which helps women pursue their careers and makes it less stressful on them to do so, if purchased, could be a form of self care. Thus, the underlying messaging within social media platforms who sell advertisements is even an advertisement could lead to less stress for an individual, particularly a woman who has a dream of running her own business in a patriarchal society.

Although The Lactation Network pin is an advertisement, I assert this pin has empowering qualities for new mothers and women because it is calling for the normalization of needing help and resources as a new mother who wants to chestfeed, rather than reinforcing the idea of a “supermom” who can do everything on her own. Despite this, it is still highlighting the idea that a mother *must* figure out how to make nursing her baby successful, rather than switching to formula if it is too uncomfortable for mother and/or baby. Furthermore, within the pins being analyzed, this is one of the only, if not the only, pin which has a Black woman in it. While it is important to have diversity within all aspects of media, The Lactation Network claims to be “insurance-covered” and have a “minimal out-of-pocket cost”; health insurance is something many new mothers who are women of color cannot afford due to lower socioeconomic status.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, for many women, especially women of color, this much-

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<sup>22</sup> Christen Linke Young states “Fourteen states have refused to expand Medicaid under the ACA, which is one of the reasons why people of color are disproportionately likely to be uninsured today.” Furthermore, in the article

needed service may be impossible for them to obtain. Despite the pin not reinforcing the patriarchy overtly because of its focus on giving mothers the care they need to take care of themselves and their babies while breastfeeding, it does bring out the underlying problem of the United States healthcare and insurance system with its description of what the company does. The healthcare system, which continues to favor men over women when it comes to reproductive rights, is thus another part of US society which is influenced by the patriarchy. The pin calls attention to the connection between gender performativity as a mother and the continued problem of patriarchal/capitalist legislation preventing new mothers from getting the healthcare they need, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.<sup>23</sup>

The other two pins on this board include a graphic named “My Circle of Control” and an aerial photo of a woman sitting on a bed with her smartphone beside her with the title “How to Wake Up at 5am and Not Feel Tired.” The graphic “My Circle of Control” with a subtitle of “I Will Focus on What I Can Control” is from the website Teachers Pay Teachers, a website with resources for mainly elementary and secondary teachers. The graphic is a poster teachers or counselors can use to help teach students what they are responsible for and what they cannot control; the things the student can control go in the circle, while the things the students are not able to change are outside of the circle.<sup>24</sup> The pin with the title “How to Wake Up at 5am and Not Feel Tired” leads to an article with the same title on a blog called *Her Highness Hungry Me*.

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“Closing the Coverage Gap Would Improve Black Maternal Health” by Judith Solomon, Figure 1’s title indicates that “Two-Thirds of Reproductive Age Women in Coverage Gap are People of Color.”

<sup>23</sup> Solomon emphasizes that “Among developed countries, the United States has the highest rate of people dying of pregnancy-related complications during or within 12 months of the end of pregnancy.”

<sup>24</sup>As an educator, I find it ironic one of the pins that would appear on my feed the day I was cataloging research would be this pin. Given that I utilized my University of Central Oklahoma email address, it is possible that the Pinterest takes into consideration the type of email address being used to curate content. Alternatively, because I did not use a clear browser, my search history on the browser I used to create the research account may have affected my Pinterest home feed.

What is interesting is out of all the pins on this board, “How to Wake Up at 5am and Not Feel Tired” seems to best fit the definition of what a Self Care Board would be about for an adult woman because it gives advice on how to wake up early, still feel rested, and “have time for the things you want to experience and achieve.” From the description, the pin itself is not about the stereotypical “have a spa day” many suggest on the Internet to practice the term “self-care.” Rather, the pin focuses on helping one strategize ways to get the sleep one needs while also pursuing one’s goals. When looking at the article the pin is connected to, the author explains how they benefitted from not only accomplishing more things they wanted to, but also more self-confidence. As such, the pin is not just about pursuing dreams and achieving, but also about improving mental health.

Yet for many women who are mothers, especially women of color, self care is not about taking care of themselves and their goals, but rather taking care of their children. Nichols et. al’s article “‘You Have to Put Your Children’s Needs First or You’re Really Not a Good Mother’: Black Motherhood and Self-Care Practices” details the higher stress levels and health issues Black women face due to stereotypes established of them in society as mother figures. These stereotypes prioritize the needs of the children Black mothers are taking care of above their own personal needs, which contradicts the United States healthcare system’s suggestion (which is perpetuated by social media platforms) to take care of one’s own health. As a result, “When the multitude of stressors these black mothers face resulted in failing to engage in healthy behaviors and/or coping via unhealthy behaviors, they blamed themselves” (185). This blaming of one’s self for not taking care of one’s body and mind implies many articles like “How to Wake Up at 5am and Not Feel Tired” can make women, especially women of color, feel as if they are not good enough because they have not achieved their “best selves,” or what that looks like as

dictated by society. Therefore, while social media platforms like Pinterest may be able to help spark inspiration for some to better take care of themselves, it may also trigger feelings of inadequacy for all mothers because it fits the definition of wife and mother many (or most) women cannot reach. This feeling of inadequacy is compounded for women of color because of the wage gap between women of color and White women, meaning that women of color often have to work longer hours/more jobs to earn what White women make.<sup>25</sup> Women of color are thus less likely to have the time and the financial resources to be the “best mother” as dictated by White American society. Furthermore, many women of color participate in extensive mothering, a practice that is often frowned upon by White, middle- and upper-class Americans due to American patriarchal gender roles indicating that the mother of the child should be the primary caregiver.<sup>26</sup>

At first glance, if one does not further investigate the origins of “My Circle of Control” pin and understand the resource the pin is referring to is geared overall toward children, one could assume this is something an adult might use to help regulate their mental and emotional health. The only real clues besides the content creator’s website are the graphic’s simplistic font and design, which to a primary school educator may suggest it is to be used for children. Despite its intention to be used for children, this graphic has advice which can be used for adults to help manage stress because it is not specific to problems children may have, like remembering “How I handle my feelings” and “My actions” are “Things That Are in My Control,” whereas “Things from the past” and “What other people say” are “Things That Are Out of My Control.” Although it is simplistic in its advice, unlike the other pins on this board, I argue it does not perpetuate

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<sup>25</sup> According to the National Partnership for Women & Families report for January 2022, Black women are paid fifteen cents less than their White counterparts on average for every dollar a White man is paid (2).

<sup>26</sup> For more information about extensive mothering, see Chapter Two and Karen Christopher’s article titled “Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers’ Constructions of the Good Mother.”

patriarchal stereotypes of women and self care because it is not focused on achievement or care for another, but rather, the person themselves.

### *Fitness and Exercise*

The board with the lowest number of pins was Fitness and Exercise, with three pins. Unlike the other categories, none of these pins were an advertisement to sell services or products, despite possibly being connected to a website whose purpose may involve selling some products. Rather, all three pins had suggestions for how to help different areas of the body. One pin titled “Unlock Your Lower Back” from GymGuider.com illustrates different yoga poses which can help “prevent injury” (with visuals of each pose depicted by a man in gray pants) below a graphic of a spine with back pain. One lists a “10 Week No-Gym Workout Plan” with a link to YouTube, with exercises and number of reps one can do at home, along with before-and-after photos of a woman in a sports bra and leggings showcasing the weight she lost around her midsection. The last pin is a graphic encouraging people to read an article about “4 Neck Exercises that Really Work” on a website called StyleCraze, with a before-and-after photo depicting the lower half of a woman's face with a double chin (on left) and no double chin (on right).

The “Unlock Your Lower Back” pin is the only pin out of the three, at first glance, that seems to be about exercising correctly rather than about losing weight. The other two pins focus more on weight and looks rather than maintaining physical fitness. Perhaps the most intriguing pin out of the three is the “4 Neck Exercises that Really Work” pin. When I clicked on this pin, the title was revealed to be “5 Effective Exercises to Lose That Double Chin Without Pills, Injections, or Surgery.” Once again, the idea of quick and convenient results, like the fast results of social media itself, appeals to many female readers who want to meet society’s beauty and

health standards, perhaps even if the typos from the pin to the article itself imply the pin is more for clickbait than it is about giving exercising and beauty advice. When I clicked on the article, the author went through the five exercises with pictures before ending the article with other common suggestions to avoid a double chin or avoid gaining too much weight, such as headings like “Reduce Your Calorie Intake,” “Never Skip Breakfast,” and “Sweets Are The Enemy.” While it is possible these exercises do work, they will not if one does not maintain a healthy lifestyle. With America’s fast-paced, high-achieving culture, many women and mothers are looking for simple ways to feel better about themselves and their bodies when they do not have the time to devote to it because of working, cooking and caring for children, and taking care of their home while maintaining social and/or romantic relationships. Therefore, most women may turn to these exercises in the hopes some of them may work even if they are unable to exercise three times a week, get a good night’s sleep, or eat enough healthy meals.

### **Conclusion**

Although Pinterest is targeted to a female/feminine audience, many of its pins continue to keep the patriarchal binary of American society in place. Content moderators of social media platforms like Pinterest follow guidelines from the platforms to filter content based on what they “listen” to, and as such what they put in users’ feeds is based on the worldview of both the social media platforms’ creators and its users. Thus, much of today’s society revolves around convenience and speed, and yet women are still expected to do too much: be a good wife, mother, and career woman at the same time as properly caring for ourselves.

On the Storage and Organization board, the pins suggest that women are expected to find time to organize the home perfectly, along with becoming a DIY woman who can fix plumbing issues. The Aaron’s laundry ad created a vision for women in which men can help take some of

the burden off women and household chores, while the DIY projects for storage indicate that women do not need men to help them with repair and DIY work. These messages point to a larger narrative of women being able to have and do “it all.” With the Women’s Style board, the clothing marketed had a variety of outfits fitting different scenarios, but all pins pointed to a larger narrative of women “having it all” by purchasing trendy clothes and thus emulating the thin, light-skinned woman standard of beauty in America. The message that women can “have it all” is thus detrimental to women’s mental and physical well-being because the expectations are impossible to meet and maintain.

Similarly, although the Storage and Organization and Self Care board sent positive messages of both men and other women taking care of mothers and wives, there is still much work to be done in social media regarding diet and exercise culture, such as what was found in the Fitness and Exercise and Nutrition boards. The Fitness and Exercise and Nutrition boards complement each other in that they seem to focus more on quick, easy solutions (salads rather than full meals; full-body workouts without going to the gym that appear to result in a flat stomach). This is furthering the message of “having it all” by marketing to women that it is not hard to achieve one’s ideal body, as long as one eats salads and follows a workout routine at home.

Finally, the Self Care board focuses more on self-improvement than actually taking care of one’s mental and physical health. Pins like “How to Wake Up at 5am and Not Feel Tired” and the SquareSpace advertisement stress this. Ultimately, the idea of self care as self-improvement is not only damaging to women but all people because it leaves the expectation that a goal must be achieved with self care, rather than relaxation and rest. This is especially true if a mother is

attempting to do self care, because for many women (and women of color in particular), self care is not a possibility due to the cultural pressure of always putting one's children first.

Therefore, I argue the importance of focusing more on caring for oneself as a woman than about achieving or excelling at being a wife, mother, and/or a career woman. This is to not say these pursuits are not worthwhile; rather, to change the view of women in society as the ones who have to “do it all” in the household or in the workplace, we must first challenge the cultural view of us perpetuated by social media platforms and allow ourselves to be seen as simply people worthy of existence.



## Chapter Two

### Gender Performativity in American Blogging

Before starting this project, I had already planned to analyze blogs alongside Pinterest to add to the conversation about the continued effects of gender performativity on media. However, when I was conducting research on Pinterest, I discovered many of the pins curated for me in fact led to blogs themselves. Half of the blogs I found were food blogs.<sup>27</sup> However, upon realizing two out of the three blogs covering the topic of food were not American based, I decided to shift my focus to cover three American-made blogs to accurately analyze and discuss the effect of blogs on gender performativity in the United States. In this chapter, I will argue that subtle word choices give power to gender roles in blogs, particularly because these blogs are often read by hundreds of people.

#### Methodology

Utilizing my Pinterest research results as a source to find blogs brought cohesion between the first two chapters of this project, and as a result I did not choose blogs based on other criteria such as genre, popularity, frequency of posts, etc. Rather, my first point of criterion for choosing a blog to analyze was as follows: did I discover the blog while I was researching the pins Pinterest curated for me? In total, I discovered seven blogs through my research with my Pinterest account. This includes the blogs *The Survival Mom*, *Handmade Haven*, *Luxe Fashion Blog*, *Everything Abode*, *My Gluten Free Guide*, *Kinda Healthy Recipes*, and *Her Highness Hungry Me*.

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<sup>27</sup> I originally wanted to focus on food blogs because this prevalence would give me a chance to explore and discuss in-depth the effects of diet culture on women in the United States and how it contributes to the continuation of patriarchal ideals and gender performativity.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the link to the website of *Luxe Fashion Blog* leads to an error message. While there is a Pinterest account titled “Luxe Fashion Blog” which appears to have amassed over 73 thousand followers and welcomes browsers “to your daily dose of FASHION, TRENDS, LUXURY & WOMEN EMPOWERMENT,” because there is no website for me to visit, this blog did not meet the first criterion to be analyzed.<sup>28</sup> Since I discovered these blogs as I was researching Pinterest, my original categorization of them within the chapter on Pinterest was based on the pin connected to it rather than the blog entirely. As such, the original categorizations based on the Pinterest boards I created did not quite match the topics discovered in every blog. For example, *The Survival Mom* and *Handmade Haven* were both connected to the board Storage and Organization. However, upon further investigation, *The Survival Mom* blog, which is created by Lisa Bedford, is not just about storage and organization, but rather, prepping for economic and other emergencies for one’s family.

Similarly, *Everything Abode*, which is a blog that was connected to a pin about clothing, has blog posts about everything from fashion to blogging. Despite Ashley Basnight’s use of woodworking to create storage spaces, her broader focus is on DIY work and designing spaces. The final three blogs, however, are all centered around food in some way. While I initially wanted to analyze the three food blogs rather than a variety of the blogs linked to my Pinterest research, when I went to analyze the food blogs for how many and which posts I should discuss, I discovered the creators of *Her Highness Hungry Me* and *My Gluten Free Guide* are based out of Europe. As such, I decided my second and final criterion for blogs to analyze was: did the blog have a content creator from or residing in the United States? This criterion, I predicted, would help me emphasize and maintain my argument that social media upholds the patriarchal

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<sup>28</sup> Capitalization in this quotation is in keeping with what appears on the *Luxe Fashion Blog* Pinterest account.

ideals and gender performativity the United States was founded on rather than deconstructing it. In other words, patriarchal influences are different based on the culture, and as such it was important to maintain a distinctly American viewpoint in order to maintain a more accurate data set. Because *Everything Abode*'s content creator, Rebecca Lauren, proved difficult to identify as an American, I was thus left with three blogs to explore: *The Survival Mom*, *Handmade Haven*, and *Kinda Healthy Recipes*. Despite *Kinda Healthy Recipes* being maintained by Mason Woodruff, who appears to be a cisgender male, I concluded because he is American, his insight into what is deemed "healthy" for food in the United States could be useful data. Furthermore, anything about his personal life could lead to more information regarding the maintaining of gender norms between American married couples. Overall, too, I felt three blogs to research was a good number in order to maintain varying perspectives and also avoid basic surface-level analyzation of the blogs.

Once I identified which blogs I was going to focus on, I decided to choose three posts to analyze from each blog.<sup>29</sup> Posts were chosen based on a combination of categories already displayed on the website which were similar to the ones chosen in my Pinterest research and keywords. For example, despite *Kinda Healthy Recipes*' blog posts mostly dealing with recipes, I decided to focus on the category of Articles to analyze Mason Woodruff's thought process behind why his recommendations can help you live a "kinda" healthy life, whereas with *Handmade Haven*, I chose the category Home Improvement underneath the DIY& Design

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<sup>29</sup> Unlike Nicholas Hookway in his 2008 article "'Entering the Blogosphere': Some Strategies for Using Blogs in Social Research," I did not peruse hundreds of blog posts to select the articles which best fit my research, nor did I "identify relevant communities" to advertise within to gain more information and perspective from bloggers themselves (103). Hookway's in-depth analysis would be not only relevant but also valuable for further research on this subject.

Projects tab.<sup>30</sup> For *The Survival Mom* blog, I chose the category of Family underneath her Blog tab because, according to Lisa Bedford's About page on her blog, her reasoning for starting the blog in the first place was to protect and prepare her family for emergencies after her family experienced some financial setbacks during the Great Recession of 2008. Furthermore, like the other categories I chose for each blog, these categories were picked because a) they reflect the ideas of gender performativity norms already established in my research and b) as such, are in keeping with the original groupings I selected to create my Pinterest account.

After I had my category established for *Kinda Healthy Recipes*, I then searched through the titles of the articles, looking for the keyword "healthy." Since most of Woodruff's posts are recipes and not articles, it was quick and easy to discover two articles which had this keyword in the title: "Healthy Snacks: The Ultimate Guide to High Protein, Low Calorie Snack Options" and "5 Easy High Volume Recipes and Healthy Eating Without Feeling Hungry."<sup>31</sup> Because there were only two articles with the word "healthy" in the title, I searched for another keyword, "diet." The one article I found fitting this criterion was "6 Reasons Your Scale Isn't Moving: Common Pitfalls When Starting a Diet or Training Program." This became the third article I analyzed.

For *The Survival Mom* blog, research to find posts to analyze took longer.<sup>32</sup> I decided to use the keyword "children" with its derivative "child" and synonyms "kid" or "kids" to analyze the titles of her articles underneath her Family category. In total, I found thirty-six posts over a

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<sup>30</sup> I found the category of Articles on *Kinda Healthy Recipes* in a dropdown box the bottom of the blog, next to the copyright and links to the privacy policy, disclaimer, and ways to contact Woodruff.

<sup>31</sup> There was another article in which the keyword "healthy" was prominent, but the word was in the article's picture, not the title itself: "The Ultimate Guide to Fast Food and Restaurant Macro Friendly Eating." Despite me wanting to use the article because of how prominent the keyword is, I chose not to since it did not meet the criterion of being in the article title.

<sup>32</sup> To avoid redundancy, I refer to blog posts sometimes as "articles" throughout this paper.

span of eleven years with those words in the titles, with the first post noted being the most recent. This did not include words like “student,” “teen,” “baby,” or “toddler” and their derivatives. From the thirty-six posts, I analyzed the titles and, in some cases, scanned part of the article to group them into two categories: “Skills and Survival” versus “Parenting.” While some articles may qualify for both categories, overall, twenty-nine of the thirty-seven posts were related to tips for surviving everyday life or an emergency. Some articles had almost the exact same title. For example, four articles mention in their title teaching children “32 skills” for survival, with at least another two articles mentioning survival skills in the title.<sup>33</sup> In total, at least ten of the twenty-nine survival articles related to children had to do with skill-building of some kind based on their titles. Thus, I chose an article from the list of skill-building posts, another one from within the group of “Survival” posts, and finally, one within the “Parenting” category.

Because not all posts on *The Survival Mom* are written by the creator, Lisa Bedford, my one specific criterion for me choosing a post to analyze was it had to be written by her. In addition, since four posts were dedicated to “32 survival skills,” I chose the one written by Bedford to analyze from the skill-building list, which was titled “32 Survival Skills Your Child Should Know and Be Able to Do ASAP.” From the “Parenting” list, I chose the article “7 Steps for Raising Secure Children in an Insecure World” because I felt the title suggested it was in better keeping with the theme of survival than the post “The 12 Days of Christmas: Day 1, A New Craft for Your Kids” would be. Finally, with the other nineteen posts in the “Survival” category, I simply went down the list of posts in the order I had categorized them until I found one written by Lisa Bedford. Therefore, the final post I analyzed was “Everyday Carry for Kids.”

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<sup>33</sup> The four articles with almost the exact same title are: “32 Survival Skills Your Child Should Know and Be Able to Do ASAP!”, “32 Wilderness Survival Skills for Kids”, “32 Basic Survival Skills for Kids”, and “32 Mental and Urban Survival Skills for Kids.” The other two articles mentioning survival skills are “Summer PREP School: 48 Survival Skills for Kids to Learn This Summer!” and “4 Top Survival Skills You Must Teach Your Kids.”

Finally, for the *Handmade Haven* posts, I decided to choose posts within the Home Improvement page which were in relation to organization, which was how I discovered this blog. Underneath the Home Improvement Projects section of the Home Improvement page, I looked for the keyword “organization” in the title. Only one post on this page fit: “Closet Organization.”<sup>34</sup> Because only one post used that keyword in the title and based on the layout and nature of Basnight’s blog, I decided to place more focus on the photos connected to the posts rather than the titles. Thus, I searched for posts on this page whose photos appeared to be focused on storage and organization, which yielded results like “Wardrobe Built Ins,” “Shoe Built Ins,” “Master Closet Reveal,” and “Pantry Makeover.” Since “Wardrobe Built Ins,” “Shoe Built Ins,” and “Master Closet Reveal,” are all related to clothing organization and closets, I decided to choose two articles of the three. I chose “Shoe Built In” and “Wardrobe Built Ins” for my second and third articles to analyze because “Master Closet Reveal” and “Closet Organization” take into consideration the whole closet instead of sections of the space. However, once I realized “Shoe Built In” and “Wardrobe Built Ins” were essentially the same article after analyzing “Shoe Built In,” I decided to not continue deep analysis of “Wardrobe Built Ins.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, “Pantry Makeover” became the final post to analyze related to storage and organization, making *Handmade Haven* the only blog from which I chose more than three posts to analyze. It should be noted that this methodology does have built-in bias due to the fact I established my

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<sup>34</sup> All posts by Ashley Basnight are referred to by their shorthand titles from the “Home Improvement” section of her blog.

<sup>35</sup> Basnight’s article “Wardrobe Built Ins” is actually part 2 to the “Shoe Built In” article. The only thing of importance to add from this article is that Basnight is not married or living with a significant other, unlike the other two creators. This was revealed in this post when she explains how she designed the closet in a way to be good for two people, even though it is not being used by two people currently.

own specific criterion for discovering articles that fit what I wanted to analyze, and further research without this built-in bias of these blogs may prove useful.

## Results and Discussion

### *Kinda Healthy Recipes*

My initial impression of Woodruff's "Healthy Snacks: The Ultimate Guide to High Protein, Low Calorie Snack Options" was a) to be overwhelmed by the many options Woodruff gives his readers, b) to notice how heavily he relies on graphics, which are uploaded and linked to his Pinterest account page, and c) to realize how time-consuming and expensive a lot of these products and recipes are. Woodruff has eleven sections to this article, each with different types of snacks, but he starts out by explaining what macronutrients are before diving into the snack options. Despite the explanation of what macronutrients are, it is clear Woodruff is targeting people who are looking to lose or gain weight/muscle as an audience—not necessarily maintain weight. Woodruff opens his section about macronutrients with these words:

I could care less what kind of diet you use as long as your overall strategy aligns with your goal. Or simply put, if you want to lose body fat, you should be eating fewer calories than you expend each day. And if you want to gain muscle or body weight, you should be eating *slightly* more calories than you're expending.

These lines suggest Woodruff *expects* his readers to be on a diet or want to be on a diet, which, given the content of his blog, is not surprising. Thus, Woodruff is playing into American diet culture by describing the basics of how to lose weight or gain muscle.

This "everyone wants to change their body" assumption is also seen in the first line for this article, which states, "This healthy snacks guide won't be your typical BuzzFeed listicle about *99 healthy snacks to get absolutely shredded this year*, though getting absolutely shredded is certainly a possibility." Woodruff is not only making fun of mainstream media with his reference to BuzzFeed's preference for lists that, if followed, ensure quick results in the dieting

and exercise world, but also leaning into the exact thing he is mocking by suggesting “getting absolutely shredded is certainly a possibility.” While he is not lying in suggesting if someone does count calories use these snacks as options for when they need a quick bite, and exercise, they may achieve their ideal body, it is highly unlikely that most people in the United States can and will maintain their “ideal body” for long periods of time. According to a study conducted by the National Library of Medicine, any macronutrient diet which improves weight and cardiovascular health will most likely stop working after a year (Ge et. al). Furthermore, given that his blog is heavily connected to Pinterest, which, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, is often seen in American culture as the “more feminine” social media platform, he can also expect many of his readers will also be women, who, according to an overview of multiple studies, often have a harder time losing weight than men.<sup>36</sup> Add to that the pressure as an American woman to still cook and provide healthy meals/snacks regardless of her career status to her family, and the likelihood many of his readers are women increases.<sup>37</sup>

In “‘How Beautiful Women Eat’: Feminine Hunger in American Popular Culture,” April Davidauskis examines Tina Fey’s character Liz Lemon in *30 Rock* and Lee Price’s portraits in relation to the “hungry woman” and postfeminist ideals portrayed in American culture. These ideals imply that a woman can “have it all,” whether it is food or sex. Before deep diving into these two examples, however, Davidauskis points out celebrity cooking show hosts like Rachel Ray attempt to “‘have it all,’ which includes doing something (cooking, eating) well, finding

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<sup>36</sup> In R L Williams et. al’s review of multiple weight loss studies, they reported that “80% of the studies directly comparing weight loss (kg) between men and women found that men lost significantly more weight than women.”

<sup>37</sup> To further corroborate my theory that many of his followers are women, I went to Woodruff’s Pinterest page and clicked on the number of followers he has to see if it would show me some of his followers. Just by scrolling through the initial set of followers Pinterest allows a non-follower to see (Woodruff has 79,471 followers), the majority had profile pictures with what appeared to be women in them, along with what is often categorized as a female name.



pleasure in the food, and looking good while cooking and eating,” thus leaning into a more postfeminist understanding of the world (170). Although Woodruff is not a woman, his long lists of “healthy” snacks, grouped by categories and often paired with recipes which require specialty ingredients such as protein powder and sugar-free cake mixes, imply it is possible and desirable for everyone to make their own healthy snacks and also track their calories, exercise, and maintain work, social, and family schedules.<sup>38</sup> If someone wants to save time by not making their own snacks, the cost of the “healthier” pre-made snack options (and the ingredients of the DIY snacks), such as nuts, specialty bread, squeezable portion-sized tubes of peanut butter, etc. are often not within the budget of low-income families.<sup>39</sup> In essence, Woodruff is buying into the postfeminist mentality Davidauskis mentions *everyone* can “have it all.”

In looking at Woodruff’s article, “5 Easy High Volume Recipes and Healthy Eating Without Feeling Hungry,” Woodruff mentions before he gets to his five recipes that “While I picked up a few cooking skills on my way to a degree in nutrition, I don’t particularly enjoy spending time in the kitchen. Therefore, most of the recipes will require minimal cooking and easy-to-prepare ingredients.” This admission was surprising to me as a reader, because, as a newcomer to food blogs, I assumed someone who is creating a food blog would enjoy cooking. However, because of Woodruff’s background in nutrition and personal training, it does make some sense he may not find cooking enjoyable, especially since he claims his main goal is “to

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<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that most of Woodruff’s recipes for snacks would take approximately a maximum of twenty minutes to prepare, with some being approximately five minutes or less. The recipe that was found to be the most time consuming was Candied Protein Pecans, with the bake time alone being thirty-five to forty-five minutes. Recipe times in this footnote were approximated based on baking times and estimations of preparation time.

<sup>39</sup> While Woodruff’s article was written in 2018, the problem of the price of these items for lower income families has increased dramatically due to inflation caused by the events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a box of 10 peanut butter squeeze packs from Peanut Butter & Co. costs \$6.49 before shipping from their website.

shed light on how healthy eating doesn't have to be complicated" in this article.<sup>40</sup> Yet, for contemporary female food bloggers, enjoying the work of cooking seems to be required. Alexandra Rodney, Sarah Cappeliez, Merin Oleschuk, and Josée Johnston discovered three ways female food blogs' authors perform femininity: "domesticity, care, and appetite" (700). In other words, they discuss how food bloggers uphold the traditional "woman in the kitchen" by glamorizing the work of making dinner *and* making mistakes, caring for the family *and* also enjoying the act of cooking, and balancing eating healthy with unhealthy. This "calibration" negates most working-class mothers' experiences because it factors out the need for resources such as time to prepare food, finances to buy specific ingredients, and access to adequate groceries, as I mentioned with Woodruff's article "Healthy Snacks: The Ultimate Guide to High Protein, Low Calorie Snack Options." Rodney et. al conclude these food bloggers reinforce the idea that feminism is no longer necessary, as well as reiterate traditional gender roles in a different way, despite these bloggers successful "revalu[ing]" of "the field of private domestic food labors" (701). Based on these findings, I argue despite Woodruff's background, Woodruff has an advantage over female food bloggers. Since he is a male food blogger, the same traditional gender roles which seem to permeate the food blog world for women do not apply to him. As such, his recipes do not have to be as time consuming or as elaborate as one may find on a women's health food blog because he is not under the same scrutiny as women are when it comes to food made from scratch and providing for the family.<sup>41</sup> Women thus have to perform their gender within the realm of food blogs because it is expected they make things from scratch

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<sup>40</sup> This background information about being a personal trainer is easily found in a sidebar titled "About Us" on every page of *Kinda Healthy Recipes*.

<sup>41</sup> Given the publication date on Davidauskis, Rodney et. al, and Salvio's (referenced later) articles, I think it would be interesting and enlightening to study how food blogs, particularly those run by women, have changed within the past five to ten years and how much of an advantage over female food bloggers Woodruff still has.

and care more about the process of making food than men do, while a male food blogger is supposed to perform his gender with a lack of care toward his craft.

Similar to Rodney et. al's conclusions, Paula M. Salvio highlights in her article "Dishing It Out: Food Blogs and Post-Feminist Domesticity" how most food blogs seem to reinforce traditional gender roles and postfeminist ideals with what food they suggest is "for women" and what food is "for men," their constant worries about pleasing their husband and raising children, and their dedication to making many things without shortcuts. For example, in researching food blogs of the twenty-first century compared to post-World War II cookbooks, Salvio found

the message that a cake made from scratch would offer women a "way to their man's heart" established gendered norms that are curiously evident in the discourses of comfort displayed across many of the blogs under review...Bloggers confine cake-making responsibilities and the accompanying anxieties to women, and many of their posts read as if they were lifted directly from cookery books published in the 1950s and 1960s. (35)

Salvio is thus suggesting, in terms of food culture and gender norms, women are still viewed in American society as the expected cook in the kitchen, much like they were sixty years ago.

Woodruff, by being a man in the kitchen, automatically breaks this norm. However, as I mentioned beforehand, because of gender norms in the kitchen, the standard of more complex, made from scratch dishes does not apply to him. Furthermore, in his "About Us" sidebar on every page, he specifically mentions "Now *my wife* and I create healthier, easy-to-make comfort food recipes inspired by *our* southern roots."<sup>42</sup> Unlike with female food blogs, which generally mention men as the consumers of the meal rather than the contributor, Woodruff's blog changes the dynamics of the traditional gender roles in the kitchen, making both contributors to the meal. Because Woodruff does not mention his wife helping him create any of the recipes he uses in "Healthy Snacks: The Ultimate Guide to High Protein, Low Calorie Snack Options" and "5 Easy

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<sup>42</sup> Italics in this quote are added by me.

High Volume Recipes and Healthy Eating Without Feeling Hungry,” however, I question what role she does play in their kitchen.<sup>43</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, Davidauskis examines the image of the “hungry woman” in pop culture. She argues because Price’s portraits and Lemon’s character depict white, thin, middle-to-upper class American women who binge eat on junk food *and* maintain their figure without any signs of purging or overexercising, they point to a larger gender performativity issue at stake in American culture. Price and Lemon have the privilege of being accepted for their overeating. while women of color (specifically Black women) and of lower socioeconomic status are not. This suggests that only a small segment of the population (white, thin, middle-to-upper class women) are “struggling with gendered power dynamics,” or fighting against the patriarchy, in media representation (185). Woodruff points to this larger issue among diet culture, gender performativity, race, and class in the third post I examined, “6 Reasons Your Scale Isn’t Moving: Common Pitfalls When Starting a Diet or Training Program.”

In his introduction to the article, he mentions some thoughts someone who is just starting a new diet/training program may be thinking if they are not seeing quick results. One that was intriguing to me was the line, ““Maybe I DO have to buy that product Nancy keeps inboxing me about to get results.”” Woodruff is referencing the multi-level marketing businesses many people sell health products that promise “quick results” from to earn extra money. He leans into the

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<sup>43</sup> Recipes were not the focus of the final post I analyzed, “6 Reasons Your Scale Isn’t Moving: Common Pitfalls When Starting a Diet or Training Program.” Despite flipping the traditional gender roles in the kitchen with his articles in some sense, I question whether Woodruff would be scrutinized as a female food blogger for recycling so many of his recipes in a post less than a year later. Although all articles have been updated in the past two years, in January of 2018, Woodruff shared at least six recipes in “Healthy Snacks: The Ultimate Guide to High Protein, Low Calorie Snack Options” that he also originally published in April 2017 in his article “5 Easy High Volume Recipes and Healthy Eating Without Feeling Hungry.” More research of the food blogging community would need to be done to expand upon this theory.

stereotype of these products and their sellers by calling the person “Nancy,” implying women are the primary sellers of these diet pills and powders with the use of this primarily female name. This also indicates he believes women are more likely to want to lose weight than men. The findings of the health professionals in the National Center for Health Statistics data brief published in 2018 involving the “Attempts to Lose Weight Among Adults in the United States, 2013–2016” support his belief.<sup>44</sup> For many women, these diet pills and powders are their solution to being able to eat what they want while still losing weight, the quick fix alternative to an eating disorder Davidauskis illustrates mainstream media perpetuates with its portrayal of White, middle-class women who can binge whatever fast food they want and maintain their thin form.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Black and Hispanic women wanted to lose weight just as much as White women.<sup>46</sup> Yet, these diet pills and powders are often unaffordable for many women of color due to wage gaps between women of color and White women.<sup>47</sup> In other words, what the health food blog world often scoffs at is also what is portrayed as the easiest, quickest route to the “acceptable” woman’s body the media portrays, and often women of color and/or of lower socioeconomic status cannot obtain this route. Thus, they may look to blogs like Woodruff’s for advice.

In “6 Reasons Your Scale Isn’t Moving: Common Pitfalls When Starting a Diet or Training Program,” Woodruff offers some commonsense advice, such as being patient with your body and trusting your training, along with scientific explanations for why people do not lose

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<sup>44</sup> Authors of the study include Crescent B. Martin, M.P.H., M.A., Kirsten A. Herrick, Ph.D., M.Sc., Neda Sarafrazi, Ph.D., and Cynthia L. Ogden, Ph.D., M.R.P. Martin et. al found that “A higher percentage of women (56.4%) than men (41.7%) tried to lose weight” during the 2013-2016 period.

<sup>45</sup> With the rising popularity of the body positivity movement, more research is needed on how this has affected mainstream media’s portrayal of women’s hunger, both physically and metaphorically.

<sup>46</sup> According to the study mentioned in the previous footnote, “The pattern among women was similar to the overall adult population. A lower percentage of non-Hispanic Asian women (44.8%) tried to lose weight than did non-Hispanic white (56.9%), non-Hispanic black (56.4%), and Hispanic (57.2%) women.

<sup>47</sup> For more information about women and the wage gap, see “Quantifying America’s Gender Wage Gap by Race/Ethnicity.”

weight as quickly as they want to, like the fact the leaner people are, the harder it will be for them to lose weight. However, perhaps the most interesting piece of advice he gives relating to a diet and exercise regimen is this: “I’ll even take it a step further and say that *anything* will work for you as long as its core principles are sound and you remain adherent.” Woodruff is vague with this statement, leaving readers to question if the core principles of their diet are sound or assume because he said “*anything* will work,” diets that get fast results but are hard on the body long term are okay. I argue because Woodruff has a background in nutrition and personal training, this statement was an attempt to emphasize everyone’s body will respond differently to diets and training regimens because of genetic makeup and the presence of past trauma. Although it is possible this statement may lead some people to believe the quickest solution, i.e. fad diets, pills, surgery, etc. is the safest and most productive solution, I also assert Woodruff not mentioning one specific way to lose weight is more inclusive of marginalized groups, helping people, especially women of lower socioeconomic groups, realize they can create a weight loss program around their access to resources such as food, workout equipment, etc. However, Woodruff subtly reinforces gender performativity in these articles by how he performs masculinity in the kitchen, specifically through him not focusing as much on making food from scratch like many famous female bloggers and his confession that he does not like to cook.

### *The Survival Mom*

Lisa Bedford is a mother who homeschools her children and gives advice on how to prep for financial, health, and natural disasters, as well as disasters like the collapse of society. Bedford became popular in the United States when she started her *The Survival Mom* blog in 2009 after the Great Recession impacted her family, and she decided to do research to help her family be prepared for future crises (“About Lisa”). The name Lisa Bedford chose for her blog

emphasizes what she values in her own life: her role as a mother. In “Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers’ Constructions of the Good Mother,” Karen Christopher reveals the results of a study of American and Canadian employed mothers of young children on their beliefs of what constitutes a good mother. Her study found employed mothers, both single and married, are ascribing to what is called “extensive” mothering; rather than putting all of their time and effort into raising their children, they reach out to others to ask for help in parenting the child. The major difference between single employed mothers and married employed mothers is single employed mothers, especially Black mothers, were more willing to accept others help in parenting their children, that married women of all classes “expressed accountability to intensive mothering ideals” or the belief women, if given the choice, should stay at home with their children to perform all the duties a parent should, from cooking and bathing to teaching the child basic life skills, scheduling events, and playing with the child (92). The only exception to expressing “intensive mothering ideals” was found among the Black mothers in the study. I argue Bedford, like the married women in the study, subscribes to some of the intensive mothering ideals that have been traditionally upheld in America by White, middle-to-upper class women.

Bedford’s intensive mothering is seen in the reasoning behind why she started the blog in the first place. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the impact of the Great Recession of 2008 was what drove Bedford to be hyper-focused on helping her family survive crises. She also mentions on her “About Lisa” page she used to be a teacher, corporate trainer, and writer before the recession, and her “mission” now is “to help moms like you create a safe refuge for your family with common-sense and frugal prepping.” Similar to a participant in Christopher’s study who works on family policy in her community, Bedford believes it is her job to help other

children *as well as her own* by teaching other moms how to prep for disasters. This is where Bedford is practicing extensive mothering *if* her work of extensive mothering takes her away from caring for her own children. However, at the same time, her use of only the word “mom” and not “parents” in her mission statement suggests she believes mothers should be the primary caregivers of children, and, by extension, the whole family; in other words, her blog is specifically targeted towards mothers/women because the wife is supposed to focus on taking care of everything related to the family, and not a job. This was the mental dilemma many middle-to-upper-class married women were facing in Christopher’s study.

In Bedford’s post titled, “32 Survival Skills Your Child Should Know and Be Able to Do ASAP!” she lists everything from knowing how to grow vegetables to being able to find/create shelter.<sup>48</sup> One thing that stood out to me is the survival skills were about survival no matter their gender; there was no separation between what girls should be able to do versus boys, but rather a caution to remember the appropriateness of an activity. Bedford tells readers “only you know the maturity of your child and what they are capable of physically and mentally,” which, given her intended audience, stresses the mother’s role in a child’s life as the most important (“32 Survival Skills”). While most of the public would agree many of the skills on here are useful for people to know, this list of skills, if all taught by the mother, would fall under intensive mothering because of how much effort it would take to teach the child this list, especially if the mother does not know all of them herself. For some mothers, teaching all these skills would be difficult if not

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<sup>48</sup> What was striking to me before I even read Bedford’s “32 Survival Skills Your Child Should Know and Be Able to Do ASAP!” post was how similar four of the titles of the articles were. Having read the one posted by Bedford and then comparing the other three, I noticed that all three of the other posts were authored by another staff member of the blog, Bethanne Kim. This is because in “32 Wilderness Survival Skills for Kids,” Kim notes at the beginning of the article that the staff “noticed there were important skills and pieces of knowledge that were missing.” As such, the three articles Kim writes break down the original list into categories, meaning there are overlaps on every list as well as new additions.



impossible because of their work schedule or socioeconomic status, and thus having someone else help to teach these skills would be more beneficial to both the mother and child. Yet the problem remains for single and/or low-income mothers that if they must work, they may not have time to teach them these survival skills, and unless someone is willing to teach their children these skills for free, they will have to pay for the lesson. Bedford is thus subtly supporting intensive mothering.

Bedford's religion seems to also reinforce this belief of intensive mothering. For example, Jennifer A. Gallagher, M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Tamara L. Anderson, and Kerris L.M. Del Rosario conducted a study of working mothers who profess Christian faith on their "personal strivings" related to motherhood in North America, and many of these women expressed wanting to be a role model for their children in their faith. Conservative Protestant Christian beliefs dictate the women's duty is to take care of the household and the children, and the man's duty is to be in the workforce to earn money for the family (Gallagher et. al 51).<sup>49</sup> Although Gallagher et. al have suggested more research needs to be done because of the lack of diversity of the participants in regards to race, marital status, education, and choice of wanting to work, one thing they noticed was the women in the study did not express as much dissatisfaction with the pressure to be an intensive mother while employed as participants in previous studies. They suggest "perhaps these women feel pressure from cultural influences to express satisfaction with their lives even in times when they may not feel satisfied" (58). In other words, because these women have been taught by their faith leaders it is their job to be an intensive mother, they cannot complain about the stress it causes them to work *and* be an intensive mother. The last

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<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that Gallagher et. al quoted the Southern Baptist Convention when discussing this concept, or America's "largest conservative Protestant denomination" (51). With my personal conservative Christian upbringing, I have noticed that beliefs on gender performativity in relation to heterosexual marriage and motherhood/fatherhood vary by denomination and by church congregation.

skill in Bedford's survival skill post is "Have strong faith in God (morals, memorize Bible verses, prayers, songs, and have a hope for heaven)." Bedford, like some of the mothers in Gallagher et. al's study, believes it is important for mothers to teach children to practice their Christian faith, and other mothers should do so as well. This goes back to Barbara Welter's argument that historically, the United States has looked to women "to raise up a whole generation of Christian statesmen" because the fathers were too busy working to do it (171-172). Not only is she practicing intensive mothering here with her own children, but by preaching this to other women of Christian faith, she is doing extensive mothering of their children while practicing the virtues of the cult of true womanhood.

After analyzing the first article, I suspected Bedford would bring in her faith to the next article based on the topic: "7 Steps for Raising Secure Children in an Insecure World." I was correct in this assertion. But this article differs from "32 Survival Skills Your Child Should Know and Be Able to Do ASAP!" because it stresses the importance of the mental health, maturity, and responsibility of parents. Bedford automatically assumes each mother reading this article is married and in a heterosexual relationship, which is in keeping with conservative Protestant cultural norms in the United States. Yet, this is not an accurate depiction of many families across the United States. Roughly 25% of US children only live with one parent, with those families who claim Christianity as their religion "about equally likely" to be a single-parent household as those families with no religion according to a Pew Research Center study published in December of 2019 (Kramer). In an effort to be an extensive mother to other children by helping other mothers be a good intensive mother, Bedford is reinforcing the binary of married/divorced couples and by extension gender performativity through suggesting the only way to raise a secure child is in a two-parent, married, heteronormative household. Furthermore,

she is not taking into consideration the positive effect extensive mothering may have on a child through extended family members or friends, which, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, is not optional for single mothers or any single parent.

Bedford does remind parents to take care of themselves mentally through talking to their doctor and a counselor if necessary, stating “When Mom and Dad are at a weak point in their lives, children become very vulnerable” (“7 Steps”). Yet, here again, we see her assuming both the mother and the father of a child are married and raising the children together. It can also be assumed Bedford does practice some extensive mothering within her own family, due to the step in the article which mentions “one-on-one time” with children. She states that her son “needs to know...mom or dad is listening.”<sup>50</sup> However, a few sentences later, she only mentions her experiences with her children, because the examples she utilizes only mention “Mom.” Thus, while her husband may spend individual time with their children, she does not feel it is necessary to use some of his experiences with the children as an example. Although it is likely Bedford feels it is in keeping with her audience of mothers to only mention her experiences, by not mentioning the father’s experiences, she keeps the gender roles of raising children more established. As a result, because of Bedford’s religious beliefs and studies like Gallagher et. al’s, I reiterate that ideas of what parenting should look like among conservative Protestant circles remains in keeping with patriarchal norms. This can be detrimental to strivings to dismantle gender performativity norms in the United States due to the reality of what families in the United States look like, Christian or not.

The post “Everyday Carry for Kids” once again centers on preparing children for any emergency. Bedford lists nine items she suggests children have on them: whistle, small LED

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<sup>50</sup> Not capitalizing “Mom” or “Dad” is in keeping with the original text of the post.

flashlight, first aid kit, food, water bottle or pouch, clothes, knife, phone, and keys. With the knife, phone, and keys, she reminds parents to use discretion based on the maturity of their children, and, for the knife specifically, to be careful about bringing it to school due to no weapons policies. She also mentions the feasibility of carrying all or most of these items around might be an issue and thus advises to “be ready to adapt for different scenarios.” In teaching parents how to adapt to scenarios, she suggests “getting a small purse for girls or a string backpack or cargo pants or shorts.” This stood out to me because she points out an item “for girls,” but then lists items that are often associated with boys right after without saying the phrase “for boys.” It is possible this is an editing oversight, yet it does suggest girls are supposed to carry a purse, yet boys have other options of what they can use to accommodate their everyday carry items. This reiterates the idea that although girl clothes and accessories are seen by society as just “for girls,” boy clothes and accessories are seen as gender neutral, upholding what is seen as masculine as a given. Alternatively, it also reiterates the idea boys are not supposed to carry purses. Thus, Bedford is using gender performativity norms even in emergency preparedness.

### *Handmade Haven*

Ashley Basnight’s “About Me” page introduces her by stating she is a software engineer who now lives in Edmond, Oklahoma. Several things stood out to me about her bio; she mentions her “great joy in breaking down stereotypes” in the woodworking community as a Black woman. In other words, she is challenging the binary of White males being the experts in the field by simply being a part of that community. Her job as a software engineer outside of woodworking has also been traditionally seen as a “man’s job,” especially in a majority conservative Protestant state like Oklahoma. She thanks her mother for honing her crafting skills, yet Basnight credits her father for teaching her how to work with tools and fix cars as a child.

Her father's role in teaching her what has often been deemed as "man's work" emphasizes how he helped challenge gender performativity when it comes to DIY work. This implies that without her father, she may not have become the successful DIYer she is today. Basnight may simply be thanking her father for helping her become inspired to start this blog/business, especially given the craft/woodworking world's culture of passing down DIY skills and Basnight's own recognition of her audience as people who see value in honoring one's parents publicly. However, this thanking of her father can be read, albeit subtly, as if Basnight is giving her father too much credit for her success in the woodworking community; therefore, she may be unaware of her own agency to break down gender performativity norms.

In the first post titled "Closet Organization," Basnight explains how she organized her "multi-purpose" closet with items from The Home Depot. Because she was compensated for doing this article, the article itself is on The Home Depot's website rather than on her blog, accompanied by many pictures breaking up the text of the article itself to see the stages of the redo. Rather than handcrafting a new item to help organize her closet, the article mainly focuses on pre-made items, such as storage bins, a cart, compact organizers, and a hanging tower which had to be assembled and screwed into the wall. This article reinforces that DIY work does not have to be complicated, but it also subtly reinforces gender roles due to the simplicity of the project. For example, while it may take someone inexperienced to do it longer, for Basnight, assembling the hanging tower and hanging it properly was about a thirty-five minute job. While this project does still show off Basnight's skill, by hiring Basnight to do this organization project despite her ability to do her own woodworking, Home Depot is suggesting "harder" projects

involving cutting wood and assembling something handcrafted is not work for a woman, thus placing women who do DIY projects in a proverbial box.<sup>51</sup>

In her “Shoe Built In” post, I discovered Basnight was sponsored by Home Depot for that article as well, which leads me to believe she has a business partnership with them of some kind. Just like the previous post, Basnight adds many pictures to show her process, even adding a video of the built-in project. She lists all her tools and materials at the beginning of the article. Because the article’s text is focused on giving step-by-step instructions on how she created this shoe built-in, I focused more on the pictures and the video. What I noticed about the difference between the previous post “Closet Organization” and this one is the pictures and the video did not always show her in perfectly posed positions and completed hair and makeup. In most of the video and pictures where Basnight can be seen, she is wearing sweats/yoga pants or leggings with a T-shirt, hoodie, or a jacket. In the video, the only time when she is “camera ready” is when she is periodically seen as she explains the project; for the pictures, the only time is in the project reveal photo. This differs from the “Closet Organization” pictures, because in those pictures, she is always posed and “camera ready” rather than in the moment and working. Thus, she brings more realism to the photos and the video by letting her readers and viewers see her in a more casual state in “Shoe Built In.”

The casualness and comfiness of dress is similar to how men are portrayed in the DIY world. To support this point, I did a quick Google search with the search terms of “diy men” and “diy women.”<sup>52</sup> I found only one out of the first ten pictures on the search of “diy men” was a

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<sup>51</sup> Because Basnight mentioned cost effectiveness as the reason why she started woodworking, I decided to attempt to budget out the cost of this closet redo. I was unable to find all the exact items and their prices, but I estimate the project would cost around \$500. For many people and families in America, spending that much to organize a closet is not possible. Thus, this project is also reinforcing the binary of upper-middle class/lower class.

<sup>52</sup> This search was conducted in “Incognito” mode to prevent previous searches and data within the browser from affecting my search results.

man posing with a tool, whereas six out of the first eleven pictures on the “diy women” search had a woman posing with a tool (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). Also, Amy Bix found in her research about women and home repair that “The courage women still needed for tool use in 2008 underlines the contested gender of technical knowledge” (57). In other words, men in the United States are still viewed as more knowledgeable with tools and repairing things, which is why women are often not performing any fixing in DIY photos. Basnight’s actual repair work in her project photos thus underlines her attempts at breaking down stereotypes. Furthermore, her “hope to inspire you guys to find your inner DIYer and try things you never thought you could achieve” as she states on her “About Me” page can be read as the “encouragement” for women to use tools and create DIY projects as Bix discussed. Despite Basnight’s use of the phrase “you guys” in this statement, which is often meant as a gender neutral term to refer to all persons, one can conclude Basnight’s audience predominantly consists of women based on a glance of her followers on Instagram.<sup>53</sup> Thus, her work involves empowering women to take on the projects they have dreamed of doing.

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<sup>53</sup> Here again, Basnight is subtly reinforcing the male/female binary by privileging the male second person plural “you guys” to refer to her audience.





only using a sponge to wipe grout off the tile. Therefore, this lack of action emphasizes a lack of agency, like many of the women in figure 2 and Basnight in “Closet Organization.” Once again, these pictures are emphasizing Basnight’s use as a teacher rather than her ability as a doer. As a Black woman in the DIY community that has largely been dominated by White men, Basnight has the opportunity to show her abilities are equal to any person, no matter their race or gender.<sup>54</sup> Choosing not to post pictures of herself doing more of the actions of building in her posts emphasizes gender roles rather than tears them down. Despite this, Basnight showing the world her woodworking skills without always displaying herself as perfect does go against the idea of women having “it all,” thus challenging the postfeminist narrative.

### **Conclusion**

Using blogs found from Pinterest, this chapter analyzed how blogs continue gender performativity in America on the Internet. I studied three blogs, each of them with a different topic: food, survival and motherhood, and DIY. The food blog *Kinda Healthy Recipes* revealed the stereotypes placed on women in the kitchen and the pressure of diet culture which places undue scrutiny on women and their appetites, sexual and otherwise, particularly women of color. This criticism is further compounded on women of lower socioeconomic status, because they do not have the resources or the time to make properly balanced meals with “healthier ingredients,” even if the meals are not necessarily fancy or “made from scratch.” In *The Survival Mom*, the notions of what a family and a mother and father should be are emphasized, only to uncover the importance of resisting the idea that family will always equal a mother, a father, and children, or that a mother will be available or willing to do the traditional “intensive mothering” many White, Protestant families have ascribed to for years. Lastly, the *Handmade Haven* points to the

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<sup>54</sup> For more information on the DIY movement for women, see Amy Bix’s “‘Creating ‘Chicks Who Fix’: Women, Tool Knowledge, and Home Repair, 1920-2007.”

importance of giving agency to women who work with tools; without this agency, women will continue to be seen in DIY projects as “othered” and unable to do the physically intensive work of construction and woodworking with tools of any kind. Furthermore, women of color given agency in fields dominated by White men help balance not only gender performativity, but also the race binary as well. Although more research is necessary, as my examples are limited and often point to subtle reinforcement of gender roles, this study on blogs emphasizes the subtle sexism, classism, and racism which upholds patriarchal structures in media of gender performativity. For my final chapter, I will look at how popular books continue these systems of power through gender roles.

### Chapter Three

#### **How American Book Clubs Market the “Have It All” Mentality for Women**

While in the first two chapters I focused on online media, the final type of media I analyzed originated off the Internet: book clubs. However, thanks to the Internet, book lovers were able to find a new medium in which to discuss books. This type of media has become intertwined with Internet, and together books and social media influence our fast-paced culture's trends and norms. Just like Pinterest and blogs, however, what books get published and become popular can and do have a negative role to play in maintaining the binary.

Due to the topic of this chapter being book clubs, I decided to do some background research on Oprah's Book Club from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* because it has been so influential on the American book market within the last twenty-five years. I also looked at some background on book clubs in order to point out the tradition of book clubs being classified as a “women's activity” despite their original intent as a means of intellectual development. Although books are consumed in many different mediums besides the traditional hardcover or paperback, I want to emphasize the books highlighted through American book clubs, which are often bestsellers, perpetuate gender performativity norms in America. During the process of this project, I realized just as important as the books being chosen to read was how the books were presented/discussed in the book club, especially if the book club was of celebrity status and/or if the book clubs' discussions were posted on social media. Put simply, how a book is marketed, whether through media, social media, or word of mouth, determines its impact on influencing gender norms as much as what the book itself is about. Thus, in this chapter I argue what books get read by book clubs and how they are marketed inside and outside of these book clubs ultimately results in the supporting or dismantling of gender roles. The supporting of gender

roles may be seen with book clubs in which they do not read “feminine” genres such as the romance, or they do not read books by authors who identify as female or non-binary. Conversely, the dismantling of gender roles may occur through a book group who is willing to spotlight books which do not fit the heterosexual and/or masculine norms.

In “Women's Groups and the Rise of the Book Club,” Burger demonstrates how women’s clubs started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a space for women to have intellectual conversations about “literature, history, and the fine arts” in order to promote female growth while handing “credence to women’s participation in public intellectual life.” Without these groups and the suffragettes of the early twentieth century, Burger argues second-wave feminism may have not occurred. The second-wave feminist ideal of ““The personal is political”” led to “conscious-raising” groups which in part helped create the modern book club through women’s discussion of sexism in their everyday lives. These clubs normalized women participating in something other than child-rearing and taking care of the home; as such, reading groups became a part of social gatherings like going to the salon.<sup>55</sup> With talk shows filled with drama as well as book clubs on the rise in the early 1990s, in 1996, Oprah’s Book Club was founded, and it has been critiqued due to its focus more on the emotional rather than the intellectual, which as Burger asserts, is “an affront to academic ideals of rigorous literary interpretation.” Thus, because Oprah has focused more attention on emotional growth than intellectual growth, book clubs in recent years have been viewed as more of a woman’s than a man’s activity.<sup>56</sup> However, according to Burger,

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<sup>55</sup> When interviewing for this paper, Burger discovered Lynn Gilbert, a New York photographer, wanted a “salon-like atmosphere” for a book club “where people could come together to discuss literature and ideas at a high level.” For more information, see Burger.

<sup>56</sup> Novelist Jonathan Franzen, a critic of Oprah’s Book Club, stated in an NPR interview linked to Burger’s article that he was shocked his book *The Corrections* was chosen for the club since many of Oprah’s books are female-authored. He explains his belief that ““So much of reading is sustained in this country, I think, by the fact that women read while men are off golfing or watching football on TV or playing with their flight simulator...I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience.”” Franzen goes on to discuss how fans of his books equate Oprah’s Book Club with “books for women.” For more information, see Gross.

national book clubs and their favor with the public historically have had to do with class. Burger asserts Oprah's book club is a part of "middlebrow" culture, similar to the Book of the Month Club, which was founded in 1926 to keep those who have graduated from college intellectually stimulated. Due to the lower number of women graduating with a bachelor's degree at the time of the creation of the Book of the Month Club, one can conclude these clubs were meant more for *men of higher classes*.<sup>57</sup> In essence, book clubs which focus less on intellectual pursuits and "artistic integrity" are viewed as just for women and those of lower socioeconomic status. Despite this, Burger reiterates the positive social interaction which comes from book clubs, whether it be for intellectual, emotional, personal, or social change. In other words, book clubs have historically been about promoting women and their right to live their lives as they so choose. Because of the history behind modern book clubs, therefore, it is logical women would be more attracted to the activity.

Having a basic background of who is more likely to consume books, particularly in a book club setting, highlights the need to also look at how books are being marketed. This is especially true for women and/or people of color. Lori Ween researched how American literature perceived as "ethnic" texts are marketed to Americans, and she reminds her readers to "examine the possibility that the truth of ethnic images can be created and manipulated for the purposes of those who control circulation," whether it is in visual media or literature (92). Ween is thus reminding her audience it is important to question the publishing and marketing industry's motives when promoting new literature perceived as "ethnic" (non-White, minority culture) or "mainstream" (White, majority culture). In other words, it is important to not let businesses

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<sup>57</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1925-1926 in the United States, a total of 62,218 bachelor's degrees were given to men, while only 35,045 women received a bachelor's degree. This includes first-professional degrees (83-84). See Snyder for further information. Italics is my addition.

define the truth of who a people group are; rather, each people group needs to define themselves through their own literature and media.

John Young's 2001 article, "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences" dives deeper into Oprah's Book Club by discussing how it has given power back to Black authors like Toni Morrison, power which has been stolen from them because of the influence of White-dominated publishing companies deciding what gets published and canonized (181). Young's article was written in the early years of the club, and already Morrison had appeared on the show three times. Although Young's article was written before Ween's and Burger's, Young's article unites Ween's argument and Burger's argument through pointing out celebrity book clubs influence the publishing industry's bestseller lists, rather than the publishing industry influencing the celebrity book club picks. The power of what is considered popular literature has been passed from "old" institutions of media to "new" institutions of media: the celebrity talk show host.<sup>58</sup> Young argues with the help of Oprah, Morrison's work can be seen as great literature by wider audiences, and Morrison can maintain more control of how her books can be received due to her increased interaction with them through reading them on audiobooks and on television, despite the loss of some "artistic integrity." However, based on the fact Morrison's work has continued to be studied in high school, undergraduate, and graduate classrooms across the United States, I assert this assumption is based on a skewed vision of the artist: one who is more in touch with the intellectual than the emotional and spiritual.

In America's patriarchal society, women are often seen as more emotional and thus less rational than men. As a result, the vision of what an artist should be is founded on an idea of men and masculinity tied to intellectual pursuits. Because of this connection, the intellectual is valued

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<sup>58</sup> Old and new are in quotation marks here given the history of television talk shows in comparison to publishing companies is a much shorter period of time.

over the spiritual and emotional. Young argues more of Black culture and history has been able to be accessed through Morrison's embracement of Oprah's national, commercialistic platform. While I do not disagree with this claim of Young's, I do argue that because Morrison wraps in the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional in her works, her "artistic integrity" is different from the male-defined norm. Oprah's Book Club has thus spotlighted that "artistic integrity" should not be defined by the binary.

It is not just Black culture and history which has gained more attention because of Oprah's Book Club. In Trysh Travis' article "'It Will Change the World If Everybody Reads This Book': New Thought Religion in Oprah's Book Club," Travis discusses how Oprah and her brand used reading as a vehicle to get the message of openness and idealistic love out on national television. This is similar to Burger's overview of the book club and its focus on emotions, but with a much more in-depth focus. Oprah's "Change Your Life TV" combined reading with New Thought, which uses "first-century Christian mysticism and Eastern religious traditions as well as new theories of (among other things) electricity, neurology, and nutrition" (1021). Together, Oprah and her team fostered a book club in which the belief in a utopia where social injustice is solved through the belief that all humans are the same is pervasive. Being unwilling to leave some viewers uncomfortable at the end of the episode with the systemic oppression which has and continues to occur within United States culture, Oprah's team would handpick people who sent in letters about the book pick and shared Oprah's ideas about the book to be a part of the taped conversations which would be aired, even going so far as to plant audience members who would ask relevant questions. In other words, Oprah's team controlled the narrative of how each book was presented.<sup>59</sup> Travis concludes with a call to action for professors to recognize the

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<sup>59</sup> For more information on how Oprah's team controlled the New Thought narrative, see Travis 1029-1035.

different “unchurched” religions happening around the country, challenging the view of utopia they have in place and ultimately affecting politics in the United States (1038). Travis’ call to action emphasizes the effect media has on our patriarchal society to professors and their need to understand them in order to aid their students in comprehending how the binary system is tied up in every part of our culture.

While Oprah may have helped Morrison reach larger audiences than just the academic elite, Oprah and her producers did not, at least within the first few years of the club, allow for dissent to the “thought as power” narrative on the show that all humans are the same, regardless of their racial, gender, sexual, political, and socioeconomic differences. This is important because, like Young’s article, this establishes that not only do celebrities have influence over what books get read in American culture, but also *how* they get read, thus affecting the social and political structures which are in place. This empowerment which celebrities like Oprah control, however, can have dangerous consequences for society if the narrative they promote upholds the White, Eurocentric patriarchal system. For example, “unchurched” religions like the New Thought Narrative Oprah promotes can cause some people to forget that it is necessary to recognize and sometimes even celebrate the differences we have based on race, gender, sexual and political orientation, and class. Without this recognition, the binary remains in place.

### **Methodology**

My first course of action in searching for books to examine was to research the book clubs which exist today. My hope was to look at three online American book clubs exclusively for men and exclusively for women, to be in keeping with the theme of digital media influence. To do this, I opened an Incognito window in Google Chrome, and then searched for “book clubs.” This was for control purposes. I then replicated this process twice, changing the search



terms to “women’s book clubs” and “men’s book clubs” respectively. As I looked at the results of “women’s book clubs” and “men’s book clubs,” I noticed the only American-based online book club website for women was the Badass Women’s Book Club on the first page.<sup>60</sup> As such, I needed to look further into the search for recommendations. Because the article “The 15 Best Online Book Clubs to Join in 2022” was a hit in both the “book clubs” and “women’s book clubs” searches’ first page, I decided to use it to look for two more book clubs for women. All book clubs on this list seemed to be inspired by or founded by women. Thus, my next step was to look for a) if these book clubs were exclusively for women and b) if these book clubs were American.<sup>61</sup> What I discovered in this list is most of the book clubs on this list did not have women as exclusive members and/or were not American; rather, only one book club seemed to be targeting women specifically to be members and was American in origin: Reese’s Book Club, which was founded by the actress Reese Witherspoon.<sup>62</sup> As such, I decided to stick with two book clubs targeted specifically for women and moved on to researching for men’s book clubs.

Finding online book clubs exclusively targeted toward American men proved more difficult. Like with women, there were some online men’s book clubs which were non-American, book clubs meeting in person in other countries, and suggestions for in-person book clubs through the website Meetup.<sup>63</sup> For example, the Men’s Discussion Group at Redberry

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<sup>60</sup> It should be noted that I searched these search terms numerous times in Incognito windows due to needing to return to researching on different days/times. While the articles which appeared did not change on the first page of the search, the number of advertisements did. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Badass Women’s Book Club was an in-person book club prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>61</sup> The term “exclusively” in this chapter is predicated on who each book club’s intended audience is based on my research. For the women’s book clubs, the intended audience are female-identifying persons, regardless of sexuality. The intended audience for the Ultra Manly Book Club, based on the title, seems to be heterosexual, male-identifying persons, whereas the NYC Gay Guys’ Book Club’s intended audience is homosexual, male-identifying persons.

<sup>62</sup> Most of the book clubs (eleven out of fifteen) found on this list were either UK based or global. The trend toward UK based book clubs may be because the website on which this article was found, Reedsy, is based in the UK.

<sup>63</sup> It should be noted that through the Meetup website there are only ten men’s book clubs found in the United States, whereas there are over one hundred women’s book clubs.

Books, which appears to be a bookstore in Cable, Wisconsin, holds a book club in-person, and a blog is attached with reviews from a member “TedG.” The “men’s book clubs” search had an article “10 Virtual Book Clubs You Can Join Now—And How to Start Your Own,” which was very similar to “The 15 Best Online Book Clubs to Join in 2022.” However, none of the book clubs fit the criterion, and a few of the suggestions overlapped.<sup>64</sup> A *New York Times* article from 2016 titled “Men Have Book Clubs, Too” mentions several men’s book clubs, including two in-person clubs which did appear to meet virtually for a period because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>65</sup> These book clubs are the International Ultra Manly Book Club (shortened to the Ultra Manly Book Club on their Twitter page) in Kansas City, Kansas, and the NYC Gay Guys’ Book Club in New York City.<sup>66</sup> These are the all-men’s book clubs I chose to analyze. If I had not chosen to use online book clubs, the results for men’s book clubs may have been more fruitful and possibly better representative of men’s book clubs in the United States. Moreover, research should be done in the future regarding men’s book clubs in America.

To have a comparison of book clubs which welcome both men and women against the exclusive clubs, I decided to use two book clubs which welcome all. Oprah’s book club was included because of its pervasiveness in late twentieth and early twenty-first century American pop culture and since some of my research focuses solely on her book club, rather than book clubs overall. For the second club, I compared the articles which showcase lists of book clubs to

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<sup>64</sup> The “10 Virtual Book Clubs You Can Join Now—And How to Start Your Own” article was also in the first page of hits in the “book club” search.

<sup>65</sup> The title of *The New York Times* article suggests everyone, at least in America, believes being a part of a book club is a feminine hobby, and thus not for a heterosexual, masculine male. Furthermore, the title also implies women have “claimed” book clubs as a “women only” activity, rather than something which can be enjoyed by everyone.

<sup>66</sup> The International Ultra Manly Book Club does not appear to be global in nature despite its title of “international.” Also, the NYC Gay Guys’ Book Club could be found on the Meetup suggestions as well. Until I found this *Times* article, I would have assumed all Meetup events are in-person. If I had discovered this while researching for women’s book clubs, I would have kept looking at the Meetup site. Due to the difficulty of discovering American men’s online book clubs (and women’s), however, I decided to keep the number of strictly men’s book clubs and strictly female book clubs at two for each.

find the most common ones. I then narrowed it down by most frequently mentioned book clubs within the articles and/or if it was an online club (whether it has been always virtual or virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and of American origin.<sup>67</sup> Goodreads Choice Awards Book Club and New York Public Library and WNYC Virtual Book Club were mentioned by four out of the six lists I looked at.<sup>68</sup> The New York Public Library and WNYC Virtual Book Club was my final book club choice to research because I wanted librarians' book selections to be analyzed because of their expertise on all different genres of books.<sup>69</sup> In other words, I wanted to ensure more variation in the data by not including the largest bookseller in the world in many areas of my research. Once I knew all the book titles, I analyzed them to see what books were/are a part of the *New York Times* Bestseller List, and then categorized each book by its genre and author gender.

For each club, my original intention was to look at the book picks for 2021.<sup>70</sup> This is because I wanted to get a good sample of what was recently read in each club. For the Badass Women's Book Club, however, the only available books to view were from December 2021 to March 2022. As such, I decided to look at the most recent books each club had available, and if a club had more than a few months available, I looked at the year 2021 in total. To organize the book data, I made a spreadsheet which had several tabs, one for each book club. I listed the book with its author, if the author was a man or a woman, if it was a *New York Times* or *LA Times*

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<sup>67</sup> These articles include: "15 Online Book Clubs to Boost Your Reading in 2021" by Tika Viteri, "9 Online Book Clubs You Can Join Now" by Ken Budd, "The 15 Best Online Book Clubs to Join in 2022," "10 Virtual Book Clubs You Can Join Now—And How to Start Your Own" by Andrew R. Chow, "The 7 Best Online Book Clubs to Join" by Scribendi, and "15 Online Book Clubs That Will Boost Your Reading Life" by Leandra Beabout.

<sup>68</sup> These articles are: "9 Online Book Clubs You Can Join Now" by Ken Budd, "The 15 Best Online Book Clubs to Join in 2022," "15 Online Book Clubs That Will Boost Your Reading Life" by Leandra Beabout, and "15 Online Book Clubs to Boost Your Reading in 2021" by Tika Viteri.

<sup>69</sup> The New York Public Library and WNYC Virtual Book Club will be referred to in the rest of the article as NYPL Book Club.

<sup>70</sup> The book clubs I looked at tended to do one book per month. The exception to this rule was Reese's Book Club, which had quarterly YA novel picks alongside the regular book club picks.

bestseller, what the genre was listed as on Amazon, and what award the book had received on Amazon or Goodreads.<sup>71</sup> The reason I chose to use Amazon as an authority for the genres of each book is because Amazon has a single category for each book, and these categories are widely applied to many books published in different countries. Furthermore, Amazon's genre identification is easily available when searching for the book.<sup>72</sup> To find the genres of each book, I would often search for the book in Google, then click on the link which led to the hardcover edition.<sup>73</sup> I would then switch to the paperback edition for consistency's sake, because I realized as I was logging information for this chapter that the genre information for the books may be different and/or non-existent depending on if I select paperback or hardcover.<sup>74</sup>

## Results and Discussion

The books and data for the Badass Women's Book Club were as follows, starting with December 2021:

Book/Author	Author Gender	Bestseller	Genre Based on Amazon Paperback	Awards
<i>Girly Drinks</i> by Mallory O'Meara	woman	<i>LA Times</i>	Cookbooks, Food & Wine/Beverages & Wine	No award
<i>Year of Yes</i> by Shonda Rhimes	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Biographies & Memoirs/Community & Culture	Editors' pick: Best Nonfiction
<i>Unbound</i> by Tarana Burke	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Biographies & Memoirs/Community & Culture	Editors' pick: Best Biographies & Memoirs
<i>Make Herstory Your Story</i> by Rebecca Sive	woman	No award	Politics & Social Sciences/Politics & Government	No award

In Reese's Book Club, the books for 2021 starting with January were as follows:

<sup>71</sup> Based on my research, there was one non-binary author read in all the book clubs during the time frame studied, and that is Casey McQuiston. Their novel, *Red, White, and Royal Blue*, was read in the NYC Gay Guys' Book Club. More research on how Amazon editors' picks and Goodreads (which Amazon owns) Choice awards influence book sales in America and worldwide is needed.

<sup>72</sup> When doing a Google search of several of the books, the top result from Google itself would list more than three fiction genres. The books which were used to establish a baseline on Google's knowledge of genre were *The Handmaid's Tale*, *This is How You Lose the Time War*, *The Shining*, and *The Paper Palace*.

<sup>73</sup> The name of the link usually included the book title followed by the words "a novel hardcover."

<sup>74</sup> There were several books where using the paperback edition did not help with consistency. For example, *Sankofa* and *The Island of Missing Trees* from Reese's Book Club did not have the genre categories listed on the paperback edition. Furthermore, *Girly Drinks* from Badass Women's Book Club and *The Handmaid's Tale* from the Ultra Manly Book Club were only available in hardcover through the link I chose to click on.

Book and Author	Author Gender	Bestseller	Genre Based on Amazon Paperback	Awards
<i>Outlawed</i> by Anna North	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	Editor's Pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>The Sanatorium</i> by Sarah Pearse	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Mystery, Thriller & Suspense/Thriller & Suspense	Editor's Pick: Best Mystery, Thriller & Suspense
<i>Infinite Country</i> by Patricia Engel	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editor's Pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>Northern Spy</i> by Flynn Berry	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Mystery, Thriller & Suspense/Thriller & Suspense	Editor's Pick: Best Mystery, Thriller & Suspense
<i>The Last Thing He Told Me</i> by Laura Dave	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editor's Pick: Best Mystery, Thriller & Suspense
<i>Seven Days in June</i> by Tia Williams	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/United States	Goodreads Choice: Award Nominee
<i>The Paper Palace</i> by Miranda Cowley Heller	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Goodreads Choice: Award Nominee
<i>We Were Never Here</i> by Andrea Bartz	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	No award
<i>L.A. Weather</i> by María Amparo Escandón	woman	<i>NY Times &amp; LA Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	No award
<i>Sankofa</i> by Chibundu Onuzo	woman	No award	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction (only on hardcover)	Editor's Pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>The Island of Missing Trees</i> by Elif Shafak	woman	No award	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction (only on hardcover)	Editor's Pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>Lucky</i> by Marissa Stapley	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Action & Adventure	No award

Next, I turned to the selected all men's book clubs. The 2020 books for the Ultra Manly

Book Club, along from two books from 2021 were:<sup>75</sup>

Book/Author	Author Gender	Bestseller	Genre Based on Amazon Paperback	Awards
<i>Out There</i> by Michael Wall	man	No award	Engineering & Transportation/Engineering (only hardcover available)	No award
<i>Those Who Wish Me Dead</i> by Michael Koryta	man	No award	Mystery, Thriller & Suspense/Thrillers & Suspense	Editor's Pick: Best Mystery, Thriller & Suspense

<sup>75</sup> The International Ultra Manly Book Club's website seems to be taken over by a different domain now, and while there is a Goodreads page titled Ultra Manly Book Club with previous book club picks, there does not seem to be an active community page. Furthermore, there are no dates on when the book club picks were read. As such, I utilized the group's Twitter page, which has not been updated since January 2021. Because the second to last post included the January and February 2021 picks, I will utilize those books as well as the picks from 2020.

<i>11/22/63</i> by Stephen King	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' Pick: Best Science Fiction & Fantasy
<i>This is How You Lose the Time War</i> by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone	woman and man	<i>LA Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' Pick: Best Science Fiction & Fantasy
<i>The Name of the Wind</i> by Patrick Rothfuss	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Science Fiction & Fantasy/Fantasy	Editors' Pick: Best Science Fiction & Fantasy
<i>The Power</i> by Naomi Alderman	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Science Fiction & Fantasy/Science Fiction	Editors' Pick: Best Science Fiction & Fantasy
<i>The Ghosts of Eden Park</i> by Karen Abbott	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Biographies & Memoirs/Historical	Editors' Pick: Best History
<i>Jay-Z: Made in America</i> by Michael Eric Dyson	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Politics & Social Sciences/Social Sciences (only hardcover available)	No award
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction (only hardcover available)	No award
<i>Watchmen</i> by Alan Moore	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Comics & Graphic Novels/Graphic Novels	No award
<i>Small Great Things</i> by Jodi Picoult	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' Pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>Kings of the Wyld</i> by Nicholas Eames	man	No award	Literature & Fiction/Action & Adventure	Goodreads Choice: Award Nominee
<i>The Spy and the Traitor</i> by Ben Macintyre	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Politics & Social Sciences/Politics & Government	Editors' Pick: Best History
<i>The Shining</i> by Stephen King	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	No award

For the NYC Gay Guys' Book Club, the 2021 book club books, from January to

December, were as follows:

Book/Author	Author Gender	Bestseller	Genre Based on Amazon Paperback	Awards on Amazon
<i>Funny Boy</i> by Shyam Selvadurai	man	No award	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	No award
<i>Cleanness</i> by Garth Greenwell	man	No award	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	No award
<i>Swimming in the Dark</i> by Tomasz Jedrowski	man	<i>NY Times</i>	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	No award
<i>Memorial: A Novel</i> by Bryan Washington	man	No award	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	Editors' Pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> by Oscar Wilde	man	<i>LA Times</i>	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	No award
<i>The Prophets</i> by Robert Jones Jr.	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/United States	No award
<i>A Beautiful Crime</i> by Christopher Bollen	man	No award	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	No award

<i>Red, White, &amp; Royal Blue</i> by Casey McQuiston	non-binary	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/United States	Editors' Pick: Best Romance
<i>Real Life</i> by Brandon Taylor	man	No award	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Goodreads Choice: Award Nominee
<i>¡Hola Papi!</i> by John Paul Brammer	man	No award	Biographies & Memoirs/Community & Culture	Goodreads Choice: Award Nominee
<i>Skye Falling</i> by Mia McKenzie	woman	No award	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	No award
<i>Yes, Daddy</i> by Jonathan Parks-Ramage	man	No award	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	No award

Finally, I researched the books which the book clubs I deemed “the control group” had been reading. For Oprah’s Book Club, while it is fairly easy to find a list of all the books she has encouraged others to read, it is a bit harder to find when she suggested to read them. Thus, I had to turn to other websites to find the books for 2021. Mackenzie Marchello’s article “All of Oprah’s Book Club Picks” showcases the book covers of each book club pick with a design on them telling what year they were chosen to be a part of Oprah’s Book Club.<sup>76</sup> The book club picks for 2021 were:

Book/Author	Author Gender	Bestseller	Genre Based on Amazon Paperback	Awards
<i>Gilead</i> by Marilynne Robinson	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/United States	No award
<i>Home</i> by Marilynne Robinson	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>Lila</i> by Marilynne Robinson	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>Jack</i> by Marilynne Robinson	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/United States	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>The Sweetness of Water</i> by Nathan Harris	man	<i>NY Times</i>	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	Goodreads Choice: Award Nominee
<i>The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois</i> by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>Bewilderment</i> by Richard Powers	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction

<sup>76</sup> While this article appears to be originally published on April 9, 2020, based on the date next to the author’s name, it has been updated to include Oprah’s 2021 and 2022 picks to date. A comment on the article indicates the article may have been uploaded in 2019.

I was able to eventually do a Google search of each Oprah’s Book Club pick for 2021 along with Oprah’s name to discover when she announced these books as her picks.

The NYPL Book Club picks for 2021 were:<sup>77</sup>

Book/Author	Author Gender	Bestseller	Genre Based on Amazon Paperback	Awards on Amazon
<i>Motherless Brooklyn</i> by Jonathan Lethem	man	No award	Biographies & Memoirs/Professionals & Academics	No award
<i>Mexican Gothic</i> by Silvia Moreno-Garcia	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' Pick: Best Science Fiction & Fantasy
<i>Black Buck</i> by Mateo Askaripour	man	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/United States	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>No One Is Talking About This</i> by Patricia Lockwood	woman	<i>LA Times</i>	Humor & Entertainment/Humor	No award
<i>The Song of Achilles</i> by Madeline Miller	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>Let's Talk About Hard Things</i> by Anna Sale	woman	No award	Self-Help/Relationships	No award
<i>The Other Black Girl</i> by Zakiya Dalila Harris	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/United States	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>The Chosen and the Beautiful</i> by Nghi Vo	woman	No award	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	Editors' pick: Best Literature & Fiction
<i>The Great Mistake</i> by Jonathan Lee	man	No award	LGBTQ+ Books/Literature & Fiction	No award
<i>Matrix</i> by Lauren Groff	woman	<i>NY Times</i>	Literature & Fiction/Genre Fiction	No award
<i>Passing</i> by Nella Larsen.	man	No award	Literature & Fiction/United States	No award

Both women’s book clubs were only reading books written by women, while the all men’s book clubs read books by both men and women. This is intriguing for the group titled the Ultra Manly Book Club, because on their Twitter page, their profile pic is one of a younger Chuck Norris showing off a gun and George Orwell’s *1984* with an American flag background. In the picture, Chuck Norris also has a sleeveless tucked-in shirt which is fully unbuttoned. Utilizing the late twentieth century action television star in such a manner suggests a group who is fixated on hyper-masculinity and books which glorify these actions (see Fig. 1). Five out of the

<sup>77</sup> In order to see all the 2021 book club picks, I had to go to the livestreamed book discussions/interviews on YouTube to look up the title and author in the video description boxes.



fourteen books between 2020 and 2021 were written or written in part by female authors, and four of those same books had female or female-presenting protagonists out of all fourteen books on the list.<sup>78</sup> One of these books, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is one of the most prominent feminist fiction books in recent years in America, alongside *This is How You Lose the Time War*, a science fiction/fantasy featuring an LGBTQ couple.<sup>79</sup> While this number of books is certainly less than half of the books chosen, it is a far cry from the statements of another all-male book club, the Man Book Club, interviewed by *The New York Times* in 2016. This club refuses to read any book with a female lead; Andrew McCullough, the founder, claims ““We do not read so-called chick lit”” (Miller).<sup>80</sup> This statement emphasizes that reading such literature as a man is not ““masculine”” enough, and thus threatens a male’s status in society as someone who is in power, or the ““good”” part of the binary. He also states his group has become envious to the wives of the men in the longstanding group because they have ““created something that is more durable”” than a woman’s book group. McCullough bases this assumption off his wife’s book club, which has seen a lot more members come in and out of the group. He is thus asserting all women’s book clubs have members that frequently come in and out of the group, and thus by extension suggesting women have a flightier nature. McCullough is implying that ““chick-lit,”” and, by extension, women, are ““other.””

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<sup>78</sup> The books by female authors were *This is How You Lose the Time War*, *The Power*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Ghosts of Eden Park*, and *Small Great Things*. *The Ghosts of Eden Park* is the only female-authored book from the Ultra Manly Book Club which does not have a female protagonist.

<sup>79</sup> While Amazon gave the categorization of “literature & fiction/genre fiction” for *This is How You Lose the Time War*, the award given for it by the editors was “Best Science Fiction & Fantasy.”

<sup>80</sup> To view a critique of Miller’s article, read Gabriella Paiella’s article, “Oh Good, Now Men Are Trying to Ruin Book Clubs.”



Fig. 1. The Ultra Manly Book Club's Twitter profile picture depicts Chuck Norris standing in front of an American flag while holding a gun and a copy of George Orwell's *1984*.

What is interesting, then, is while the Ultra Manly Book Club's Twitter page appears to possibly espouse the values of toxic masculinity, the actual books chosen, and the comments from the founder of the Man Book Club suggest a milder group. In other words, the Ultra Manly Book Club seems to be disguising itself as a source of toxic masculinity in order to attract more members to consider a book club as "fun." Although perhaps not subscribing to the same patriarchal ideals as the Man Book Club, the members of the Ultra Manly Book Club pose the risk of perpetuating gender roles by utilizing male symbols of power to masculinize book clubs, despite their picks celebrating women and marginalized groups. Furthermore, it seems as though much of the reason why the Ultra Manly Book Club appears more empowering with its choices than the Man Book Club would be is because the group has chosen many books which appear on the bestseller list. In contrast, the NYC Gay Guys' Book Club celebrates both masculinity and femininity in the books they read through choosing authors who are more comfortable with breaking down gender performativity stereotypes, even though only one out of twelve books read by the group is authored by a woman. This is because all of the books have either protagonists or authors who are a part of the LGBTQ community, thus subverting heteronormative gender roles and heterosexual romance which is seen as the stereotypical go-to for book clubs, as is evidenced

by the worldview of McCullough. According to John Pruitt, one of the reasons why book clubs are viewed as more heteronormative is due to the fact public book clubs are often held at public libraries, which require public funding provided by mostly heteronormative patrons. Pruitt argues “public libraries may increase the diversity of their patrons and reinforce the philosophy the library is a welcoming space open to all individuals in the community” if they are willing to work with and stand up for gay book club members and their right to use the public library for discussion groups (137). Change can be seen in the book club picks for this study, in which every book club but the Badass Women’s Book Club had a book labeled as LGBTQ.<sup>81</sup>

Unfortunately, it must be noted that because one of the only all-male online book clubs I could find was the NYC Gay Guys’ Book Club, the patriarchal and heteronormative stereotype of book clubs not being for “real men” (i.e. heterosexual cisgender males) because many clubs involve processing emotions rather than having intellectual conversations (as evidenced with Oprah’s Book Club), seems to still have a strong hold in the United States.

For Reese’s Book Club, their website states on the “Who We Are” page that they read books with “a woman at the center of the story.” While some may argue Reese’s Book Club is doing the same thing as the Man Book Club by only reading women-centered stories, Reese’s book club does not criticize male authors’ works in the process of lifting female authors’ works up. As Burger notes, women’s book clubs of the nineteenth century were primarily meant to encourage women’s education, as well as political and social reform. Ten out of the twelve books Reese’s Book Club read in 2021 were categorized under the genre of “literature & fiction.”<sup>82</sup> None of the Badass Women’s Book Club books were categorized as “literature &

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<sup>81</sup> I theorize that if I had been able to obtain a larger sample of the Badass Women’s Book Club picks, I would have found at least one book categorized as LGBTQ.

<sup>82</sup> Amazon tended to have two categorizations of genre for each book.

fiction,” but two out of the four books, *Year of Yes* and *Unbound*, were labeled as “biographies & memoirs/community & culture.” Furthermore, none of the books from the Badass Women’s Club are fiction, whereas all twelve books from Reese’s Book Club in 2021 are. In comparison to the groups which are just for men, one book from each men’s club is categorized as “biographies & memoirs,” *The Ghosts of Eden Park* and *¡Hola Papi!* Six out of the fourteen books from the Ultra Manly Book Club were listed as “literature & fiction,” whereas eleven out of the twelve books from the NYC Gay Guys’ Book Club books from 2021 were labeled as such. In comparison to the groups which include both men and women, Oprah’s Book Club seem to have very similar genre tastes to Reese’s Book Club and the NYC Gay Guys’ Book Club; all of Oprah’s Book Club had “literature & fiction” as part of the genre listed in Amazon. Furthermore, eight out of twelve books from the NYPL Book Club had the “literature & fiction” genre label as well. Based on the idea in Eurocentric culture of literature being a highbrow art form which creates thought-provoking, intelligent conversations, these results imply people in American culture think it is necessary to find such books to read in a book club setting.

In her article, “Calvino and the Value of Literature,” Lucia Re discusses the Italian writer Italo Calvino’s definition of the cultural value of literature by stating that “The value of literature is that of teaching us how to attribute a value to things. It is therefore eminently moral, yet devoid of a specific message, and intrinsic to the esthetic object” (123). In other words, certain books are more “worthy” of studying because they help us deem what is more valuable morally. Although I do not disagree with this statement, I argue the genre of literature is often attributed to texts which make one think critically, while some books are considered “less worthy” because they focus on the emotional and entertaining. Even Toni Morrison’s works, which are canonized and taught in university classrooms, were steered away from intellectual conversations by Oprah

in favor of processing the emotional and spiritual forces behind her work.<sup>83</sup> This switch from intellectual to emotional conversation within book clubs, however, has been stereotyped as less than, regardless of the work's genre. This is due to American society's gender norms equating women with emotional conversations and men with intellectual conversations. However, the way Oprah conducts her book club has opened the door for less serious conversations and more community to take place because of them, which was a part of the original purpose of nineteenth century women's clubs. Therefore, Oprah's Book Club is doing on a much larger scale what women have been doing for over a century, and shows why there is a need for people of oppressed groups to be able to take part in spaces like book clubs where a community can be built.

Most of the books from the book clubs were on a bestseller list, whether it is on *The New York Times* or *The Los Angeles Times*.<sup>84</sup> However, out of all the clubs, one club stood out for having the least number of bestsellers picked. Eight out of the twelve books read in 2021 by the NYC Gay Guys' Book Club had not been on the bestseller list for *The New York Times* or *The Los Angeles Times*.<sup>85</sup> Seven out of eight books which were not on the bestseller lists were published in 2020 and 2021. While this suggests the reason why these books were not bestsellers is because of how recent the publication dates are, for other book clubs, this is not the case. This is especially true with the book clubs run by the celebrities Reese Witherspoon and Oprah Winfrey. For example, all twelve books in Reese's Book Club from 2021 were published that year, and ten out of twelve of them became bestsellers on *The New York Times* Bestseller List.

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<sup>83</sup> Travis notes that Oprah suggested a "A too-cerebral analysis...could in fact detract from what made the reading experience truly valuable."

<sup>84</sup> If I could not find a book on *The New York Times* Bestseller List, whether current or past, I researched to see if it had appeared on *The Los Angeles Times* Bestseller List. This method did result in books included on both lists.

<sup>85</sup> Because I discovered several of the books read by these book clubs were not bestsellers yet, I decided to check the publication dates on all the books, regardless of their bestseller status.

Similarly, four out of seven books in the Oprah’s Book Club were published in 2020 and 2021, and all four of them won awards. With the other book clubs run by non-famous people (the Badass Women’s Book Club, Ultra Manly Book Club, and the NYPL Book Club), all of them had most of their books on bestseller lists.<sup>86</sup> Because of these results, I dived deeper to discover when these books were bestsellers to determine whether or not the fact they were being read in a book club, particularly a large book club like Reese’s, Oprah’s, or the New York Public Library and WNYC Virtual Book Club caused them to become bestsellers, or if they were already bestsellers before they were read in the clubs. For example, in the New York Public Library and WNYC Virtual Book Club, *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller was published September 20, 2011, but it became a #1 New York Times Bestseller in 2021 due to videos on TikTok of people reacting to it.<sup>87</sup> This suggests that, at least for book clubs not run by famous people, the books read are ones which have been chosen based on recommendations. In other words, these book clubs do not influence bestseller lists; rather, the bestseller lists influence the book clubs.

When looking at the publication date of the books chosen for Reese’s Book Club, I discovered nine out of twelve of the books chosen for each month in 2021 were released early in the month they were read by the club. According to Reese’s Book Club’s “Who We Are” page, Witherspoon chooses all the books, thus implying Witherspoon intentionally looks for recently published books with woman-centered stories. Every book which became a bestseller on Witherspoon’s book club appeared on the bestseller list by the end of the month in which the book club was reading it, regardless of the publication date.<sup>88</sup> In other words, Reese’s Book Club

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<sup>86</sup> For the Badass Women’s Book Club, three out of four books were on bestseller lists; the Ultra Manly Book Club had eleven out of fourteen on a list; the NYPL Book Club had six out of eleven on a list.

<sup>87</sup> For more information on how the social media platform TikTok is influencing bestseller lists, see *The New York Times* article, “How Crying on TikTok Sells Books” by Elizabeth A. Harris.

<sup>88</sup> The books which did not make it on the bestseller list were *Sankofa* by Chibundu Onuzo and *The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak.

influences whether a book gets on the bestseller lists quickly. These results are in keeping with other celebrities. In her introduction to her article about the history of the book club, Burger points out Mark Zuckerberg's announcement of his first book club book skyrocketed the sales of the first book pick within a day. Furthermore, with Oprah and her book club, which existed before the rise of early social media like MySpace and Facebook, R. Mark Hall mentions "publishers credited her with revitalizing the book-selling industry" (647). This major influence continues today. Oprah's Book Club had three out of the seven books for 2021 appear on *The New York Times* Bestseller List not long after they were published.<sup>89</sup> Like Reese's Book Club picks, these books' appearances on the bestseller list seem to be in direct correlation with Oprah announcing them as her picks, as each announcement came within two weeks of the books being published.<sup>90</sup> Even more evidence is seen with the power of celebrity influence with the Badass Book Club's choice, *Year of Yes* by Shonda Rhimes. Despite this book not being promoted by one of the celebrity book clubs I chose to analyze, Shonda Rhimes, being a celebrity herself as the creator of many long-running hit television shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, was a *New York Times* Bestseller in part due to her already famous status. Furthermore, while the book itself is meant to convince others like Rhimes to face their fears, the shortened version of the title lends itself to a subliminal message that people, especially women, can and should say yes to everything. In other words, if women do say yes to everything, then they *will* be successful. This idea women can and should do "it all" is not only detrimental to women's physical and mental health, but it is also simply not possible for many women of color

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<sup>89</sup> These books, *The Sweetness of Water*, *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*, and *Bewilderment*, became bestsellers approximately three weeks after being published according to *The New York Times* Bestseller List.

and lower socioeconomic status to achieve due to lack of resources and opportunities. Therefore, the “have it all” mentality sets women up for failure.

Because the idea of women can “have it all” is furthered by celebrities like Reese Witherspoon, Oprah, and Shonda Rhimes, American society believes it is achievable. As such, rather than deconstructing the binary of man/woman, this concept strengthens it because the “have it all” mentality places female value with how many goals women can achieve, rather than with their existence as a person. These examples point to the influence celebrity status still has on the book sales industry and American culture as a whole. Moreover, these examples emphasize how American society often culturally places more value on gender performativity and the patriarchal structure than people.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of the book club within the last thirty years due to celebrities like Oprah has changed the publishing industry in the United States to where what is being published and sold is more determined by celebrities and social media than those on the board of these companies. While this is a welcomed change for women and/or people of color because of the gatekeeping in academia and the publishing world for these marginalized groups, there is still the continuation of gender performativity with the belief a book club is for women to discuss “chick lit” and their emotions, rather than a space to grow intellectually and socially. Most of the clubs examined in this chapter had books classified as “literature & fiction,” except for the Badass Women’s Book Club. Yet this particular club was reading books about history and social justice issues, rather than reading romance. Despite this, it is important to remember the stereotypes of women reading romance should not prevent women from reading such novels together in groups. People, no matter their gender, should be able to read a book with a group and have intellectual and/or



emotional conversations about said book without having to adhere to gender norms, and by extension White, capitalist ideas of race and socioeconomics. Breaking down this gender performativity, I argue, will lead to stronger social connections and eventually books which reflect a deconstruction of the binary and patriarchal society. This does not mean I am suggesting that exclusively women or men's book clubs should not exist; rather, I am highlighting the issues regarding performing gender in said groups, one of which is women performing the postfeminist idea of "Women can and should have it all."

With R. Mark Hall's statement about Oprah's sway over the book publishing industry and evidence to suggest these books may have never become bestsellers had it not been for Oprah, it is likely that simple book recommendations from devoted book accounts on social media like TikTok will increasingly gain influence on the publishing industry, especially given many more people are becoming famous due to their activity on social media rather than their work as an actor or TV personality. However, much more research is needed to determine whether these trends will further perpetuate gender performativity in their book choices, or if the constant use of random strangers' opinions on social media regarding books will convince readers to read something different than what they usually do. How social media influences affect the "Women can have it all" narrative in the publishing world remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

This study looks at how gender norms are perpetuated through American media. Specifically, it aims to expose how the women can “have it all” narrative is continued through social media platforms like Pinterest, blogs, and online book clubs. In Chapter One, Pinterest is found to suggest pins for white females in their twenties which stress the idea that a woman *can and should* have a perfectly organized home, eat nutritiously balanced meals, exercise regularly, have trendy outfits, and time to pursue one’s dreams. In Chapter Two, blogs discovered from the pins in Chapter One are analyzed; it is discovered that all three blogs use subtle word choices which further the ideals of gender performativity. This ultimately leads to the ideas that a) patriarchal ideals are ingrained into American citizens and b) not all upholding of gender norms is intentional, but rather, subconscious. Throughout these blogs, the messaging of women can “have it all” is still there, whether it be with nutrition and exercise, motherhood, or career/crafting goals. Finally, in Chapter Three, I analyze online American book clubs: two all-men’s clubs, two all-women’s, and two general clubs. Two of these were female celebrity-run clubs. The goal is to analyze how book clubs perform gender through the books they chose, as well as take into consideration how celebrity influence affects book picks and bestseller lists. Often, through celebrities’ discussions of books in their clubs, the books they choose, and the books they write, the patriarchal ideal that “Women can have it all” is emphasized to women readers.

More research should be done over this topic, given the limitations of this study. However, based on my findings, I conclude that it is necessary for society as a whole to take issue with the gender norm of “Women can have it all” that has been perpetuated by postfeminist ideals. This norm is not only unhealthy for all women, regardless of race, socioeconomic status,

age, or sexual orientation, but it also furthers the patriarchal structure of our society. This is done through suggesting that it is healthy (both mentally and physically) and possible for women to do everything that a man does, but better. We must as a society work together for a new narrative: one in which women's value is based on their existence, and not on what they can or cannot do.

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