

Abstract

In this Master's thesis, we examine body manifestations within chosen TV-series from popular culture, namely *Tales of the City* (2019), *Insatiable* (2018-2019), and *Dietland* (2018), in order to uncover how they comment on contemporary beauty ideals in relation to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and physical appearance. This is done in order to examine if these body representations reflect body positivity and gender activism within contemporary society. When doing so, we convey the meanings of the body iconographies within the series, since we consider the body as a sign that can be interpreted in order to identify the bodily communication. Essentially, the thesis has a post-structuralist approach, because the analysis is based on the principle that beauty ideals are not static but ever-evolving. Prior to the analysis, we briefly account for the historical development of Western body images and beauty ideals, as well as the complexity of the concept of beauty, in order to provide insight into the origin of contemporary beauty ideals and how they have historically been used to regulate human beings. In the analysis, we draw upon queer theory, narcissism theory, identity theory, the beauty myth as well as the notion of governmentality, in order to shed light on how the body is influenced by society's body images and beauty ideals. The findings of the analysis reveal that the body manifestations within the series challenge body images and beauty ideals in contemporary society that are rooted within traditional masculinity and femininity, because these body iconographies are used to criticize contemporary beauty ideals and the lack of diversity within the media and the beauty industry. Therefore, these manifestations mirror contemporary body positivity and gender activism movements that encourage inclusivity by promoting diverse body representations. However, the three series also comment on the excessive focus on the body in society, suggesting that the strive for perfection has caused human beings to become self-righteous to such a degree that religious worship is frequently substituted with worship of the body. Ultimately, the shared message of the three series suggests that the immense focus on the body has negative effects on the individual, because it results in feelings of inadequacy and existential meaninglessness, since the strive for perfection is ultimately an unattainable fiction.

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The politics of beauty: How body manifestations within selected TV-series of popular culture
challenge contemporary beauty ideals

Throughout decades there have been various depictions of physical beauty that have been object for admiration and desire, expressed in portrayals of protagonists who exhibit innocence and high morals, rendering them beautiful and associating them with good. In contrast, evil is often depicted through characters with an ugly and unappealing physical appearance that mirror their immoral nature. This is a reoccurring theme within the fairytale genre, where the narrative revolves around the battle between these two opposing forces. Notably, this distinction between ugly and beautiful has transcended into contemporary, mainstream culture where the body is similarly judged based on its physical appearance, since it can create assumptions about an individual. As a result, contemporary society focuses heavily on physical appearance, which is particularly prominent on social media platforms where the body functions as a representation of the self, wherefore people seek to convey a socially desired self. Hence, the discourse on social media is centered around creating idealized presentations of the body, arguably fostering a culture that is obsessed with body images, wherefore people's personal qualities can be overshadowed by the prominent focus on the body in postmodern society. In this connection, society promotes exclusive beauty that set an unrealistic standard of beauty through retouched advertising images, wherefore people are occupied with extensive self-contemplation that can result in feelings of inadequacy. In order to counteract feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with the body, there is an increased focus on gender and body positive activism within contemporary society as seen in the body positive movement, #EffYourBeautyStandards, created in 2013 by plus-size model, Tess Holliday, in order to combat the discrimination against overweight people while encouraging both men and women to share their unique beauty. A similar example is seen in a present Dove campaign called #ShowUs from 2020, which has emerged due to a fact that 70% of women and non-binary individuals worldwide still do not feel represented within the media and advertisement (Dove US). Correspondingly, there continues to be examples of queer activism promoted by the original LGBT social movements,

currently known as LGBTQIA+ that are constantly evolving and fighting for the rights of queer minorities. This demonstrates a contemporary tendency to continuously attach labels to the body in order to create inclusivity and promote uniqueness. Moreover, an example of how the body is attributed significant importance in relation to how people's level of attractiveness is judged. This is emphasized when Instagrammer, Jenna Kutcher, experienced body discrimination, when people on social media questioned why a muscular guy would be romantically involved with a woman of her size (Trainor). Also, more recently, the singer, Adele, who was previously considered a body positive role model for embracing her curvaceous figure, has undergone a tremendous weight loss, which has changed her social image. This contradicts her initial critique of mainstream beauty ideals and advocacy for body positivity because she no longer physically resembles the role model that she used to be when she was a curvy woman (Drexler). As such, this suggests that there is a predominant focus on the body in society, yet contemporary beauty ideals are constantly scrutinized through body and gender activism, which promote constant contemplation about the body whilst encouraging a revision of contemporary beauty ideals, which is an interesting issue to examine further. Therefore, we will analyze body manifestations in relation to the themes of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and overall physical appearance in selected TV-series from popular culture, namely *Tales of the City* (2019), *Insatiable* (2018-2019), and *Dietland* (2018), with the purpose of examining how they comment on current beauty ideals. This will be done in order to uncover whether or not these manifestations challenge society's contemporary body and beauty ideals, and if body and gender activism are reflected within these fictional body manifestations. In order to do so, we will account for the historical development of Western beauty ideals and body images that will be utilized to gain an understanding of the formation of contemporary beauty and body ideals that combine traditional influences with modern and liberated attitudes towards the body. Subsequently, we will draw upon queer theory, narcissism theory, the self-reflexive identity process, and the structure of the self, in order to gain an understanding of how the body experiences a conflict caused by society's body images and beauty ideals. This will be combined with theory of the beauty myth as well as the concept of governmentality for the purpose of examining how these factors might contribute to contemplations about the body in relation to the characters of the TV-series. Ultimately, our thesis is centered around the iconography of the body in a historical and Christian cultural perspective. In this regard, we draw upon post-structuralism and semiotics because the development of beauty ideals reflects the premise that these structures are not molded but open and interchangeable, and the ideals can be perceived as system of signs that reflect cultural

ideologies. Hence, we will analyze current body manifestations within popular culture in order to uncover how they comment on the relationship between beauty ideals and the body in contemporary society, and gain an understanding of the diversity of these prevailing body representations, and the notions that they reflect about the body through their denotations and connotations.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BEAUTY IDEALS

This chapter will account for the concept of beauty and subsequently provide an explanation for the development of Western beauty ideals across different historical periods, from Antiquity until the 21st century, in order to gain an understanding of the development of the concept and how it influences body manifestations in contemporary society.

Beauty & Aesthetics

Beauty is a complex concept, since it has historically been perceived from different theoretical angles, thereby revealing the complexity regarding the meaning of it. Hence, this section will provide insight into the complicated nature of beauty by explaining how beauty has been perceived within philosophy and aesthetics.

The concept of beauty is “one of the most enduring and controversial themes in Western philosophy” and philosophical aesthetics has tried to grasp the meaning of beauty alongside the nature of art (Sartwell). In this connection, beauty has “traditionally been counted among the ultimate values, with goodness, truth and justice” (ibid.). Notably, one of the biggest controversies regarding the concept of beauty is the debate regarding whether it is subjective and thus determined by ‘the eye of the beholder’ or an objective feature determined by biology, which has caused disagreement and confusion regarding beauty. Thus, theories of beauty have predominantly been developed within Western philosophy and aesthetics, in order to create understandings of the abstract concept. For instance, within the realm of aesthetics, the classical conception of beauty, as seen in Renaissance paintings and architecture, relied on perfect proportions when illustrating the human body, utilizing a theoretical angle that was based on mathematical principles of symmetry and harmony in order to achieve an image of beauty and perfection (Wölffin qtd. in Sartwell). This depiction of beauty is exemplified in Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing of *The Vitruvian Man* from 1490 (Figure 1), which illustrates the symmetry of the human proportions, in line with Aristotle’s definition in the *Poetics* (330 BCE), which states that, “to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must ... present a certain order in its arrangement of parts” (Aristotle qtd.

in Sartwell). Moreover, the idealist conception of beauty as reflected in Plato's work, *The Symposium* (385-370 BC), suggests that beauty is a perfect unity that cannot be measured solely based on physical components, wherefore if "man's life is ever worth living, it is when he has attained this vision of the very soul of beauty" (Plato qtd. in Sartwell). This suggests that man must realize that the perfect unity of beauty cannot be found only by acknowledging the beauty of physical appearance because beauty is a coherent whole, wherefore the idealist conception of beauty is explicit in comparison to the classical aesthetics that equate beauty with perfect form.

Moreover, beauty is also connected to concepts of the good and the truth, as well as being connected to the divine, exemplified in the mythical depiction of the beauty of God, and the way in which the universe is beautiful because it is created by love of God (Sartwell). In this regard, artists have depicted the divine concept of beauty by recognizing art and beauty as a spiritual ladder that leads human beings closer to divinity. This is also exemplified in Shaftesbury's three levels of beauty characterized as being, "what God makes (nature); what human beings make from nature or what is transformed by human intelligence (art, for example); and finally what makes even the maker of such things as us (that is, God)" (Shaftesbury in Sartwell). Therefore, artistic depictions of beauty can be considered a gateway to the Absolute, because it is connected to the mind and spirit, wherefore artistic renditions of God's creation are perceived as beautiful because they depict his work. During Romanticism, this became conceptualized as *the sublime*, which was considered the ultimate experience of beauty and often idealized and portrayed within poetry and impressionistic paintings



Figure 2. *Springtime* symbolically illustrates female gender norms.

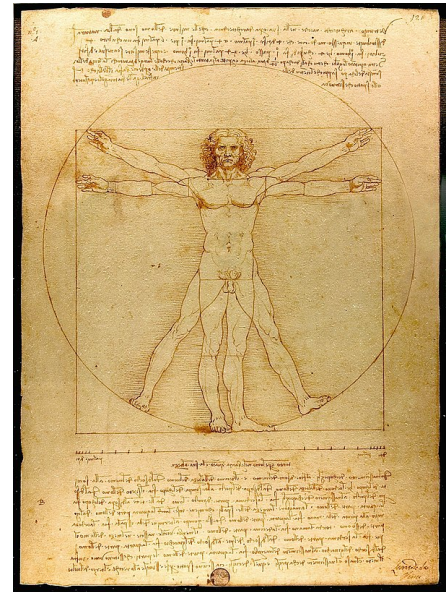


Figure 1. *The Vitruvian Man* illustrates perfect human proportions

from a metaphysical perspective, as seen in the poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819) by John Keats, as well the idealized postcard aesthetic in Claude Monet's painting, *Springtime* from 1872 (see Figure 2), which portrays the passive, virtuous woman in harmony with idyllic nature. Furthermore, despite disagreements amongst theorists, there exists a general consensus regarding beauty that supports why some people believe in its objective

nature, since “it would be odd or perverse for any person to deny that a perfect rose or a dramatic sunset was beautiful” (Sartwell). Notably, until the 18th century the majority of philosophers treated beauty as an objective quality, locating it “in the beautiful object itself or in the qualities of that object” (ibid.). In ancient Greece, philosophers, such as Plato and Plotinus, connected beauty to specific objects, specifically related to forms as described by Plotinus, “we hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form. All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly from that very isolation from the Divine-Thought” (Plotinus qtd. in Sartwell). Thus, according to Plotinus, the nature of beauty is objective and rooted within logic, because it is connected to ideal and exclusive formulas that determine whether or not something is beautiful and causes delight. However, philosopher, Immanuel Kant, argues that beauty is,

“Not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*. Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective (and then it signifies the real [element] of an empirical representation), save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as it is affected by the representation” (Kant qtd. in Sartwell).

However, Kant also recognized that beauty cannot solely be considered as being subjective, because “if beauty is completely relative to individual experiences, it ceases to be a paramount value, or even recognizable as a value at all across persons or societies” (ibid.). In this regard, Kant acknowledges that taste is a matter of subjective opinion, but that some tastes are considered superior to others, wherefore he treats “judgments of beauty neither precisely as purely subjective nor precisely as objective but, as we might put it, as inter-subjective or as having a social and cultural aspect, or as conceptually entailing an inter-subjective claim to validity” (ibid.). Yet, he believes that judgments of beauty are based on varying personal experiences and opinions, and as he says,

“By a principle of taste I mean a principle under the condition of which we could subsume the concept of the object, and thus infer, by means of a syllogism, that

the object is beautiful. But that is absolutely impossible. For I must immediately feel the pleasure in the representation of the object, and of that I can be persuaded by no grounds of proof whatever [...] They cannot expect the determining ground of their judgment [to be derived] from the force of the proofs, but only from the reflection of the subject upon its own proper state of pleasure or pain” (ibid.).

However, Kant refers to individual evaluation of beauty as *disinterested judgment*, since he believes that it is important to be unprejudiced to form a genuine judgement that is independent from “the normal range of human desires”, for instance, in the form of sexual or economic desires (ibid.). Therefore, Kant argues that people are often indifferent towards beauty when they experience it, since “one takes pleasure, rather, in its sheer representation in one’s experience” (ibid.). As such, beauty is arguably not solely judged based on its existence, but rather by individual observation and experiences. Therefore, Kant argues that, “in saying it is *beautiful*, and in showing that I have taste, I am concerned, not with that in which I depend on the existence of the object, but with that which I make out of this representation in myself” (ibid.). Thus, this suggests that beauty is not experienced for its own sake, wherefore people arguably do not experience the authentic beauty of the given object, since the individual observes it for his/her own pleasure and delight, thus judging its beauty solely based on the personal experience. For instance, “if you are looking at a lovely woman and considering her as a possible sexual conquest, you are not able to experience her beauty in the fullest or purest sense; you are distracted from the form as represented in your experience” (Shaftesbury qtd. in Sartwell). Similarly, in *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), Santayana defines beauty as *objectified pleasure*, claiming that the judgment of beauty is rooted within the fact that it creates a form of pleasure, which is attributed to the object in question that is ascribed its own agency and subjective nature by its ability to impact the individual. As he claims,

“Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing. [...] Beauty is a value, that is, it is not a perception of a matter of fact or of a relation: it is an emotion, an affection of our volitional and appreciative nature. An object cannot be beautiful if it can give pleasure to nobody: a beauty to which all men were forever indifferent is a contradiction in terms. [...] Beauty is therefore a positive value that is intrinsic; it is a pleasure” (Santayana 49–50).

Hence, this suggests that beauty is in fact rooted within the eye of the beholder rather than in the object itself. Ultimately, in relation to aesthetic judgments, beauty is predominantly determined by subjective opinions, yet it “contains the ‘demand’ that everyone should reach the same judgment. The judgment conceptually entails a claim to inter-subjective validity. This accounts for the fact that we do very often argue about judgments of taste, and that we find tastes that are different than our own defective” (Sartwell). Notably, this draws attention to the way in which beauty can be considered as being culturally constructed, which also explains why some opinions of beauty are considered superior in comparison to others.

Ancient beauty ideals

After having accounted for the complexity of the nature of beauty, this section will introduce the concept of beauty ideals and its influence throughout history in a Western cultural perspective, providing an explanation for the concept, and how it is related to the phenomena of physical attractiveness. Simultaneously, the section will explain the development of beauty ideals in relation to the body, focusing particularly on the influence of Christianity in order to shed light on the origin of Western beauty ideals.

The phenomenon of beauty ideals is categorized as “a limitless desire to see and imagine an ideal human form” (Etcoff 3). Therefore, beauty ideals can be perceived as cultural ideologies that portray a ‘perfect’ human form, which sets a standard for the human body. In this connection, ideal beauty images are powerful because they “perpetuate disappointment in the ‘real’, but also they carry fantasized solutions to our anxieties and insecurities” (Bordo 250). A significant factor, which is also related to the phenomenon, is the fact that “each of us is judged – silently, unconsciously, and nearly instantly – on the basis of everything that goes into the mix of qualities known as ‘physical attractiveness’” (Patzer 2). In order to understand the concepts of beauty and physical attractiveness, scientists have tried to understand and quantify the perfect ideal. This has resulted in the mathematical principle of the Golden Ratio, which frequently occurs in elements that are considered beautiful and attractive. In this regard, Dr. Marquardt has developed a way to calculate the beauty in human faces, based on the principle that beauty can be measured by symmetry, since he claims that they conform to an equivalent ratio that constitutes ideal beauty. As such, he believes that people’s level of physical attractiveness can be measured, which is rooted in the claim that “human beings find the greatest beauty in symmetry” (ibid.). Throughout history, the qualities that constitute physical attractiveness have also been thoroughly studied by theorists from other

faculties, including philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists, emphasizing how physical attractiveness matter in nearly all aspects of life. In ancient Greece, Aristotle acknowledged the influence of physical attraction (PA) when he wrote that “personal beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of reference” (Aristotle qtd. in Patzer 5). In Antiquity, the Greeks studied the improvement of the body and focused heavily on achieving and maintaining a muscular and sculptured physique in order to appear ready for battle. In this relation, mythology has had great influence on the formation of beauty ideals, since myths are essentially narratives that convey “beliefs and values that are shared by, and definitive of, a particular cultural group [...] And illustrate or exemplify the moral values that are venerated by the group” (Edgar & Sedgwick 217). Hence, myths constitute common knowledge systems, wherefore they are often perceived as truths within a particular culture. For instance, in ancient Greece, beauty ideals were dictated by the elite and often influenced by religion. Notably, religion has played a crucial role when defining societal ideals and norms, and “psychologists have categorised it [religion] as a projection of human desire (or even as a kind of neurosis), while political thinkers have understood it to be a means of social control”, which demonstrates that religion is a complex concept that creates opposing opinions about its definition (Edgard & Sedgwick 291). Yet, a simplified definition of religion is arguably that it provides human beings with existential meaning, whilst setting norms and guidelines for the collective and the individual to follow. For instance, religion has contributed to the formation of beauty ideals and one of the earliest examples is Helen of Sparta, who was the immortal daughter of Zeus. In this regard, religious mythology caused Helen’s beauty to become known across the ancient world, since her kidnapping by the young and handsome Paris started a war between men that lasted for ten years, causing her to be known as the “face that launched a thousand ships” (Patzer 9). This myth reveals how beauty and PA have been of great influence throughout history, since Helen represents one of the earliest known female archetypes in terms of beauty in the Western world. Similar to the ancient Greeks, the Romans believed in an absolute standard for measuring beauty, however, instead of focusing on what causes physical attraction, their literature was more concerned with “the ramifications of its absence” (14). Hence, Roman theater and storytelling usually consisted of “invariably detailed portraits of people who lack physical attractiveness” (ibid.). Therefore, the Roman ideal was ultimately characterized as being flawless.

Furthermore, during the Roman Empire, the majority of men were soldiers and the beauty ideal was predominantly measured in relation to men. This was due to the fact that the first Emperor, Augustus, set the ideal of being Roman during his reign. He wanted to be perceived as a father of



Figure 3. *Prima Porta* illustrates the muscular and youthful features of Augustus, emphasizing the masculine ideal.

the empire and his emperorship acquired religious traits, since he became a state God following his death (Blois & Spek 219). In contrast to the Roman Republic, where aging was a coveted sign of wisdom and power, Augustus shifted the focus because he was a young emperor, thereby substituting the traditional ideals with a praise of youthfulness. This standard of male beauty is exemplified in the famous statue *Prima Porta* from 1st Century AD (see Figure 3), which exemplifies the shift in iconography, since it illustrates the young Augustus wearing an armor and a toga that emphasize his muscularity, signaling one of the crucial elements of being a male Roman citizen. The purpose of the statue was to function as political propaganda, emphasizing that

Augustus was exceptional and had a divine status. Moreover, in relation to female beauty, Roman mythology depicted Venus (inspired by the Greek Aphrodite) as the Goddess of love, beauty,

and fertility with a curvy figure that exemplified the ideal woman (Garcia). For centuries, portrayals of Venus became a standard of measuring female beauty, wherefore there have been various sculptures and paintings dedicated to accentuate this ideal. This is exemplified in *The Birth of Venus* from 1445–1510 CE by Sandro Botticelli (see Figure 4). Besides, Augustus was depicted as a descendent of the Goddess Venus, which arguably strengthened his masculine ideal, since being born of a Goddess supported his divine status (Janson & Janson 191).

Furthermore, the Bible also recognizes the power of beauty and PA of men and women, which can be seen in descriptions, such as, “Joseph was handsome in form and appearance” and “in all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks” (Genesis 39:6; 2 Samuel 14:25). This emphasizes how beauty was

considered a gift from God, especially since a general belief was that sin “often hardens the face as



Figure 4. *The Birth of Venus* illustrates the ideal female embodiment by virtue of her being a Goddess.

well as the heart, bringing lines of sadness, despair, guilt and worry” (Ecclesiastes 8:1-10). However, while the Bible recognized beauty as a reward, it also realized the ‘dangerous’ power of PA. For instance, during the Renaissance, the rising influence of Christianity had a great impact on the female ideal. The curvaceous body associated with maternity was still of great importance, however, according to the Bible, women had to appear modest and pure, in order to refrain from lacking discretion and possibly ‘luring’ men’s attention. This is primarily due to the way in which Christianity associates sexuality with sin and treats the naked body as an object of shame and, to some extent, disgust. The main reason behind this belief is rooted within the Christian myth of Adam and Eve and the imagery of the fig leaf, which “immediately conjures up one explanation for clothes – sexual modesty” (Steele 13). Notably, after Eve tempted Adam into sin, and consequently disobeyed God, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and subsequently, “the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments, and clothed them” (ibid.). The experience of lust and their subsequent loss of innocence was followed by a sexual revelation, which meant that it was necessary to conceal their nudity, since “the naked body was suddenly a sexual body” (13). Thus, the punishment of Adam and Eve has created a negative view of sexuality and the naked body, wherefore they have traditionally been associated with sin. As a result, sexual modesty has been expected of women, who had to resemble purity and innocence, exemplified in the Christian female ideal of Virgin Mary, who is an ambiguous, yet important female archetype, because according to Christian myth, she remains a virgin during her entire life and following the birth of Jesus “her hymen miraculously restored” (Lee). The depiction of Virgin Mary emphasizes Catholic piety and the way in which it associates sexuality with sin. Thus, women had to live up to the virtuous ideal of Virgin Mary, wherefore they had to refrain from sexual activity and not draw attention to their bodies. For example, the Bible states in the letter of Paul to Timothy that, “I want the women to adorn themselves with respectable apparel, with modesty, and with self-control not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds” (1 Timothy 2:9).

Interestingly, in Antiquity, statues and paintings were used to emphasize the ideal figure, however during the Renaissance, the Catholic church imposed censorship on the ancient paintings, which meant that artists like Michelangelo had to edit their work by covering the naked bodies, which is exemplified in his famous paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Jones). This illustrates how the Christian view of the body differs from previous perceptions of sexuality, and emphasizes that the Christian ideal of Virgin Mary contrasts the ideal woman of Antiquity. However, their commonality is rooted within the mythical narrative that portrays ideal women as

mothers of ideal men who are fathered by the highest Gods. From these narratives, one can draw the conclusion that the female ideal was to be a mother, which is substantiated by the statues and paintings that continued to portray women as curvaceous and fertile until the end of the 19th century. Moreover, the Bible defines the body from the point of view of traditional dualism between the sexes. In fact, “matriarchy and patriarchy can be regarded as traditional principles for deciding the legitimacy and ownership of bodies [...] There were common homologies between the reproductive work of a creator God, the creative force of nature and the sexual reproduction of bodies in human groups” (Eliade qtd. in Turner 12). In the Genesis story, the relationship between man and woman changes after the Fall and is subsequently characterized by a relationship of domination in which “women were household property and they could not take decisions for themselves” (Turner 12). As such, religion promotes traditional embodiments that appear to be biologically determined, supported by religious mythology and ultimately reinforced in society. Besides, the social value focusing on female chastity arguably explains why there has been more emphasis on modesty in relation to women’s clothing and appearance in contrast to men’s. Ultimately, it is apparent that ancient beauty ideals were defined based on their divine status, however, the following section will expand on the concept of beauty and how it relates to fashion, while accounting for the development of beauty ideals from the 19th century to the present day. In this connection, we take point of reference from the Victorian and Edwardian beauty ideals in the 19th century, subsequently introducing how these ideals have become redefined in the beginning of the 20th century. Afterwards, we will provide a condensed overview of the development of beauty ideals in selected decades until the present day, in order to provide an understanding of how beauty ideals are not static but continuously evolving.

Beauty and fashion

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, clothing was strategically and primarily utilized to secure one’s reputation by preserving modesty and decency, and a general belief was that “adornment and beautification need not – and should not – contradict the primary purpose of dress” (Steele 15). However, with the development of a secular world view, the purpose of clothing came to represent a “complete reversal of the Biblical hypothesis” thereby revealing the underlying argument regarding sexuality (16). In this regard, sociologist, Roland Barthes, argues in his book, *The Fashion System* (1967), how fashion is a language of semiology, since he perceives clothing as a system of signs that can convey meanings about people through non-verbal communication, while

revealing underlying societal ideologies and conventions. To that end, some theorists have interpreted fashion as a reflection of competition, because of the way in which it has been utilized to signify status and power within feudal aristocratic class societies. However, fashion historian, Valerie Steele, argues that beauty and fashion are erotic in nature and her argument stems from a psychoanalytical point of view, claiming that,

“Both the desire to display oneself and the reaction formation of modesty or shame were related to the naked body. The unconscious conflict between exhibitionism and modesty is displaced – shifted away – from the naked body onto clothing, which then functions as a “compromise,” since it both covers the body and attracts attention to it” (25).

Thus, it is important to understand how the idea of beauty also relates to fashion, because they both carry embedded contradictions of being erotic and moral, but also due to the fact that fashion has been utilized to convey the notion of beauty by setting specific standards for the human body. Besides, while clothes conceal the sexual body, it also has a powerful function of being alluring and erotic, which is identified as *the attraction of concealment*, “because it arouses curiosity about the “hidden parts”, and by a process of sublimation, curiosity about “the body as a whole”” (Freud in Steele 42). This principle is based on the notion that when the body is constantly exposed, nothing is left to the viewer’s imagination, in which case the body “tends to be perceived as ordinary, and, eventually, is hardly noticed at all” (Steele 42). Therefore, clothes can be utilized in order to excite sexual curiosity and spark erotic attraction due to the tension between “sexual modesty” and “sexual display”, and the way in which it is “so intimately connected to the physical self” (39). As such, fashion is as a way to maintain an interest in the body, because the variation of styles promotes changing ‘reveals’ that function as exciting renewal. The reason why it is relevant to consider the way in which fashion participates in the formation of beauty ideals is because “dress is so closely associated with the wearer’s personal self-image and his or her social being that it produces a “quality of individuality”” (45). This is due to the fact that a person’s appearance or ‘look’ is not limited to the naked body, but is based on the combination of “a style of dress and adornment, a body and a mode of self-presentation” (47). As a result, clothing can be interpreted as a “second skin” that carries a lot of meaning, because it functions as a guide to the wearer’s personal identity (39).



Figure 5. Hadot's caricature illustrates how much second skin women utilized in order to resemble the female beauty ideal.

Moreover, Steele stresses that the concept of beauty is difficult to define, due to its complex nature, and while beauty is connected to PA, consisting of sexual characteristics that create gender distinction, these ultimately vary and intertwine with other ideals and aesthetics. Consequently, clothing enables the individual to decorate his/her body and showcase it in a way that mediates his/her own personality. This leads to the concept of *the ideal self*, which the ideal body is closely connected to, and fashion arguably functions as a bridge between the two. This is due to the fact that clothing can emphasize and draw attention to the body, consciously or unconsciously creating a particular image that expresses the 'ideal' and best version of the self. This is illustrated in caricature drawing, *Être et Paraitre* (1869),

which illustrates women's use of second skin (see Figure 5). Steele's definition of the ideal 'self' claims that "our appearance is a form of self-presentation, a look that has meaning, involving a compromise between who we are and who we would like to be, our personal self image and a 'self-for-others'" (46). Thus, a person's style signals his/her personality, and the image can vary depending on the social setting, because human beings are constantly "on stage" where they engage in social role playing. Moreover, fashion is a product of the socioeconomic development of a capitalist society, and it has traditionally been associated with women, because, for a long period of time, men predominately wore uniforms. Consequently, women's fashion changed more frequently, wherefore it dominated the creative industry (8-9). In fact, earlier depictions of the ideal full-figured woman, which women aspired to look like, continued throughout the Western world, dictating women's fashion from the late Renaissance to the beginning of the 20th century (Leafloor). Notably, Victorian fashion lasted from approximately 1820 to 1910. Prior to 1820, the style was known as Empire or Regency, and it was characterized by a high waist and a straight dress line that hit an

ankle length and concealed the female curves. However, from 1820, the silhouette changed from being vertical, instead accentuating the curves of the body with corsets that significantly narrowed and constricted the waist, while the skirt became more voluminous, manifesting the ideal female figure of the Victorian era (Steele 51-55). Also, Victorian fashion was inspired by ethereal fantasies, and it was supposed to accentuate the ideal feminine figure, while still emphasizing her virtuous nature. In this connection, the narrow-waisted, curvaceous ideal is often referred to as the Gibson Girl (see Figure 6) (Howard). In contrast to women's fashion, men's clothing typically consisted of long slim pants (pantaloon), and tail-coats that emphasized broad shoulders, however, later in the century, menswear became boxy and loose fitted (Steele 57).



Figure 6. *Portrait of the Artist's daughter, Mrs. J.J. Emery (1938)* by Charles D. Gibson illustrates the idealized beauty of the virtuous Gibson Girl.

In addition, the majority also believed in spiritual beauty, which implied that the face was a reflection of the soul. Therefore, a woman's face had to be pale and proportionate with delicate facial features in order to be considered beautiful. In contrast to men, a woman should have a small mouth, with a softer skin, but also with "large, pure, spiritual eyes" (Humphrey qtd. in Steele 118). Hairstyle was also significant, since short hair was considered "virile and perfectly appropriate to the role of man" (Prevost qtd. in Steele 119). Contrastingly, women had long hair, which was "traditionally associated both with sexual potency and with virginity" (Steele 119). This is arguably connected to reproductive biology, since the state of a woman's hair was of great importance due to the belief that "hair is a visible history of body health, [thus], a woman with unhealthy-looking locks is likely a poor candidate to bear and rear children" (Patzer 6). Moreover, conservative and religious people rejected artificial beauty and the idea of improving upon physical flaws, which they associated with vanity and considered "false" and "deceptive" (Steele 124). They also believed that if a woman was too focused on improving her physical appearance, it could be interpreted as a seductive trick, which deviated from the fact that women should be virtuous and pure. Furthermore, a majority of Victorians considered facial beauty as an "accidental quality" that could not be improved in the same way as the body by using accentuating types of fashion like the corset, which

created the illusion of a ‘perfect’ figure. Additionally, both men and women wore clothing that



Figure 7. Male and Female Day Dress (1827) illustrates how the binary gender division was accentuated by fashion

emphasized the contrasts between their sexual bodies, since a clear binary distinction between the two sexes was a primary characteristic of the Victorian era (see Figure 7). Yet, “the image of Victorian women has long been that of a person both sexually repressed and socially oppressed” (3). This is primarily due to the way in which the physical restriction of corsets has been translated as a symbol of women’s restrictions within society, and the excessive embellishments have emphasized the fact that women’s primary function was to suffer the “torture to look beautiful and respectable” (ibid.). Correspondingly, theorists have often criticized that Victorian women were arguably forced into passivity, due to their strict socialization and their limited function within society, wherefore they “had relatively little

choice other than to make a “profession” of being pleasing and attractive to men” (4). Likewise, arguments have been

made that the main purpose of the restrictive corset and the long skirts was to emphasize women’s infirmity by restricting their abilities to move. Hence, women’s clothes were mainly regarded as beautiful, because they reinforced passivity by illustrating that they were unable to work. However, while fashion has arguably influenced the female role within society, Steele emphasizes that “Victorian fashion revolved around an ideal of feminine beauty in which eroticism played an important part” (3). In this regard, she believes that the opposing arguments generally ignore “the wealth of evidence that the most important motive behind these forms of body transformations was sexual” (19). Ultimately, instead of just being considered as restrictive obstacles, women’s clothing and appearance had “definite connotations of feminine sexual beauty” (ibid.). Therefore, the ideal female body was emphasized by the corset, and the standards of beauty included a voluptuous body with a small waist that accentuated the width of the hips, and “firm and massive” thighs were praised (ibid.). Hence, Steele argues that “Victorian fashion expressed neither the social or sexual repression of women nor male perceptions of them as primarily sexual beings. Victorian women themselves sought to appear attractive – even sexually attractive – within the changing limits of the socially acceptable” (ibid.). Moreover, in the early 20th century, the ideal of feminine beauty changed into a new look known as the Edwardian *Belle Epoque* ideal (see Figure 8), which was an

important predecessor to the ideal of the 1920s. Also, during the late 19th century, the literature on feminine beauty shifted from describing the High Victorian ideal, to a more prominent focus on erotic elements by significantly drawing attention to women's chests (Steele 213-214). The hourglass figure was still the ideal, but it began to resemble the shape of an 'S', with a prominent bust that was significantly squeezed forward, while the hips were pushed back. As such, the ideal body was characterized by a voluptuous figure that consisted of a "bust as full, plump, and firm as you could desire" (218). For instance, advertisements even promised women that they could achieve more voluptuous bodies by claiming that they could improve the size of the bust, and even "make the arms and neck plump and round" (221). In contrast, thin and angular bodies were not considered feminine and attractive, and some even considered "a want of flesh that displays the skeleton under the skin [...] a disgrace in a woman" (Staffe qtd. in Steele 222). In addition, women wore prominent accessories and large jewelry, which emphasized their exquisite and "larger-than-life" ideal that has also been associated with "massive daintiness" (Gernsheim qtd. in Steele 218). Some Edwardian writers described that a new religion had emerged, where women were completely devoted to their physical appearance, since the power of fashion could arguably give them "sexual "power" over men" (Steele 214). These were described as a feminine rite (*Le rite féminin*), which was considered a practice that women would engage in across centuries to achieve happiness and satisfaction (Tramar in Steele 214). As this suggests, women not only focused on their physical beauty in order to please men, but also gained a pleasure from pampering themselves, hence "the feminine rite of self-beautification was auto-erotic" (214). However, the main cause of self-satisfaction arguably came from the knowledge of their power of seduction, and the ability to rule men "through their sexual passion, and not with either feminine submission or the moral improvement of men" (ibid.). Throughout this decade, artificial beauty gradually became more acceptable, wherefore women began to discretely wear more makeup (215).



Figure 8. A corset advertisement from The London Corset Company's Tricot Corset from 1905 illustrates how the corset became more restrictive in order to create the illusion of a more prominent bust, mirroring the Belle Epoque ideal.

The use of cosmetics also enabled women to emphasize their sexual beauty, because the use of rouge and lip salve arguably resembled “the coloring Mother Nature provides at the peak of the fertility cycle” (Patzner 19). However, while women became more aware of the power of their own sexuality and beauty, they were still not allowed to compromise their honor (or the honor of their husbands), wherefore they still had to maintain proper behavior.

A New Era: Introducing the slender beauty ideal

The beginning of the 20th century introduced a beauty ideal that did not resemble the Victorian or Edwardian ideals of beauty. In contrast to previous beauty ideals that were determined by religious myths, the new ideal evolved alongside the development of high fashion, and the corset became a thing of the past as designers of the modern era rejected the “full figure with the constricted waist” (Steele 226). This shift was also influenced by the First World War, which led to a culmination of changes in everyday life, since the previous social order had been disrupted (Lamkin). During the war, women had to wear practical clothing in order to be able to work, which meant that they had become used to wearing less restrictive garments, and the curvaceous ideal that associated female beauty with maternity was subsequently substituted by “a slender, and sinuous body type with smaller breasts, slimmer hips, and long legs” (Steele 227). This groundbreaking ideal was associated with youth rather than traditional womanhood and, supportive of this ideal, women’s fashion was characterized by the raised empire waistline and a straight silhouette that disguised the curves, promoting and popularizing the slender figure (see Figure 9). In addition, the look was a frontrunner to the ideal of the 1920s, and while some historians have described this feminine ideal as boyish, it is rather supposed to be perceived as youthful, since “the post-war disillusionment with the “old” people who had sent the young off to die may also have contributed to the apotheosis of youth” (239). Thus, it is important to note that this ideal female body “was not supposed to be asexual, androgynous, or masculine” (238).

Furthermore, cultural attitudes changed alongside social evolution,



Figure 9. Russell Patterson's drawing, *Where there's smoke there's fire* (1920), illustrates the revolutionary female body image and the casual attitude that dominated during the 1920s.



Figure 10. Milton Green's photograph of Marilyn Monroe illustrates her erotic allure by exposing part of her skin in a sexualized manner, creating a contrasting parallel to the virtuousness of traditional female ideals.

which meant that there was less focus on modesty in comparison to previous decades. However, while the new beauty ideal allowed for a more comfortable and relaxed socialization, women arguably experienced a new form of restriction. Thus, “the change from the admiration for the ample, mature female body to that of the slim, young, active body meant partly that the corset was internalized in the form of dieting, while the need to look young fed the growing beauty industry” (241). The slender body ideal continued until the late 1940s when the fuller figure of pin-up models and actresses gained popularity, which was supported by doctors who had also “demonstrated a correlation between a woman’s hourglass figure and her reproductive ability”

(Ellison in Patzer 16). Subsequently, the beauty ideal in the

50s was categorized by the blonde bombshell look, featuring

a curvy figure, bleached blonde hair, pale skin, and red lips as represented by famous Hollywood actress, Marilyn Monroe (see Figure 10). Monroe’s iconic look turned her into a famous sex symbol, and combined with her popularity, she ultimately became an idealized female embodiment (Churchwell 25; 62). Additionally, the first issue of Playboy magazine, released in 1953, featured women with similar figures, thus creating a beauty ideal that was intended to please the male gaze. However, feminists have later rebelled against this male-oriented and sexualized ideal that was popular amongst the Post World War II generation (Bordo 250). Yet, the ideal only lasted until the 60s when the fashion industry set a new beauty standard as exemplified by the popular, British fashion model, Twiggy (see Figure 11), which “seemed to symbolize a shift away from the corsets and pinup girls of years past” (Howard). In this connection, philosopher, Susan Bordo, argues that thinness became a permanent beauty ideal following the 60s and that “the lean body seems to represent a rejection of the fifties ideal of cuddly,



Figure 11. This fashion advertisement image of the iconic model Twiggy showcases the shift in beauty standards from the curvaceous look of the 50s to a new beauty ideal in the 60s that was characterized by a more lean figure.

reproductive womanhood, and an assertion of a post-feminist, nondomestic identity” (250). However, while women no longer had to ‘suffer’ physical restriction from clothing garments, various media images and societal pressure continued to reinforce the idea of an ideal body, wherefore “foundation garments were replaced by diet and exercise” (McClendon qtd. in Howard). Thus, the body ideal of being slender continued throughout the 80s, but the thin ideal known from the 20s and the 60s was substituted with an emphasis on athletic and toned bodies. Therefore, supermodels of the 80s were no longer skinny like Twiggy, but were instead tall and lean with



Figure 12. This Calvin Klein advertisement illustrates the heroin chic beauty ideal, exemplified by the iconic model, Kate Moss.

muscular definition, as represented by supermodel Cindy Crawford (Howard). However, the ideal of the 90s shifted back to focusing on the skinny silhouette and suddenly it was considered the 90s “moment of the waif”, most famously embodied by supermodel Kate Moss (see Figure 12) (McClendon qtd. in Howard). In this connection, her emaciated look was referred to as “heroin chic”, which was popularized and granted iconic status by the house of Calvin Klein, who was a trendsetter of this iconic beauty ideal.

However, during the 90s, a binary division was created across the media with a strong opposition within body

representations, “with extreme thinness celebrated in fashion imagery while larger bodies are highlighted as

“unhealthy” and bad in reporting on obesity” (ibid.). In this relation, eating disorders, despite being increasingly common, did not have the same awareness as it does in contemporary society. In this regard, it was feminists, such as Susie Orbach and Kim Chermin who created awareness regarding how “‘the tyranny of slenderness,’ ‘body image disturbance syndrome,’ ‘binge/purge cycling,’ ‘bulimic thinking,’ fear of fat and other defining features of eating disorders had become, in the second half of the twentieth century, more culturally normative than had been recognized” (Bordo 248). Also, Bordo argues that the nature of eating disorders is not a definition, instead the answer is rooted within three histories; the first and the last being relevant to elaborate on. The first history is defined as one of “the body, and the mutable, ingenious, and sometimes self-destructive ways it searches for meaning, security and power in the world” (244). Subsequently, she describes the third as “a history of consumption in the socio-economic sense, which has produced and continues to nourish particular forms of disordered relations with food, body image, and the regulation of hunger

and desire” (ibid.). Further, Bordo stresses the fact that unlike other courses of disease, which have biologically distinctive markers of disorder, eating disorders are rooted within a psycho-cultural and psychological dimension. However, the historic and cultural context ultimately influence whether or not dietary restriction is considered a disorder, since what is commonly referred to as eating disorders have also been considered as religious, spiritual, or political acts. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi came close to death after having starved himself during a political protest, and “the medieval nuns who fasted to achieve spiritual purity have been called “holy anorexics” because of their obsession with self-denial and transcendence of bodily need” (Bell qtd. in Bordo 244). In both cases, starvation dieting is considered a positive action of averting selfishness, and no one would accuse either Gandhi or the medieval nuns of having an eating disorder (Bordo 244). Further, in 1973, psychoanalyst, Hilde Bruch, was one of the first to identify *perceptual disturbances*, which is defined as a distorted self-image where the individual overestimates body size and considers him/herself as overweight despite how thin one may be, which was later identified as “the hallmark of anorexia” (Bruch in Bordo 245).

Furthermore, the first paradigms for understanding and treating eating disorders were ignorant in terms of racial and class differences, primarily because the patients who could afford to seek treatment came from white middle or upper-middle class families. Also, a typical misconception of the anorexic paradigm is that, in order to have an eating disorder, one has to be thin, and due to the limited representation of patients, “anorexia became stamped in many people’s mind as a rich, spoiled, white girl’s disease” (Bordo 245). Consequently, “left out the anorexic paradigm were the growing numbers of young African-Americans and Latinas who were struggling with body image issues” (246). Thus, due to the fact that women of color were not represented amongst the patients who suffered from eating disorders, many specialists have “postulated that black women were permanently ‘immune’ to eating problems” (ibid.). In addition, Western society has continuously promoted a cultural stereotype that portrays African-American women as proportionally larger in size in comparison to white women. So, while this has arguably granted black women a cultural permission to be large, it has also created a stigmatizing effect. For instance, Retha Powers, editor of the anthology, *Black Silk: A Collection of African American Erotica* (1989), emphasizes how she struggled with her weight when she was a teenager and went to her high-school guidance counselor who told her that she “shouldn’t worry because “black women aren’t seen as sex objects”” (Powers qtd. in Bordo 247). This illustrates how Western society has often marginalized women of color, not to mention the striking similarity between racially exclusive assumptions regarding patients

who suffer from eating disorders, and the way in which the beauty industry has traditionally promoted racially exclusive beauty ideals. Besides, despite the fact that Naomi Campbell became a famous African-American supermodel during the 80s, her silhouette did not resemble the average, African-American woman. Moreover, in 1999, *Vogue* signed supermodel, Gisele Bündchen (see Figure 13), who became the poster girl for the lingerie brand, Victoria's Secret, and was considered "the return of the sexy model" due to her sultry look and her healthy appearance with a golden tan and toned figure. This marked a shift into the new era, since her look manifested a new beauty ideal that contrasted the pale and skinny models in the 90s ("Gisele Bündchen"). Ultimately, the shift into the 20th century reveals how beauty ideals are no longer dictated by religious mythology, since their formation is instead rooted within the realm of capitalism, predominantly in the fashion and beauty industry, which is also the case in contemporary society.

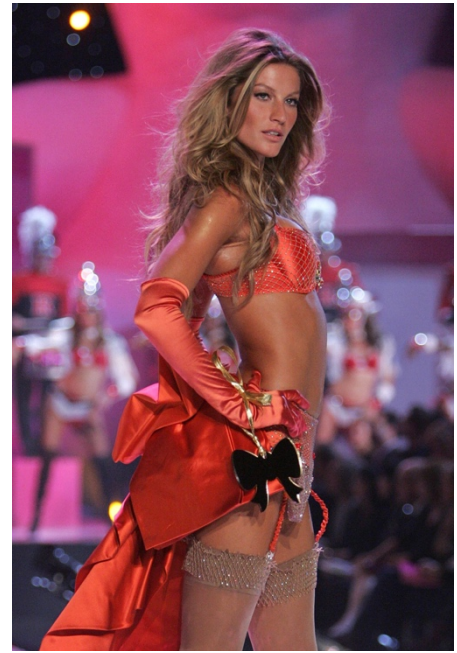


Figure 13. This photograph of Gisele Bündchen taken at a Victoria's Secret fashion show illustrates the toned and tanned figure which became popular during the early 21st century.

Beauty ideals in contemporary society

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a rising focus on advocating body positivity and promoting alternative body manifestations on digital media platforms as an opposing response to society's favoritism of specific body types, wherefore it has been referred to as a "frontier for body-positive expression" (McClendon qtd. Howard). Thus, as a result of body activism on social media, "the American ideal has shifted from curvy to androgynous to muscular and everything in between" (Filucci qtd. in Howard). However, as mentioned previously, beauty ideals have traditionally been dictated by the elite, hence "while individual preferences vary, people generally agree about what is attractive in others; if that were otherwise, then the nature of the faces that regularly appear on magazine covers would vary far more widely than it does" (Patzner 13-14). Therefore, despite the attempt to create diversity by promoting alternative body manifestations on social media, the beauty ideal remains dictated by mainstream society, heavily influenced by the fashion and beauty industry and popular culture. For instance, since the first episode of the reality TV-show, *Keeping up With the Kardashians*, aired in 2007, the Kardashian sisters have gained

popularity across different media platforms, continuously being in the spotlight where they have manifested a “new curvaceous body ideal” (Howard). Besides, when Kim Kardashian was seen naked on the cover of Paper Magazine in 2014 (see Figure 14), it created a stir on social media, but subsequently caused women to aspire to resemble her look (Hoff). In this relation, Bordo emphasizes that “the idealized combination of large, usually cosmetically enhanced breasts, on lean and liposuctioned bodies offers the sexual allure of the traditionally feminine body without its ‘soft’ passivity or connotations of motherliness” (250).

Notably, this body ideal has caused a lot of women

to aspire to achieve a similar body with curves in the ‘right’ places, consequently leading to social media platforms that are fueled by instructions on how to get ‘perfect’ curves and a tight stomach area. This relates to the fact that slenderness and restrictive eating is typically associated with an admirable ability to exercise control of one’s urges and desires in a world of excess, wherefore it “imparts autonomy and moral superiority only where others are prone to overindulgence” (Bordo 245). However, the fashion industry has often been blamed of being responsible for creating unrealistic beauty standards that result in a poor self-image amongst women. This is primarily due to statistics, which reveal that, “the average model is 5’10” and weighs 107 pounds; [while] the average American woman is 5’4” and weighs 143 pounds” (249). This significant difference may cause women to feel dissatisfied with their bodies, due to the lack of realistic body representations within the fashion and beauty industry. This issue is also one of the primary reasons why body positive activists fight for realistic and natural representations within the fashion and beauty industry. On the contrary, the idea that fashion,



Figure 14. The picture of Kim Kardashian on the cover of Paper Magazine illustrates a beauty ideal that has created controversy, yet gained immense popularity in contemporary society.

“Should progress towards greater naturalness is antithetical to the phenomenon. Fashion is never “natural”. It is not that “fashion” has failed to “accept” the human body, but that people use fashion to create images of themselves. Just as

the individual cannot be conceived of apart from society, so also is the body itself a product of “The glass of fashion and the mould of form” (Steele 48).

Nevertheless, Bordo highlights a problematic shift in contemporary society, where the standards have become even more unachievable, emphasizing that while editors of fashion magazines and different brands have argued that fashion is not a reflection of reality, but a creative field that brings visions to life (249). However, they have arguably failed to realize the powerful effect of advertising images and the way in which they function as manipulative visuals that are “arranged precisely in order to arouse desire and longing, to make us want to participate in the world they portray” (ibid.). In fact, retouched images have created a fictional beauty ideal that has formed a society where “we as a culture, as a society, are obsessed with size. It’s become connected to our identity as people” (McClendon qtd. in Howard). Hence, the cultural obsession with physical appearance is unavoidable due to the continuous promotion of an exclusive beauty ideal in which,

“The thin models are thinner, the athletic bodies are more tightly toned, cosmetic surgery has firmed and enlarged breasts, lifted the buttocks, and suctioned the bulges from celebrity bodies, and advertisers have accepted digital enhancement as a routine method of selling the possibilities of flawless skin and cellulite free thighs. So long as what we see in the mirror is mediated by these images, which by virtue of their ubiquity declare themselves a norm, we are bound to be unhappy with what we see and to find it defective” (Bordo 249).

However, during this cultural obsession, the majority seems to forget that beauty ideals have changed across time and that the current ideal is “an opposition to whatever the *old* look was: If the old look was full, the new look will become slim” (Steele 47). This indicates that beauty itself is socially constructed and determined by culture, rather than being a physical given. However, according to anthropologist, Laura Betzig, “humans are programmed to recognize the shape of health” (Betzig in Patzer 16). Thus, in contemporary society, where there is an increased focus on physical health, being overweight has negative connotations, because people have a tendency to judge the personalities of others based on physical indicators of health. In this relation, studies have revealed that “overweight students are very aware of their bodies; often they share the same biases toward obesity harbored by their classmates of average weight: namely, that they are lazy, stupid,

sloppy, and ugly” (Patzner 66). This also emphasizes that people often have a tendency to internalize criticism, which contributes to a negative self-image.

Moreover, despite the predominant emphasis on female beauty, internalized criticism does not only apply to women. In fact, modern society has also set high standards for men, causing it to be “a confusing time to be a man: New standards of beauty are emerging and the advertising industry is constantly showing the athletic ‘ideal’ body” (Graham). According to beauty expert, Victoria Burchanan, men are “now more body-conscious than ever [...] They are increasingly pursuing a toned and muscular physique” (Burchanan qtd. in

Graham). This is due to the growing trend of utilizing hyper-athletic male models and football players in the advertising business (see Figure 15), which has “grown significantly in recent years and resulting in men today being just as sexualised in advertising campaigns as women” (Duckett qtd. in Graham). Traditionally, manufacturers and advertisers primarily focused on women due to a fear that an “anxiety of being seen as gay would prevent heterosexual men from showing too obvious interest in their bodies” (Bordo 251). However, Calvin Klein was a pioneer when he “brought the sinuous, sculpted male body out of the closet, and made everyone, gay and straight, male and female, succumb to its classic, masculine beauty” (ibid.). In contrast to the anxiety of being perceived as

homosexual, men’s rising focus on their bodies has created another form of anxiety where,



Figure 15. This underwear advertisement illustrates the famous football player Cristiano Ronaldo modelling for his own brand, CR7, while exemplifying a contemporary, idealized male beauty ideal.

“Being the object of gaze, as men are finding out, has a flip side: the anxiety of not measuring up. Now, young men are looking in their mirrors, finding themselves soft and ill defined, no matter how muscular they are. Now they are developing the eating and body image disorders that we once thought only girls had. Now they are abusing steroids, measuring their own muscularity against the

oiled and perfected images of professional athletes [and] bodybuilders” (Hall qtd. in Bordo 251).

Thus, contemporary society has created general feelings of inadequacy in both men and women, who do not feel represented within various media images, predominantly in fashion, fitness, and beauty advertisements. In this case, *A Picture of Health* study from 2016 found that “41% of boys feel that the portrayal of men in media images is unrealistic” (“How body image is portrayed in the media”). Also, a large global research study conducted by Dove has documented that “70% of women still don’t feel represented in media and advertising [...] 67% of women are calling for brands to step up and start taking responsibility for the stock imagery they use” (“Dove Reveals”). Subsequently, health experts warn about the possible dangers of the ‘selfie’ and social media culture, stressing how they can negatively influence body images, since “the rise of Instagram and YouTube has allowed for the bodies of everyday people to be idealized, not just the bodies of supermodels” (Howard). As a result, people are more encouraged than ever to focus on their appearance, causing the beauty industry and social media platforms to emit ‘promise’ cures that will lead to beauty and youth. In fact, people’s pursuit of higher levels of PA has created a “\$160-billion-a-year global industry ranging from weight-loss preparations, cosmetics, skin and hair care, and perfumes to cosmetic surgery, health clubs, and hormone injections. Americans spend more money each year on beauty enhancements than they do on education” (Patzner 7). As a result, advertisements and magazines unite with social media where celebrities, bloggers, and beauty-influencers constantly spread the message that it is possible to achieve a ‘perfect’ body. Additionally, there is a rising focus on fitness within society, alongside beauty ideals that claim to promote a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise and healthy eating habits. However, the fitness influencers that promotes these ideals are often retouching their pictures and physically altering their bodies with cosmetic surgery, which ultimately raises questions that challenge their health claims. Yet, people are provided with instructions, such as booty building workouts, keto-diets, and skincare routines that they can follow step-by-step in an effort to achieve what mainstream culture regards as the ‘perfect’ appearance. In other words, “they teach us how to *see*, educate our vision in what’s a defect and what is *normal*, provide the models against which our own bodies and the bodies of others are measured. Perceptual pedagogy: ‘How To Interpret Your Body 101’. It’s become a global requirement” (Bordo 251). Essentially, encouraging people to live a healthy lifestyle that consists of taking care of oneself with regular exercise, less sugar intake, and

maintaining a good personal hygiene is not the root of the problem. In fact, a lot of these encouraging suggestions are beneficial, because they can be considered healthy, if people exercise moderation. In this regard, Bordo argues that the problem that causes distorted body images is the fact that “so much of what we enjoy and benefit from is part of an industrial/cultural machinery that encourages excess” (252). As a result, the things that could be regarded as part of a ‘healthy’ lifestyle are instead used to create disordered consumers who are influenced by exaggerated mindsets, unable to set healthy limits and strive towards moderation. Yet, an overload of information creates feelings of guilt and promotes negative self-evaluations that can ultimately lead to eating and/or body image disorders.

Another element is the contradiction that exists amongst advertisements, which mentally affects the individual, since these contradicting images create inner conflicts of desire. Hence, “it’s easy to see why so many of us experience our lives as a tug-of-war between radically conflicting messages: to binge, give in to our desires on the one hand, but to get rid of the results – at the gym, over the toilet bowl, through a crash diet – on the other” (253). Furthermore, while the fashion and beauty industry attempt to be more inclusive, they do not “address the effects, on ordinary consumers, of the mass images in which their bodies, and the bodies of celebrities, are deployed. With the exception of the occasional token nod to ‘plus-size’ bodies (sizes 10-12) on ‘America’s Next Top Model’ and a scattering of ads for Dove and ‘Just My Size’, these images continue to be digitally trimmed and toned” (252). Ultimately, while beauty ideals cause human beings to strive to look a certain way in order to gain social validation, the body is also frequently used as a method of classification, where it is symbolically used to express different meanings. In this connection, the body also provides a “wealth of metaphors about power, sex and difference” (Strathern qtd. in Turner 4). As a matter of fact, the body has different functions apart from its physical capabilities, which is the case regarding its appearance that also reinforces thoughts about power and authority. As a consequence, “the human body has been a persistent and prominent source of metaphors for social and political relations throughout human history” (Turner 4). An example is the way in which dieting not only refers to a regulation of the physical body, but also how it is frequently used as a metaphor to describe corporative or political matters. For instance, “lean and mean corporations require healthy management teams [...] In neo-conservative ideology, central government is an excess – a form of political obesity – that needs to be pruned by cut-backs” (ibid.). In addition, during election campaigns, politicians often have photograph sessions that portray them as healthy, “jogging, cycling and swimming to keep fit in readiness to orchestrate the fitness of government”

(ibid.). This emphasizes that the body has to look a specific way in order for it to signify that a person is competent and ‘worthy’ of acceptance and respect, while highlighting how dieting is a powerful symbol that “stands for a political regime, a regimentation of society and a government of the body” (ibid.). Notably, the theme and symbolic meaning of regulating the body to exemplify discipline and authority is powerful, because it reinforces certain beauty ideals that are centered around health and fitness, in turn creating negative connotations about people who do not resemble this ideal. Finally, it is problematic to explain how or why ideals of beauty have changed, and why people tend to mirror themselves in a physical ideal that does not resemble their actual body. Hence, Steele argues that “the concept of beauty is sexual in origin, and the changing ideal of beauty apparently reflects shifting attitudes toward sexual expression” (5). However, while beauty is connected to physical and sexual attraction, it remains more complex than being limited to eroticism. Therefore, “although it seems clear that the cultural conception of beauty contains a very significant sexual element, beauty is not reducible to sexual attraction. If it were merely a question of sexual characteristics, the ideal of physical beauty would not change so much over time” (41). Ultimately, in contemporary society, the guidelines of measuring beauty have been significantly blurred, and to some extent, beauty has become a matter of subjective opinion, yet the power of cultural imagery cannot be denied. Despite what the individual motivations may be to achieve a particular look, fashion and beauty always signify a social attribute, which is arguably why they are granted to much importance in a society that praises self-realization.

The Beauty Myth

The theme of beauty has not only been reflected upon within the fields of philosophy and aesthetics of earlier decades, but has also been the cause for contemplation in modern times, which is arguably due to the rapid development of beauty and body images in the 20th century. Consequently, in 1991, feminist author, Naomi Wolf, wrote the book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, which involves “the idea that anything about beauty can be called “natural” is the myth that Wolf sets out to deconstruct” (Gottschall et al. 175). Wolf recognizes that there are biological differences between men and women in terms of beauty, because the beauty myth has created a narrative, which implies that “women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary” (Wolf 12). However, Wolf dismisses this narrative by stressing that beauty “is a

currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keep male dominance intact” (ibid.). Therefore, she believes that the beauty myth is not about women by any means, “it is about men’s institutions an institutional power” (13). Thus, the myth “exists to “naturalize” a social construction that serves the interest of the patriarchy” (Gottschall et al. 175). Also, the beauty myth dictates that the concept of beauty is universal and constant, but Wolf dismisses that belief because she argues that, “its ideals change at a pace far more rapid than that of the evolution of species” (Wolf 12). Therefore, beauty cannot be regarded as a fixed, objective, and universal concept that is unchangeable, because history proves that beauty standards have evolved throughout time (13). Additionally, “the contemporary ravages of the beauty backlash are destroying women physically and depleting us psychologically” (19). As such, the beauty myth oppresses women psychologically by subjecting them to endless images of beauty framing it as the ultimate success, inducing feelings of guilt and failure if they do not resemble these images. In other words, “the modern arsenal of the myth is a dissemination of millions of images of the current ideal” (16). Therefore, the constant exposure to the beauty myth, due to technology, causes modern women to feel as if they are unable to measure up to the existing beauty ideals in spite of their growing power. As described by Wolf, “more women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves *physically*, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers” (10). Moreover, Wolf argues that “before the Industrial Revolution, the average woman could not have had the same feelings about “beauty” that modern women do who experience the myth as continual comparison to a mass-disseminated physical ideal” (14). In fact, Wolf describes that “inside the majority of the West’s controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret “underlife” poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control” (10). Therefore, despite the constitutional and tangible limitations that women have overcome, “the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us” (ibid.). Thus, according to Wolf, because women have requested power, patriarchy has employed the myth to compromise women’s progression (20). Hence, “we are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth” (10). As such, the myth is also used to limit each woman’s respective demand for power.

Furthermore, in order to hold women in its grip, the beauty myth divides and creates tensions between women, wherefore it has made youth a preferred quality, because with age comes power, and to undermine this power, older women and the relationship between generations must be oppressed. In other words,

“Youth and (until recently) virginity have been “beautiful” in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance. Aging in women is “unbeautiful” since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span. Most urgently, women’s identity must be premised upon our “beauty” so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air” (14).

Thus, the myth is utilized in the attempt to create tension between generations, in order to remain a significant weapon against women. Moreover, Wolf calls the beauty myth a “hallucination” and “contradiction”, because even though modern women are showing more independency and individuality, beauty is still a single standard ideal, thus filling people with unintentional fears (17). To that end, Wolf argues that “this hallucination is necessary and deliberate, [which] is evident in the way “beauty” so directly contradicts women’s real situation” (ibid.). Conclusively, Wolf notes a correlation between the beauty myth and the Iron Maiden, an ancient torture device that trapped its victims in a body shaped casket decorated with a cheerful young woman, where the victim would either die of hunger or of metal spikes inside the casket. Interestingly, Wolf uses this imagery to describe how the beauty myth oppresses and compromises women, stating that “the modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel, and euphemistically painted. Contemporary culture directs attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women’s faces and bodies” (17). Hence, the application of the beauty myth upholds patriarchal power relations in society.

THE STUDY OF THE HUMAN BODY

In order to examine the way in which body manifestations are problematized by beauty ideals and regulations of human behavior, it is relevant to touch upon the development of the field of body

studies, in order to primarily understand how different ways of perceiving the body raise questions regarding embodied practices in contemporary society.

During the 20th century, there has been a growing interest in the human body, and according to sociologist, Bryan S. Turner, the academic field of body studies within cultural studies, social sciences, and anthropology has developed due to “fundamental changes in the contemporary relationship between bodies, technology and society” (1). During the last few decades, body studies have received a significant amount of attention, “culminating for example in 2009 with recognition by the American Sociological Association of ‘the body and embodiment’ as an area of professional growth and academic relevance” (ibid.). The body is relevant to study because it is a complex unit that consists of more than its biological functions, hence the most common way to understand its complexity is to divide it into different layers, which constitute a physical layer, and an underlying “social layer that is situated on top of it” (Mol 120). In this connection, biology studies the physical aspects of the body, whereas the field of social sciences examines the way in which the body is shaped in different social and cultural environments. This is relevant in relation to beauty ideals because they are instated and reinforced through societal and cultural discourses, since they set a standard for the human body. However, there are also studies that suggest that favoring attractiveness is even more ingrained in human nature than merely being caused by cultural factors. For instance, based on the principle of symmetry, various experiments have concluded that infants who were two months or older preferred attractive faces over unattractive faces (Slater et al. 345). In that relation, since infants are not able to fully comprehend what is culturally and socially considered attractive, their preferences imply that the notion of beauty could also be an evolutionary bias. Furthermore, there has been conducted several studies, which have concluded that attractive bodies in various aspects are treated more favorable in society. Correspondingly, the book, *The Psychology of Physical Attraction* (2008), written by Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham provides several examples hereof,

“Attractive individuals are judged as more honest, less maladjusted and disturbed, happier, more successful and more sociable than less attractive individuals.
Attractive people are also reported to be afforded more personal space, more likely to win arguments, more trusted with secrets and generally considered better

at everything in comparison with less attractive individuals” (Yarmouk; Cash et al.; Dion; Dion et al.; Cash & Soloway; Horai et al. in Swami & Furnham 11).

These findings indicate that contemporary society engages in various discriminatory actions when favoring some people based on their physical appearance. This prejudiced societal dynamic is referred to as *the attractiveness bias* or *lookism*, and the terms do not only cover how attractive people receive favorable treatment by society, but also how “unattractive people are denied opportunities” (Swami & Furnham 159). Besides, society and culture have created a myth, concerning how beauty equals ‘good’. Consequently, from a young age, children are exposed to stereotypes, which “play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of members of the culture to others”, because stereotypes are simple and unnuanced renditions of people that are heavily influenced by cultural attitudes towards specific behaviors and expressions of a certain embodiments (Edgar & Sedgwick 336). This is exemplified through the prince and princess stereotypes who embody heroism, bravery, goodness, and kindness, while being described as beautiful, fair, and handsome. Notably, these discourses are represented in various Disney films, including *Snow White* (1937) *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). The movie, *Snow White*, further exemplifies another stereotype that is the diametric opposite to the young female princess, which is the “ageing female grotesque”, exemplified by the evil witch who desires to become the fairest of them all (Richardson & Locks 43). In these narratives, it is reflected how beauty is typically equated with good, whilst being ugly is associated with evil, wherefore the attractiveness bias becomes even further indoctrinated and accentuated within these representations that echo the Christian notion that evil and sin mask a beautiful face. However, the pressure to strive for a specific type of beauty is a contributing factor to various psychological disorders, since “there is an enormous amount of pressure (especially) on women to relentlessly pursue attractiveness and youth and so the illnesses anorexia, bulimia and body dysmorphic disorder are often seen as the disheartening results of this attempt to live up to cultural expectations” (33). Yet, as mentioned previously, men also suffer from the pressure of living up to beauty ideals. For instance, in some subcultures, such as Metropolitan gay culture, the focus on the ideal male body is sometimes so extreme that it is described as body fascism (Richardson & Wearing in Richardson & Locks 22). Nonetheless, despite their sexual orientation, both men and women suffer from the pressure of trying to attain the ideal types of bodies. However, for men, the focus is more on achieving a muscular physique, which the Adonis complex and muscle dysmorphia both are

examples of.

Furthermore, theorists who contribute to the field of body studies have different attitudes towards the regulation of the body and human embodiment. For instance, German philosopher, Arnold Gehlen, postulates that human beings are unfinished animals. By his definition, human beings are deficient, unfulfilled beings and he believes that they are,

“Biologically poorly equipped to cope with the world into which they are involuntarily thrown. They have no distinctive or specific instinctual equipment to a given environment, and require a long period of training in them to become creatures of ritual and discipline; their very survival requires self-discipline, training and self-monitoring. In order to manage this world openness (*Weltoffenheit*), human beings have to create a cultural world to replace or to supplement their limited instinctual legacy” (Gehlen in Turner 3).

In contrast to the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, who criticizes institutional power, Gehlen argues in favor of institutions by claiming that human beings are “characterized by their *instinctual deprivation* (*Instinktarmut*) and therefore they do not have a stable structure within which to operate” (ibid.). As such, he believes that social institutions enable humans to function in their physical environment because,

“It is through these institutions that human life becomes coherent, meaningful and continuous. In filling the gap created by instinctual deprivation, institutions provide humans with relief (*Entlastung*) from the tensions generated by undirected instinctual drives. It is as if humans have an abundance of needs but are poorly equipped to satisfy them, and hence social training is essential to survival. Habit and ritual are central features of relief, because it reduces the expenditure of effort otherwise necessary for motivation and control in everyday life” (ibid.).

However, with modernization, de-institutionalization, and de-traditionalization, “objective and sacred institutions suffer erosion, and modern life becomes subjective, contingent and uncertain” (Turner 3). According to Gehlen, institutions are thus taken for granted and eventually “merge into the background of social action, while the foreground is occupied by reflexive, practical and conscious activities [...] The background becomes less reliable, more open to negotiation,

increasingly precarious and routinely an object of reflection” (Gehlen in Turner 3). As a consequence, Gehlen believes that people cannot experience the feeling of *entlastung*, because institutions become fragile due to consistent reflections and changes, which ultimately have psychological consequences, since human beings cannot experience relief because they no longer have a reliable and definite background. As a result, “people have personalities that are fluid and flexible, like the institutions in which they exist” (Turner 3).

Contrastingly, Foucault examines the body from a historical and sociological point of view, focusing on social control and the way in which power controls bodies. He makes a distinction between *the discipline of the individual body* and *regulatory controls* by focusing on how institutions define and classify human beings, regulating human behavior in modern Western society. In addition, he particularly investigates the influence of *governmentality*, which is fueled by his research on discipline and sexuality, theorizing the government of the body and opposing institutions of power and the occurrence of social control through individual self-discipline (Foucault in Turner 2). Likewise, in the book, *Body Studies – the basics* (2014), Niall Richardson and Adam Locks address how the concept of the panopticon has been used as a metaphor for how power occurs and operates in contemporary societies, generating self-discipline amongst its members (16-23). This theory has also been examined by Foucault in relation to society’s surveillance and control of human beings. In this regard, the panopticon is an Amphitheatre of prison cells that are centered around a warden’s tower, and the design of the prison offers an ideal way of surveilling its inmates who come to learn that there are under constant surveillance and scrutiny (18). The prisoners become fully aware of the fact that they are being watched, which causes them to internalize the gaze and consequently turn into “self-policing subjects” (ibid.). Thus, “after a period of time, it doesn’t even matter if there actually is a warden in the tower of surveying the cells as each prisoner will have adopted the regime of self-discipline” (ibid.). According to Foucault, society utilizes the same policing scheme when in relation to its citizens, influencing people’s behavior and their bodies. According to him, the panopticon logic is much more efficient at disciplining people, than if society were to punish them with physical force. In his own words, “there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (Foucault qtd. Richardson & Locks 18-19). Additionally, Foucault further argues that the body is part of what he calls a political field, since “power relations work through and on the body by demanding

“appropriate” performance and iconography” (Foucault in Richardson & Locks 16). Ultimately, he elaborates on said power relation between the body and society from a historical outset of corporeal torture when he says,

“But the punishment-body relation is not the same as it was in the torture during public executions. The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property. The body, according to this penalty, is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions. Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty” (Foucault 10-11).

Thus, the body is still monitored, punished, and disciplined, however, this is achieved by other means than through physical torture. Therefore, one can argue that the individual is “punishing” and exposing the body to physical pain, when people are actively self-policing their bodies by altering their corpus to fit certain ideals. So, the gaze of society has become increasingly immense, which means that even though people are not directly in contact with the societal gaze, they are still modifying their behavior to act according to body norms.

Moreover, the panoptic gaze is said to influence three things in terms of people’s body images and performances (Richardson & Locks 22). The first is to *normalize*, which is done when certain body types and performances are reinforced and continuously displayed, wherefore these discourses subsequently turn into a standard of how ‘appropriate’ bodies are supposed to be. Richardson and Locks refer to celebrity culture as an example. because it showcases certain body types and measurements that are considered the norm, due to the vast expose to these iconographies, rather than the exception (ibid.). Secondly, the panoptic gaze *homogenizes* because in the process of a standardization of certain body ideals, there has been limited room for variation (ibid.). For example, in terms of ethnicity and the lack of racial diversity in Western media culture, there has been a tendency for some racial minorities to mimic some aspects of the standardized beauty ideals that are mostly based on Caucasian individuals, which is seen when African-American women bleach and straighten their hair. Lastly, the gaze *idealizes* because when a standardization of certain body types is installed, it will often become the focus of desire and put on a pedestal.

Moreover, in contemporary society, the idealized body is framed in a way that appears to be easily attainable, which is exemplified in various magazines or websites (23). Nonetheless, even though the body is undergoing a considerable amount of pressure due to the societal gaze, there are also examples of people trying to resist embodying ‘appropriate’ bodies. This is referred to as a *bodily transgression*, and according to Richardson and Locks there are three elements in the process of bodily transgression worth noting (24). The first involves how “the transgressor is, by the very act of transgression, showing a form respect for the disciplinary control” (ibid.). For example, a person who shows up at work in their pajamas despite there being a formal dress code would arguably challenge the norms, which indicates that there must be a form of respect about the installed norms in terms of appearance, otherwise the transgression would not be valid or needed in the first place (ibid.). Additionally, they another example, which entails the transgressive act of blasphemy. Here, only a person who credits and recognizes Christianity would be offended about using the name of God in vain (ibid.). Secondly, Richardson and Locks argue that in the act of bodily transgression, the question regarding how long the act of transgression is able to be sustained is bound to occur. This is because even though a person challenges the norms in terms of appearance, he/she is prone to end up in a subcultural category by simply mirroring ideals in other subcategories of appearance, which means that the act no longer can be considered transgressive (25). For example, if a student dyes his hair purple, and thus challenges a school’s policy about appearances, he could be perceived as belonging to a subculture that has its own regulations, rules, and requirements, which includes purple hair, wherefore the act would not be deemed transgressive (ibid.). As such, his untraditional hair color would simply serve as normative behavior in the given subcultural context. In order to remain transgressive, the student would have to continuously engage in further transgressive acts or bodily modifications. Consequently, “transgression can only have limited power as it may well defy the dominant but only moves the subject into a subcultural group in which this defiance is read simply as the norm” (ibid.) Finally, the third point, which is described as being the most significant, is that “hegemonic culture will always respond to these acts of subcultural defiance by incorporating their styles and aesthetics into the mainstream” (ibid.). So, even though the transgressor’s intentions initially would be to challenge certain body norms, they may subsequently end up contributing to the formation of new ones. Besides, Richardson and Locks utilize the example of tattoos, which was formerly perceived as being an act of bodily transgression, yet in contemporary society they have become mainstream and a common way of decorating the body (ibid.).

On a different note, German sociologist, Norbert Elias, takes a similar standpoint to Foucault in his studies of the body seen in relation to the norms of civilized behavior, examining cultural etiquette and focusing on how interpretations of the body and personality structures are manifestations of socialization processes and internal self-regulations that are influenced by group interdependencies (Elias in Atkinson 51). Additionally, the body has also been an important focus in the field of social anthropology, as seen in the studies conducted by Mary Douglas, in which she examines moral symbols related to the quality of being pure versus being contaminated. Douglas particularly investigates how different ways of regulating the body have also been associated with ritual purity, and one of her main concerns was “the physical signification of gender differences through dress codes” (Turner 13). In contemporary society, it can be argued whether or not the concept of ritual purity still applies, since it consists of a “secular system of rules to regulate the body and our collective rituals have become vague; they no longer have the capacity to instill fundamental beliefs through dramatic rituals and emotional effervescence” (ibid.). Contemporary embodied practices are still rooted within rituals, however religious rituals have been substituted by secular rules that are rooted within morality about right and wrong behavior. As argued by Turner, “it is impossible to think of the body without thinking of highly ritualized practices [...] What emerges from the sociology of the body is the notion that conscious embodiment is situated in taken-for-granted rituals that constitute the habitus of the everyday world” (14). Moreover, embodiment is also influenced by our understanding of ‘the self’ in a social world that is constantly changing. In this connection, Turner argues that rapid technological changes raise fundamental questions about life, and as a consequence, human beings are placed in a position of contemplating the meaning behind the constant changes. In other words, “it is hardly surprising therefore that the changing nature of our own embodiment raises questions of a serious theological character” (11). In fact, within the sociobiology of the body, religion plays a significant role in terms of the fundamental understanding of a connection between religion, sexuality, and the body. Notably, sexuality is generally rooted within the attraction to other human beings, manifested in a desire for (bodily) connections, yet “sexuality cannot be reduced to instinctual behavior since the relationship between the drive and the object is arbitrary” (Edgar & Sedgwick 310). Traditionally, sexuality has also been an indicator of gender differences by assigning distinctively different norms to the sexes based on their genitalia (ibid.).

Moreover, religious guidelines have resulted in ritualistic cultural practices that have traditionally created gendered embodiments. For instance, while The Old Testament includes “an

important mythical role for a generative Father who is the patriarch of nations”, it also promotes a “deeply negative understanding of women and sexuality” (Turner 11). As a result, women used to be excluded from public cultic events, since both menstruation and childbirth were considered as being ritually unclean. However, The New Testament provided the son of Jesus in order to create the concept of redemptive salvation and “a major difference of course between Christianity on the one side and Judaism and Islam on the other is the clear rejection of the notion in the latter cases that God can have a body” (12). Notably, traditional Western societies rely on a patriarchal world view that is rooted within Christianity, hence “the contemporary secularization of family life, sexuality and the sexual division of labour has had a profound, and largely corrosive, consequence for orthodox religious world-views” (11). However, contemporary society challenges traditional embodiments, since ritual embodiments and cultural practices have changed throughout history. As a result, “there have been (and continue to be) major political and social issues over the ownership and the authorship of bodies. Who owns bodies? If there is self-ownership, does God own our bodies through his divine fatherhood or does the state own them with the growth of the modern state?” (12). This also raises a question of originality, as it can be questioned whether the body is original in its initial form, or whether or not originality arises from personal embodiment.

In this connection, feminist studies have contributed significantly to this discussion within the field of body studies, and one of the biggest influences is Simone de Beauvoir who claims that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (de Beauvoir qtd. in Storey 167). De Beauvoir distinguishes between sex and gender, the first being biologically determined and separated from the latter, which she believes is culturally created. As such, this challenges the traditional perception of embodiment, since it indicates that society shapes people into human beings through ritualized and reinforced practices. This also challenges the traditional understanding that embodiment is determined by matriarchy and patriarchy, which is demonstrated in the view on “sexuality in terms of homosexual practice, the role of women in society, the status of women in the family, same-sex marriage, the recognition of gay men in the US military, and adolescent sexual behavior” (Turner 11). Therefore, the question regarding ownership and authorship of bodies is interesting to discuss, when examining the way in which body manifestations have become not only a matter of political activism, but also a way of empowering the self in contemporary society, predominantly through personalized and ritualized embodiments on social media platforms. This is the case because digital technology, as well as medical techniques, have expanded the possibility of body expressions within contemporary culture. Yet, the technological development has in turn “given the human

body a problematic social and cultural status” (1). Thus, “in contemporary society, the body is in one sense disappearing; it is being converted into an information system whose genetic code can be manipulated and sold as a commercial product in the new bio-technological economy” (14). Ultimately, this is rooted within the fact that the human body is no longer fixed to what has traditionally been perceived as biological boundaries, since technological developments and scientific advancements have enabled human beings to alter the human biology. As a result, the body may therefore be viewed as a template that can be built on; a foundation which can be adjusted and molded into something that hardly resembles the original body. Therefore, due to the development of digital and medical technology, it is interesting to examine the difficulties that the human body is currently facing, as well as how beauty ideals influence personal and ritual embodiments in contemporary society.

Queer theory

In order to analyze the complexity of body manifestations, it is relevant to incorporate queer theory, because it encompasses the idea that the gender is a fluid construction, wherefore it disregards traditional binary expressions and understandings of the body. Hence, queer theory allows for an alternative perspective on gender, sexuality, and the body by deconstructing traditional body norms, thereby challenging society’s beauty ideals that are rooted within traditional masculinity and femininity. In this connection, the concept of deconstruction originates from structuralism and in the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, utilizes deconstruction in order “to dismantle the structures of meaning so as to expose the premises on which they are built and to reveal the concepts of objectivity and linguistic anatomy as constructs” (Edgar & Sedgwick 88). Thus, deconstruction is an approach within the field of post-structuralism that aims at revealing that opposites, such as subjects/objects, good/evil etc. are relative, historical and cultural constructions. Therefore, deconstructivism aims at marginalizing these differences and challenge societal notions that appear as given truths, because it based on the understanding that there is a constant negotiation of meaning, wherefore there presumably does not exist any fixed meanings.

Moreover, in the book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2015), authors, Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, argue how “queer theory seeks to locate Queernees in places that had previously been thought of as strictly for the straights. [...] Indeed, part of the project of Queer is to attack ... the very “naturalness” of gender and, by extension, the fictions supporting compulsory heterosexuality” (Burston & Richardson qtd. in Storey 167). In that regard, the main influence of queer theory is Judith Butler’s work, *Gender Trouble* (1990), since it examines the alleged

‘naturalness’ of gender (Butler in Clough 95; Storey 167). Notably, Butler is inspired by Simone de Beauvoir, who also makes a distinction between sex and gender, “suggesting that while biological sex is stable, there will always be different and competing (historically and socially variable) ‘versions’ of femininity and masculinity” (de Beauvoir in Storey 167). However, Butler identifies this distinction as an issue, because it presupposes “that there are only two biological sexes (‘male’ and ‘female’), which are determined by nature, and which in turn generate and guarantee the binary gender system” (Butler in Storey 167). On the contrary, Butler believes “that biology is itself always already culturally gendered as ‘male’ and ‘female’, and, as such already guarantees a particular version of the feminine and the masculine. Therefore, the distinction between sex and gender is not a distinction between nature and culture” (ibid.). Thus, she claims that gender is not a manifestation of sex, because “the category of “sex” is itself a *gendered* category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural” (Butler 143). Hence, according to Butler, there is no distinction between sex and gender because they are both culturally determined and created performatively. Also, in her words, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (43-44). This suggests that femininity and masculinity are expressions of standardized human behavior, which cause them to appear as normative performances. However, Butler argues that “there is no identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (33). Therefore, defining a human as being either a girl or a boy does not reveal said person’s gender, but rather creates a gendered subject, and “thus begins a continuous process of subjectification in which ‘it’ is required to conform to culturally intelligible (i.e. socially acceptable) norms of maleness and femaleness” (Storey 169). Butler claims that gender identities do not exist prior to culture, because they are the result of cultural performativity. In her words,

“If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the

strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 180).

As such, Butler maintains that both gender and sex are the results of performativity, which essentially makes the notions of femininity and masculinity attributing pawns that merely exist in order to hide the true nature of gender as being performative. In that relation, Butler's "discursive framework heavily influenced two decades of writing on the body, and posited culture as doing just that, writing the body" (Pitts-Taylor 171). Additionally, she makes the argument that the reason for this binary division of male and female is essentially to please the institution of heterosexuality. According to Butler, "there is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality" (Butler 143). In that relation, professor of cultural studies, John Storey, claims that the reason behind the supposed 'truth' about sex and gender stems from

"A variety of discourses, including those from parents, fashion, educational institutions, the media, will all combine to ensure our conformity to the reiteration and citation of gender norms. In this way, the performance of gender creates the illusion of an already existing gendered self (supposedly guaranteed by biology)" (Storey 169).

However, in line with Butler's argument, professor of sociology and women's studies, Patricia Clough, claims that "the body is never given; it is performed" (95). Moreover, Butler expands on the notion of both gender and sex as being performative, by stating that all gender identities are imitations of each other, indicating that there is no original. This argument portrays identity in a postmodern way, where it is constantly "switching among a range of different roles and positions, drawn from a kind of limitless data bank of potentialities [...] A series of masks, roles, and potentialities, a kind of amalgam of everything which is provisional, contingent, and improvisatory" (Barry 139-140).

Furthermore, the word 'queer' is arguably a difficult term to disentangle from its judgmental history, however, the word is being reclaimed by people who have long been subjected to persistent and harsh discrimination, wherefore "individuals and communities now more vigorous in an

insistence on ending both narrow categorizations and repressions based on sexual diversity” (Honeychurch 342). Moreover, a queer position is also more inclusive in terms of acknowledging all identities, “both heterogeneity, and the possibilities of mutual identifications across, difference” (ibid.). Hence, the term queer can be used “to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non-(anti-contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (Doty qtd. in Storey 171). In that connection, it can be argued that “heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments” (ibid.). Therefore, all types of sexual and gender identities can have queer receptions of things, because it,

“Stand[s] outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function. [...] As a gay man your cultlike devotion to *Laverne and Shirley*, *Kate and Allie*, or *The Golden Girls* has less to do with straight-defined cross-gender identification than with articulating the loving relationship between women” (Storey 172).

As such, queer reception opens the door for a dynamic and fluid understanding and appreciation for things, unrelated to one’s sexual orientation or gender. Furthermore, queer theory also includes a variety of work involving history, sociology, philosophy etc., which “seeks to place the question of sexuality as the centre of concern and as the key category through which other social, political and cultural phenomena are to be understood” (Edgar & Sedgwick 277). Therefore, queer theory is argued to examine sexual identity and its development in society from the past to the present, hence “sexuality is thus to be presented as a meaningful activity or achievement that is continually undergoing negotiation and dissemination, rather than as a mere natural fact” (ibid.). Similar to post-structuralism, the core of queer theory is to shatter the binary opposition, revealing that “the distinction between paired oppositions is not absolute, since each term in the paring can only be understood and defined in terms of the other, and, secondly that it is possible to reverse the hierarchy within such pairs, and so ‘privilege’ the second term rather than the first” (Barry 138). Therefore, queer theory seeks to remove the internalized notion within binary oppositions that ‘one’ embodiment is superior to the ‘other’.

THE BODY – AN EXTENSION OF THE SELF

Moreover, in order to uncover the conflict that people can experience when their bodies do not mirror society's beauty ideals. In this connection, it is relevant to include psychological theory regarding the internal structure of the self to understand how it is influenced by external factors. Subsequently, the section will also draw upon sociology in relation to how human beings are influenced by their social interactions, and how it molds their embodiments. This is accounted for in order to understand how beauty ideals not only effect the body but also the internal self.

Notably, George Herbert Mead, an American sociologist, philosopher, and psychologist, theorizes about the origin of the self and believes that it emerges and is cultivated through two childhood stages: *play* and *game* (Mead in da Silva 5). In the play stage, the child learns how to put himself/herself in the shoes of another person and as a consequence gains a self by taking *the role of the other* (ibid.). Subsequently, in the game stage, the child has “to take the role of not only a single individual, but of all the individuals involved in the game; moreover, children have to learn how to coordinate their actions according to the rules of the game” (ibid.). Additionally, in this stage the self is said to be fully developed because in the organization of different attitudes and rules of the game, the structure of the self comes to reflect the structure of the community (50). Consequently, the self ultimately originates from the interaction with other people. Therefore, one can argue that through interacting with other people, the self becomes relevant, because socializing with other people creates a distinction between ‘them’ and ‘I’. In that relation, it is also in the game stage that one of Mead's most well-known concepts called *the generalized other* originates, defined as “the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self” (154). Thus, taking on the role of the generalized other, which involves certain social attitudes, enables the individual to internalize these social norms and incorporate them into his/her own self (Mead in da Silva 5). For example, when playing a game of hockey, a person must abide by the rules of the game and further try to adopt the perspective of his fellow teammates in order to play the game collectively. Similarly, when people interact with various social groups, there are also norms, values, and expectations, which the individual must adhere by in order to successfully engage and interact with other people. In that connection, Mead further introduces the concept of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ which is the internal structure of the self. The ‘I’ is “the spontaneous response of the individual to the social situation”, whereas the ‘me’ is described as being “a socially structured, conscious self-image that we build by seeing ourselves through the eyes of the others” (5-6). Furthermore, the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ are both components of the self, consisting of more factors than

just the organization of social attitudes (Mead 173). In order to make the distinction between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’, Mead utilizes the example of memory. Therefore, when one actively engages in self-reflection that is the phase of the ‘I’. Contrastingly, when the individual in a past sense comes to remember the ‘I’, it transforms into the passive ‘me’ (Mead in da Silva 51). Hence, “the ‘I’ disappears at the very moment when it performs its function; once it presents itself as a past actor, it ceases to be an ‘I’ and becomes a ‘me’” (ibid.). Thus, the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ are perceived as internal processes that constitute the self. In that regard, the ‘I’ can only be accessed by the individual through the recollection of his or her former actions, wherefore the ‘I’ becomes a somewhat unknown concept to others as well as oneself (ibid.).

Furthermore, professor at Lakehead University, Ryan McVeigh, also argues that in relation to Mead’s hypothesis, “the social emergence of mind depends on human physiology” (1). McVeigh suggests that the body is a vital component in this regard, when he says that Mead’s “work is thus emblematic of a strong characterization of embodiment. [...] It is clear that Mead was committed to placing the body at the center of mind, self, and society” (13). In that connection, the social experience existentially and physically requires a body where the individual becomes self-aware. In this regard, Richardson and Locks exemplify how the self requires other individuals in order to develop when saying, “after all, if somebody was living in desert island isolation how would that person know if he/she was tall or short, fat or thin, good looking or plain? We only gain a sense of self, a sense of identification through interaction with culture” (4). This also indicates that the self is a reflection of other people, and society as a whole, because the self is only relevant when it coexists alongside other living creatures. In other words,

“The ‘I’ and the ‘me’ are but phases of a larger process, the self, which in turn is but a phase of an even larger process, society. Each phase can only be fully understood by reference not only to the process in which it is located, but also to the larger process in which the former takes place: general changes in the societal values and norms can thus be seen to influence transformations at the level of individual consciousness and vice versa” (Mead in da Silva 6).

This reveals that the self can, to some extent, be perceived to be a condensed form of societal and cultural values or merely an individual reflection of society or culture, correlating with how people also abide by norms, ideals, and values in relation to beauty ideals. Moreover, if the self is constructed on the basis of society, one can find it logical and convenient to abide by and strive for

the societal installed norms to avoid rejection and ridicule. In addition, the worldview of centering the body in terms of the human experience correlates with the field of phenomenology. This field can be translated into “the study of phenomena” and is described as being both a philosophy or a tool to gather data on the “premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness” (Richardson & Locks IX). Besides, Richard and Locks stress that people understand and perceive the world through the body as a filter, wherefore the latter must be considered a necessary component of phenomenology. In other words, “we come to understand our relation to the world via the positioning of our bodies” (ibid.). Furthermore, the body is also used to express and articulate our identity through religion, gender, sexuality, race, class etc. (ibid.). However, in these subcategories of social identities, there will often exist a bodily ideal that society encourages the individual to strive for. For example, if you are an Islamic woman and abide by traditional norms, the bodily expression or physical appearance would manifest itself by dressing modestly and covering oneself. Finally, according to Mead and phenomenology, the body is an apparatus that ensures the genesis of the self, while also functioning as a device that both mirrors culture while reflects the individual’s identity.

The self-reflexive process

Similar to Mead, Anthony Giddens is a British sociologist, who also theorizes about the self and identity. In that relation, he has developed theory about modern society, which he classifies as high or late modernity (Giddens 1). Modernity is predominantly influenced by three characteristic dynamics, which include separation of time and space, disembedding mechanisms and institutional reflexivity (20). Separation of time and space entails “the condition for the articulation of social relations across wide spans of time-space, up to and including global systems” (20). In that regard, pre-modern time and space were more inherently fixed, whereas time and space in contemporary society is no longer as linked as before. Thus, technological advances and the shift towards globalization exposes individuals to various external influences. The second concept is disembedding mechanisms, which “separate interaction from the particularities of locales” (ibid.). The concept of institutional reflexivity is “the regularised use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organisation and transformation” (20). Notably, in modernity everything is open for reflection including reflexivity itself. As a result, science and factuality is constantly challenged by reflection, and with the constant flow of new information and ideas nothing appears to be fixed or certain. Giddens argues that this erratic and ever changing

condition is not beneficial for the individual because it creates existential uncertainty for humans (21). As a consequence, he argues that people in modernity are prone or conditioned to feel a sense of personal meaninglessness and that life has nothing worthwhile to give (9).

Furthermore, modernity is characterized by how it is no longer predominantly bound by tradition, which means that the individual is not attributed a social identity based on factors, such as kinship, sex, or locality, but are forced to engage in a more comprehensive self-reflexive identity process in an internal and singular manner (Giddens & Pierson 15; 18). However, this does not entail that the concept of tradition no longer has any hold, but merely that the individual is now exposed to different cultural influences, which ‘complicate’ the individual identity work, since it provides him/her with more options and choices to consider (16). The increased and comprehensive identity work is referred to as the reflexive project of the self “which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” (Giddens 5). Also, he states that it is not the individual’s behavior or the responses from other people that determine one’s identity, but rather the ability to consistently maintain a particular narrative (54). This narrative, the individual’s biography, cannot remain fully fictional but must continuously integrate external factual events in order to socialize with people in their everyday world (ibid.) Moreover, one’s self-identity is described as being both fragile and robust. Giddens considers it fragile because the individual’s biography is a single narrative among many possible narratives about the self, and robust because “a sense of self-identity is often securely enough held to weather major tensions or transitions in the social environments within which the person moves” (55). In addition, due to certain cultural and social factors the content of an individual’s self-identity is bound to vary (ibid.). This appears evident since an individual’s circumstantial condition provides referential markers but also dictates how much access one has to global referential markers. Giddens also touches upon how the local and the global dynamic interfere with and affect these referential markers or lifestyle choices. In his own words,

“In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course, there are standardising influences too – most notably, in the forms of commodification,

since capitalistic production and distribution form core components of modernity's institutions" (5).

Here, he speaks to how globalization influences the local community to such an extent that individuals are compelled to constantly self-contemplate, since every choice one makes reflects one's lifestyle and identity. Additionally, marketing and advertisement, which are highly facilitated by the media, also interfere with the individual's self-identity. For example, this is evident on various social media platforms, where various lifestyles are displayed and can be argued to be used as a kind of referential marker for the individual. However, since commodification and capitalism are said to be integral components of modernity, the self is somewhat also turned into a commodity, when famous people utilize their own name as a brand. The consumer society that modernity situates the individual in, is also fostering narcissism since consumerism is "a society dominated by appearances" (172). Further, consumption targets and speaks to the alienated feeling modernity has brought with it, claiming to be a solution since it promises that various material items are able to provide popularity, attractiveness, and beauty (*ibid.*) Thus, Giddens argues that "all of us, in modern social conditions, live as though surrounded by mirrors; in these we search for the appearance of an unblemished, socially valued self" (172). Besides, he expands on how the body plays a crucial part of one's self-identity when saying, "regularised control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained; yet at the same time the self is also more or less constantly 'on display' to others in terms of its embodiment" (57-58). Here, he postulates that the body is directly relevant to what narrative the individual promotes (218). As such, the individual's physiological corpus is bound to be exposed to this increased reflexivity, since the body reflects and is an extension of the internal self. This is the case in relation to the concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality, which are especially debated, revised, and redefined in contemporary society. For instance, the individual is faced with the question about whether or not their internal self-perception about their gender correlates with their external and physiological sex. In that relation, modern society has issued the individual with more choices in this area, since people are able to change their external narrative regarding sex through gender reassignment surgery, so it coheres with the individual's internal narrative. This differs from traditional societies where aspects, such as gender and sexuality, were fixed concepts and parts of one's given and inherited identity that were typically based on kinship and sex. As Giddens argues, "the body used to be one aspect of nature, governed in a fundamental way by processes only marginally subject to human intervention. The

body was a ‘given’, the often inconvenient and inadequate seat of the self” (218). Hence, since the body is often still perceived as an inadequate representation of the self, one can argue that the need for bodily alteration is fueled by the pursuit of self-actualization, which would entail reaching the socially valued self. Contrastingly, traditional society was more fixated on the collective, whereas modernity focalizes on the individual, making the intensified self-reflexive project imperative. Moreover, Giddens refers to sociologist, Alberto Melucci, who explains why there is such an increased attention on the body in modernity, when arguing,

“The return of the body initiates a new search for identity. The body appears as a secret domain, to which only the individual holds the key, and to which he or she can return to seek self-definition unfettered by the rules and expectations of society. Nowadays the social attribution of identity invades all areas traditionally protected by the barrier of ‘private space’” (Melucci qtd. in Giddens 218).

For example, since the body has been somewhat released from certain societal expectations, the terms masculinity and femininity no longer have to play a fixed or integral part of one’s identity. This can be argued to create an even more puzzling and comprehensive self-reflexive identity process for the individual, because femininity and masculinity have traditionally served as idealized guidelines for how the body should act and appear.

THE NARCISSISTIC SELF

Following Giddens’ argument that consumerism fosters narcissism, the following chapter will provide an understanding of narcissism, in order to be able to analyze the possible negative effects of beauty ideals and body obsessions in relation to whether or not they encourage narcissism.

Evidently, narcissism is a character trait that arises when a person claims him/herself as love-object, “or, to put it in classic Freudian terminology, when the libido takes its own self as love object” (Symington 1993, 29). This occurrence is also described as an unconscious choice, meaning that an alternative object has been rejected. In this relation, psychoanalyst, Neville Symington, argues that the rejected object is to be called the *lifegiver*. The lifegiver is a mental object vital to our positive mental health, which has been rejected, and from his perspective, this is the definition of narcissism (2007, 209-211). In Symington’s words, “friendship is a psychological reality that exists in two people, and yet it is not entirely contained in them. The *lifegiver* is an object of this

kind. [...] As another analogy, take the word “shape”. A shape cannot exist except in the material that fashions it, but it is not the material itself” (1993, 37). Therefore, Symington argues that accepting the lifegiver is the foundation for good mental health, yet the essence of narcissism is a refusal of the lifegiver (2007, 212). As a result, the narcissistic individual has rejected the lifegiver, which occurs in infancy. At this stage, the mother is the source of survival in terms of food, drink, and protection, making the infant entirely dependent on her, wherefore she is the lifegiver (1993, 41). In Symington’s words,

“As with all realities, the self is inherently relational. It is always in relation of other selves in the human community. From birth, even from conception, this is so. If when the baby was born there was no tendency in it to find its way to the mother, to the breast, it would die. This relational nature permeates all the parts of the self in the way that gravity permeates all matter. We shall come to see, as we go on, that the core of narcissism is a hatred of the relational – a hatred of something that is inherent in our being” (18).

Thus, a narcissistic person refuses the lifegiver object, because of the relational, dependable nature of a relationship, wherefore he/she does not relate to other people, despite not being able to survive without social relations. In this regard, the narcissistic individual must appear to be “able to manage human intimacy, and the pathway that is open is through erotizing the self. Essentially, this means that figures from the outside have to be enticed to be the individual’s source of action” (52). This means that “by refusing the *lifegiver*, the individual has refused the inner principle of coherence, so he has the threefold problem of generating action, binding himself into a unity, and contending with the outside world” (53). Therefore, Symington argues that a person with narcissistic traits attempts to hide them, because people generally do not wish to flaunt their self-centeredness, and therefore narcissism has to be “flushed out”. In other words, “when people begin to grasp the narcissistic elements in themselves, these elements will already be losing their hold” (61). However, feelings of immense guilt following the refusal of the lifegiver makes the individual feel terrible about his/her own self. Essentially, “embracing the lifegiver is an act of acceptance of the self, its refusal is a rejection of the self. It is an act of self-castration” (2007, 212). Therefore, the lack of ability to generate genuine emotional responses, as well as the guilt over having refused the lifegiver, cause the narcissistic individuals to mask their narcissistic traits, presenting themselves as

an ordinary “nice guy” or “nice woman” (212). Eventually, this façade will become problematic, since all of the energy used in this process will leave little devotion to a potential partner, because “the person who is intimate with the narcissistic individual finds, over time, that he is bereft of any love or generous impulses coming from him” (213). In fact, narcissistic individuals lack mental health objects to help guide them through changes in their lives, wherefore they are dependent on others to perform those functions for them (ibid.). This means that narcissistic people have to compensate for their inner emptiness by creating temporary excitement and energy into their system. Hence, they are “often manipulating and exploiting people and viewing others as tools to make themselves look and feel good” (Twenge & Campbell 19). Here, erotization is usually at the surface within narcissistic people who have no basis for action from inside themselves, and thus “action occurs through being ‘rubbed’ and stimulated, as it were, from outside, and this is why it is never long-lasting” (Symington 2007, 213). Additionally, a narcissist’s superficial mindset regarding relationships can be explained as such, “in place of love for another person, put love for the self; in place of caring, put exploitation; and to commitment, add “as long as it benefits me” [...] Narcissists’ approach to relationships is simple: it’s all about them” (Twenge & Campbell 213). This is also why narcissists are unable to have sincere, loving relations with others, because they do not value those types of commitments (19). Instead, narcissists value short-term commitments, because they offer short-term benefits wherefore narcissists do not need to get too invested. Hence, a narcissist can often relate to the following,

“First, it feels good. It is fun to gamble, binge drink, have an illicit sexual relationship, eat glazed donuts, or take notepads from the office. Second, destructive behaviors usually have short-term benefits and long-term costs. When you gamble, you get the fun and excitement of going to the casino and playing cards. But you risk the long-term costs of losing all your money, destroying your marriage, and losing your self-respect” (54).

Evidently, this destructive behavior can also have severe consequences for other people, and “like other destructive behaviors, narcissism is a “time-delay trap” – it tempts you with some good outcomes up front and then hurts you in the end” (54-55). Also, one of the reasons why narcissists enjoy short-term commitments is because they have short-term benefits, because “it feels good. It’s fun to look at yourself in the mirror and think, “I am so frickin’ hot,” and even better to post

pictures of yourself online and have people comment, “you are so frickin’ hot”. It is exciting to be in the spotlight enjoying your fifteen minutes of fame” (55). However, the negative effects of these benefits are that narcissists become miserable long-term, since they have ruined both their professional and personal relationships because of their egotism (ibid.). A possible explanation behind this is that “at the intrapersonal level, narcissists predominantly attribute successes to themselves; however, if they fail, they externalize blame to others” (Nevicka). This can also contribute to the fact that other people will distance themselves from narcissistic people, leaving them with no significant relationships. In fact, this move away from long-term couple connections to short-term unions is a pattern that narcissistic people are more prone to show (Buss & Smith; Reise & Wright in Barnett & Sharp 327).

In addition, psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm expands on narcissism for it to include all variations of “vanity”, “self-admiration”, “self-satisfaction”, and “self-glorification” (Fromm qtd. in Lasch 1991, 31). Essentially, “a narcissist is full of herself, has a big head, is a blowhard, loves the sound of his own voice, or is a legend in her own mind” (Twenge & Campbell 18). Thus, narcissistic people believe that they are superior to others socially, physically, intellectually, and creatively (19). As such, “at the core of narcissism lies a pervasive sense of uniqueness, grandiosity, and a continuous desire to align the real self with the overly positive ideal self” (Nevicka). Moreover, Lasch argues that narcissism “signifies a loss of selfhood, not self-assertion. It refers to a self threatened with disintegration and by a sense of inner emptiness. To avoid confusion, what I have called the culture of narcissism might be better characterized [...] as a culture of survivalism” (Lasch 1984, 57). Hence, this survival disposition and the culture of narcissism imitate the rejection of moral and emotional obligations (75). This also indicates that narcissism is more a matter of self-hatred rather than self-admiration (Lasch 1991, 31). Besides, Lasch considers that the intentional decision, made by authors, to disregard the psychological and social dimensions of narcissism has proven to be an oversight, since they fail to investigate the characteristics connected to pathological narcissism, which are presented less intensely in the everyday life of American society. Characteristics, such as,

“Dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings. Nor do they discuss what might be called the secondary characteristics of narcissism: pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor” (33).

Lasch believes that because of the decision to disregard these traits, authors deny themselves a foundation on which to create relations between a narcissistic individual and specific attribute patterns of current society, “such as intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, deteriorating relations between men and women” (ibid.). Thus, for these authors, “narcissism remains at its loosest a synonym for selfishness and at its most precise a metaphor, and nothing more, that describes the state of mind in which the world appears as a mirror of the self” (ibid.). Yet, as according to Lasch, narcissism is more complicated than being reduced to mere selfishness.

Different types of narcissism

In the article, *Grandiose narcissism versus vulnerable narcissism and impulsivity* (2018), it is suggested that two types of narcissism can be identified as *grandiose* and *vulnerable* (Maleza & Kaczmarek 61). In that relation, grandiose narcissism “is characterized by dominance, aggression, self-assurance, arrogant attitudes, inflated self-esteem, exploitativeness, entitlement, and a strong need for the admiration of others” (Hendin & Cheek; Miller et al. in Maleza & Kaczmarek 61). Additionally, grandiose features include, “relatively functional intrapersonal self-relevant features such as confidence, dominance, extraversion, high self-esteem, and low emotional distress” (Nevicka). In contrast, vulnerable narcissism “is characterized by fragile self-esteem, emotional instability, introversion, negative affect, hostility, need for recognition, entitlement, egocentricity, and preoccupation with grandiose fantasies, oscillation between feelings of superiority and inferiority” (Hendin & Cheek; Miller et al. in Maleza & Kaczmarek 61). In that regard, vulnerable narcissism includes “more dysfunctional intrapersonal features which include introversion, low self-esteem, and high emotional distress” (Nevicka).

Also, within the category of narcissism, *self-absorption* is presumed as a relevant element, and the article, *Narcissism, gender, and evolutionary theory* (2017), distinguishes between two kinds of self-absorption, namely *private* and *public* self-absorption (Emmons; Raskin & Hall qtd. in Barnett & Sharp 327). In this regard, the article explains how,

“Private self-absorption reflects excessive thoughts about one-self, which can interfere with an individual’s ability to concentrate and perform daily tasks. Public self-absorption reflects excessive thoughts about what others are thinking about

oneself, which often leads to critical thoughts about oneself” (McKenzie & Hoyle qtd. in Barnett & Sharp 326).

Therefore, in contrast to private self-absorption, people who are prone to public self-absorption will seek behavioral cues from others, yet they will not seek their approval (ibid.). Moreover, narcissism contains both normal and pathological levels, and in his book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1991), Lasch discusses pathological narcissism as being increasingly more normalized, because “narcissism appears realistically to present the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions therefore tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone” (1991, 50). In this regard, Symington also notes that “none of us is free of narcissism, and one of the fundamental aspects of the condition is that it blinds us to self-knowledge” (1993, 10). Moreover, Lasch states that those conditions also modify the family, which ultimately mold the fundamental structure of a child’s personality. Therefore, “a society that fears it has no future is not likely to give much attention to the needs of the next generation [...] [and so] the modern parent’s attempt to make children feel loved and wanted does not conceal an underlying coolness” (Lasch 1991, 50). Thus, the combination of emotional detachment as well as the attempt to reassure a child of his/her superior status within the family have damaging effects on the family, wherefore it is “a good prescription for a narcissistic personality structure” (ibid.). Further, Lasch argues that regular self-absorption should be distinguished from narcissism, and that narcissism cannot be described as either feminine or masculine, since “it denies any knowledge of sexual differences, just as it denies the difference between the self and the world around it” (1984, 20).

Moreover, Lasch maintains that because narcissism causes blurred lines between others and the self,

“It expresses itself in later life both in the desire for ecstatic union with others, as in romantic love, and in the desire for absolute independence from others, by means of which we seek to revive the original illusion of omnipotence and to deny our dependence on external sources of nourishment and gratification” (Lasch 1984, 245-246).

In this connection, he claims that in order to escape the complexities of narcissism, one has to create transitional objects that can re-establish a substitute feeling of connecting with the mother. This leads to what is described as purposeful activities that are intended to give straightforward pleasure and satisfaction, including artistic creation, lovemaking, and play. Moreover, he expresses that purposeful activities are not necessarily rendered pathological, when they operate as a way to compensate people for their previous losses, unless they attempt to deny those losses (247). In other words, “it becomes pathological when it tries to keep alive the illusion of omnipotence: for example, by assuring us that we can make ourselves absolute masters over nature and thus want for nothing” (ibid.). Thus, narcissism not only creates problems on an individual level but also on a collective level due to the sole focus on the self.

Narcissism on social media

In contemporary society, social media has become a major component for people in their everyday lives as a means of communication and expression, which has arguably increased narcissistic tendencies in American culture. This is demonstrated in the book, *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009), where Twenge and Campbell state that “two core cultural ideas are at the root of the narcissism epidemic: that self-admiration is very important, and that self-expression is necessary to establish one’s own existence” (289). Therefore, the increase instances of narcissism exemplify a negative change in contemporary culture due to the large emphasis on self-admiration (38). In that regard, “internet social networking sites and celebrity culture have raised the bar for narcissistic behavior and standards. [...] To post a picture of yourself half naked and posturing provocatively is now considered totally normal – even though it is also deeply narcissistic” (38-39). To a certain extent, reality TV and other celebrity profiles have been made key components in the distribution of narcissism, which is also due to the fact that celebrities in contemporary society dominate social media platforms, which makes them superspreaders of narcissism, causing people to be exposed to narcissism on a daily and consistent basis (91). Moreover, the social media content that is distributed is calculated and manipulated, presenting only the ‘right’ set of desirable traits, making it difficult for the users to separate fantasy from reality. In other words,

“Social networking sites encourage users to highlight only certain aspects of themselves. First, users can choose to present only the most attractive or cool pictures of themselves – some people call this “the angles” [...] You can also

highlight only the life events that make you look good and delete negative comments [...] In other words, social networking sites make it possible to open the gap between fantasy and reality” (113).

This type of online content can eventually become destructive for the spectator, due to feelings of having to mimic the sender’s narcissistic behavior, which eventually fosters a society that is obsessed with self-presentation. In fact, “Americans’ growing obsession with appearance is a clear symptom of a narcissistic culture in love with its own reflection. True to the Greek myth, narcissists believe that they are more attractive than other people” (141). Therefore, narcissistic people use these platforms to display their supposed physical attractiveness as a means to pursue status and attention (142). Arguably, this exposure to narcissistic content has created a new beauty culture, where the users of social media get a distorted view on their own physical appearance, based on the opinions and choices of narcissistic people whom they might idolize because of their availability and likability. Thus, a reason behind the superspreaders’ credibility can be attributed to the fact that “despite not being found to be more intelligent, narcissistic individuals tend to be perceived as more intelligent and competent by others” (Nevicka). Therefore, using this logic, the superspreaders will have great success in ‘deceiving’ the users into thinking that their narcissistic lifestyle is something they should strive for.

Ultimately, “beauty has always been a virtue, but lately its pursuit has reached new levels. There is a new standard of vanity, where it’s not enough to be beautiful; you have to be hot” (Twenge & Campbell 142). In this regard, it is interesting that “narcissism appears to be higher in individualistic cultures in which the emphasis is on individual achievement (e.g., the United States), than in collectivistic cultures where the emphasis is on embeddedness of individuals in larger groups (e.g., China)” (Nevicka). In light of this, it seems highly evident that Western society is heading towards an increasingly more narcissistic culture (Twenge & Campbell 289).

ANALYSIS OF BODY MANIFESTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Based on the condensed account of the development of Western beauty ideals, and the definition of selected theory, we will utilize this acquired knowledge and apply the theoretical concepts in an analysis of the selected TV-series, namely *Tales of the City*, *Insatiable* and *Dietland*. This will be done in order to examine how the body iconographies within these series comment on the contemporary beauty ideals, and whether or not they challenge them.

Tales of the City

We have chosen to analyze this specific TV-series because it portrays queer minorities and provides insight into their subcultural community. In this connection, the show particularly focuses on body issues in relation to gender identity and sexuality through the depiction of alternative body manifestations that differ from society's mainstream beauty ideals.

Anna Madrigal. She is a character whose body is essentially a manifestation of gender performativity, since she has changed her biological sex by transitioning from a man to a woman in order for her body to accurately reflect her self. Therefore, this correlates with Butler's theory because Anna's embodiment challenges the traditional binary gender oppositions, since she has altered her physical corpus. In addition, Anna's body manifestation can also be related to the theory regarding the body as an extension of the self, since it becomes clear that her transition represents a conflict between Mead's concept of the generalized other and his distinction between the 'I' and the 'me'. Consequently, it can be argued that Anna does not experience a unity of self within the organized social group that she used to belong to as a biological man, wherefore she must have failed to successfully take the role of other men. Therefore, taking on the role of a man arguably caused her to experience a disconnection to the 'me', since society's expectations towards her, based on her biological sex, did not correlate with her authentic self. As a result, she has ultimately rejected the socially inherited norms and values that she was expected to embody in the past. Notably, as Mead suggests, the 'I' disappears once it performs its function within society and subsequently becomes a 'me'. However, it can be argued that Anna's previous constellation of 'I' and 'me' is ultimately an erased concept because she has actively chosen to reject her initial self entirely, in order to create a new relationship between the 'I' and the 'me'. In this connection, it also becomes apparent that Anna's identity is predominately influenced by the 'I', since she does not conform to the societal norms and expectations that exist within the 'me'. Additionally, Mead argues that the self is fully developed during an individual's childhood when the child becomes aware of its own separate existence apart from other individuals. Subsequently, when the child becomes self-aware, he/she enters the game stage, which consists of imitating the behavior of one's assigned gender affiliation. However, since the show does not provide insight into Anna's childhood, it is not revealed whether or not she expressed the disconnection between her sex and gender from an early age. Nevertheless, she was previously married to a woman and fathered a child, which suggests that she has attempted to embody traditional masculinity for a significant part

of her life. Therefore, this arguably challenges Mead's argument that the self is fully developed during childhood, since Anna transitioned into a woman when she was an adult, which implies that she eventually discovered her authentic self later in life, wherefore it cannot be said to have been fully developed at an early stage. Moreover, in contrast to when she was a man, Anna can be said to successfully take the role of the other as a woman. This becomes evident when she deliberately imitates and embodies traditional femininity by dressing according to the fashion and beauty trends that dominated after World War II, whilst trying to conceal that she is transgender. For instance, this can be seen when the transgender woman, Ysela, notices that Anna does not behave like the other transgender women and asks, "so, that's the story with the pretty skirt and the heels? It's like your housewife costume?" to which Anna responds, "more like a goal. It's all I've ever wanted to be, a true lady" (S01E08). Subsequently, when they walk by a fashion store, Anna wants to go inside, causing Ysela to react, "we won't last a minute in there. You kidding? Stores like that don't let us try on clothes. You keep acting like a farm girl, you're gonna be dead by tomorrow" (ibid.). This exemplifies how Anna wants to embody a 'proper' woman, whilst not wanting her transgender status to define her. As such, despite Ysela's warning, she later walks into the store on her own where she tries on a silk scarf, revealing that although she is defying the norms by walking into the store, she ultimately tries to embody the heteronormative body ideals in order to successfully blend in. Thus, her personal embodiment consists of dressing according to the way in which ladies are 'supposed' to dress, which reveals that she successfully takes on the role of the generalized other, since it strengthens her personal embodiment as a woman. This is supported by the fact that she is allowed inside the store where she also manages to attract the attention of Tommy who is a heterosexual man. In this connection, this correlates with Steele's argument, regarding fashion as a tool to excite curiosity of the body, because he notices Anna in the fashion store and buys her the silk scarf, saying that she looked too beautiful in it wherefore it is, "more of a moral obligation than a kindness" (ibid.). Thus, Tommy's compliment reveals that fashion is effective when it comes to highlighting and embodying Anna's femininity, because it excites curiosity about her body, successfully attracting the opposite sex. Also, the fact that he calls it a moral obligation reinforces traditional ideals which entail that a woman's physical beauty has to be accentuated in order to attract attention from a potential partner. Arguably, this also explains why she is treated differently in comparison to Ysela, and the other transgender women, since she has internalized traditional gender norms, and expresses her identity according to what society deems appropriate for a woman in order to avoid rejection and ridicule. Therefore, Anna can also be said to embody the beauty

myth, because she is subjected to a beauty ideal that she tries to mimic, causing her to be desired by Tommy and ultimately become favored in comparison to the other transgender women. This is emphasized when Tommy offers Anna the chance to become part of the heteronormative community when he proposes marriage, while offering to pay for her reassignment surgery, which is arguably atypical behavior for a heterosexual man during the 60s. This becomes clear when he says,

“I’m serious. I know you think I’m crazy, but I don’t care. I’ve waited too long to find you [...] Let me give you the life you deserve. Let me take you away from this place [...] As long as no one knows about you, we’ll be fine. I didn’t at first. That means you can’t be hanging around down here. You can’t be seen with those people, do you understand? It’s gonna be beautiful, you’ll see” (ibid.).

Thus, Anna is granted the opportunity to live as a ‘normal’ woman, on the condition that she distances herself from the transgender community. However, this reveals how Anna’s personal embodiment is problematized by the fact that she cannot embody a ‘real’ woman on her own terms, because society will not regard her as such if she does not behave according to the ascribed gender norms, revealing how she is dictated by patriarchy. In this connection, it can also be argued that Anna exemplifies the attractiveness bias, because a prominent reason why her transition is considered successful is because she resembles society’s beauty ideals and successfully attracts the opposite sex, thereby ensuring heteronormativity in the eyes of the public. As such, her relationship with Tommy is a manifestation of traditional gender norms, which is revealed when she embodies the role of the housewife, cooking and taking care of the household, while attending dinner parties as Tommy’s date where she blends in amongst the cisgender women, thereby keeping up appearances. Thus, the fact that she embodies traditional female beauty ideals, and behaves according to society’s gender norms temporarily causes her to achieve a successful ‘me’ and a socially valued self.

Moreover, Anna’s conflict regarding gender identity can be said to reflect Giddens’ definition of the self-reflexive identity process, because her body transformation is ultimately a manifestation of the process, which has caused her to change her physical appearance in order to match her gender identity. In this regard, her transition also supports Butler’s notion that sex and gender are cultural constructions, since she was born male, but ultimately becomes a woman and is attributed qualities

that are traditionally considered feminine, without biology limiting her from being regarded as such. However, despite supporting Butler's argument, Anna's transition also contradicts her claim, because Anna finds it necessary to transition from male to female, which suggests that there is an interdependent relationship between sex and gender. Otherwise, Anna would arguably have been able to live as a woman and be regarded as feminine without having to change her body. However, this is ultimately not the case, because her transition is essential for her in order to be regarded as a woman. Thus, despite the fact that Anna differs from traditional gender norms, she has internalized society's norms, which have become a vital part of her identity and embodiment, revealing that her 'self' is still influenced by the dominant, heteronormative gender codes.

Furthermore, it becomes evident that Anna's self-reflexive identity process has caused her to leave her daughter and her ex-wife, thereby prioritizing herself over her family. This can also be related to Giddens' argument regarding how it is not people's behavior or the responses from others that shape one's identity, but the ability to maintain a specific narrative. Presumably, it would not have been possible for Anna to maintain the narrative of being a father, because the transition consists of a new biography that she has to maintain, since the focus on altering her body to resemble a female is ultimately what constitutes her narrative as a woman. Thus, while having a fragile identity due to the ability to form new narratives about the self, her self-identity can be said to predominantly be robust, because she rejects her previous narrative and remains secure about her choice to ultimately change her self-biography, while being able to handle the tensions as well as the changes in her social environment following her transition. However, the fact that she chooses to leave her family reveals that her self-reflexive identity process results in narcissistic behavior, because she abandons her parental duties, causing her to be alienated from her daughter. In that regard, Anna can be said to have rejected the lifegiver, in the form of her family, in favor of her own self-realization. Therefore, Anna could not identify with her role as a father within the family, wherefore she ultimately rejected the lifegiver.

Similarly, when Anna is perceived as a woman in the eyes of society, she lives a double life when she socializes with the other transgender women who experience discrimination from society, while also trying to live a heteronormative lifestyle. Besides, Anna is initially accepted into the community of the other transgender women because they can relate to her identity and gender conflicts. However, the fact that Anna chooses to pursue a heterosexual lifestyle reveals that she rejects the lifegiver again when she neglects the transgender community, in favor of living a

heteronormative lifestyle. This is revealed when Ysela discovers that Tommy is a police officer and subsequently confronts Anna by saying,

“He’s a monster [...] It doesn’t matter who he is, because he’s one of them! How do you live with yourself knowing you go to a sleep beside a man who steals from us? Those men, the ones you drink and dance with, those men are killing us one by one. But you’re in love, so who cares, right? I always thought you survived for so long because you pass. But I was wrong. You survived because you are spineless. I’m sorry that you’re willing to accept so little” (S01E08).

This reveals that, despite embodying a transgender woman, Anna does not accept the transgender label, because she betrays her own community in favor of embodying normative ideals, suggesting that her desire to be considered a ‘true’ lady is in fact rooted in a desire to be accepted by mainstream society. Therefore, it can also be argued that Anna is forced into narcissistic behavior, because society limits her from experiencing both romantic love and friendship, thereby being in a position where her only choice is to reject the lifegiver, in the form of her transgender community, if she wants to be accepted by society. Thus, in line with Symington’s argument regarding feelings of guilt following the refusal of the lifegiver, it becomes apparent that Anna feels terrible for having betrayed her own community, wherefore she continuously struggles to abide by Tommy’s orders to refrain from socializing with them. This suggests that she does not fully accept herself as a transgender woman, because she desperately tries to resemble a ‘real’ woman, wherefore her rejection of the lifegiver, in the form of her membership in the transgender community, is ultimately a rejection of the self, since embracing the lifegiver is considered an act of accepting the self. Eventually, her narcissistic behavior causes her to terminate her relationship with Tommy, because her façade of embodying a ‘real’ woman is problematized by the fact that she struggles with her own guilt towards her community, which accidentally causes her transgender status to be revealed. As such, this correlates with the fact that people who are intimate with narcissistic individuals eventually experience that they are bereft of love, because they cannot fully invest themselves emotionally.

Moreover, Anna exemplifies vulnerable narcissism and public self-absorption, because her need for recognition is a result of her own insecurities and fragile self-esteem. This is exemplified in her personal embodiment, which is inspired by her grandiose fantasies about being a ‘true’ lady and

wanting others to perceive her as such. In addition, she feels superior to the other transgender women because she successfully passes as a woman in society, without caring about her own community's lack of approval. However, this is also challenged by feelings of inferiority when she is ultimately rejected by her own community, causing her to experience high emotional distress. However, Anna's reason for not being able to maintain her relationship with Tommy stems from the fact that she is not able to embody her true self in the relationship, rather than being a pure act of narcissism. This is the case because her inner conflict is not rooted within the fact that she does not value commitment, but rather because she has to choose between her close relationships. This conflict arises after Anna has tried to help the transgender women, when Ysela stresses, "we didn't need saving. We needed you to fight with us. Jesus, you still don't get it. You can't have it both ways. You can't have both lives" (ibid.). Here, Ysela's statement draws attention to the fact that society does not permit Anna to have a relationship with Tommy, whilst simultaneously participating in the transgender community, thus forcing her into a position where narcissism is arguably impossible to avoid. Therefore, consistent with Lasch's argument, Anna's narcissism is evidently a manifestation of her own self-hatred rather than self-admiration, because she experiences a loss of self-hood when trying to embody society's definition of womanhood. Ultimately, it can be argued that Anna has undergone a personal development in which she has learned to embrace her status as a transgender woman, rather than attempting to deceive society by trying to pass as a biological woman. This is due to the fact that despite having previously abandoned the transgender community, in her attempt to be accepted by society, it eventually becomes apparent that Anna has created a community for people who struggle to embody society's gender norms. As a result, upon accepting her transgender identity, it can be argued that Anna has managed to regain the lifegiver, because the community at Barbary Lane has become her chosen family, consisting of genuine relationships that are characterized by love and commitment. However, it can be questioned whether or not this has become possible due to the fact that she no longer lives in a traditional context where homosexuals and transgender people had limited possibilities of expressing their identity in comparison to contemporary society, where personal embodiments are no longer restricted by fixed gender norms. Additionally, Anna also challenges the beauty ideals of contemporary society in relation to the fear of aging, which is revealed when Shawna compliments Anna when she sees a picture of her from her younger days, saying, "damn. You were hot. I bet you used to turn heads", to which Anna responds, "I still do" (S01E02). Here, Anna states that she is still an attractive woman despite her age, which challenges the general notion

that beauty is equated with youth, wherefore older people cannot be considered ‘hot’. Likewise, she also questions society’s tendency to create negative connotations about aging, which is emphasized when she says, “people get uncomfortable around old things, don’t they? When someone grows old, it reminds us of the inevitability of death, and before you know it, you’re using words like “iconic” instead of “old”” (S01E01). Here, Anna’s statement emphasizes that society’s praise of youthfulness echoes Lasch’s argument that society has an intense fear of old age and death, drawing attention to the way in which society endorses youth in relation to the ideal of the perfect body, which contrasts the imagery of the decaying corpus. In this regard, Anna’s statement also suggests that the image of the aging female grotesque is a stereotypical depiction of people’s fear of the aging body, which is emphasized in the negative connotations of the iconography. Also, the fact that Anna comments on the usage of the word ‘iconic’ to remove the negative connotations, also emphasizes how older people are often subjected to desexualized discourses that result in sexual deprivation, since adjectives like ‘beautiful’, ‘attractive’, or ‘sexy’ are consistently left out from the vocabulary when describing older people. Thus, Anna’s statements can be argued to reflect a general critique of beauty ideals in contemporary society and the tendency to idealize youth and create negative connotations about aging, emphasizing that society needs to overcome the fear of decay by acknowledging that beauty and attractiveness is not restricted by age.

Additionally, despite the fact that Anna abandoned her initial family, she has managed to gain a new family where she fulfills the maternal figure, which correlates with her identity as a woman. To that end, it becomes apparent that Anna is idealized by her family at Barbary Lane, wherefore it can be argued that she achieves an idolized status, performing the role as the caring mother, whilst embodying the archetype of the wise crone with whom the other characters seek comfort and guidance from. This is also reflected in her last name, Madrigal, which is addressed by the other characters upon her death when they are all gathered around the table and share their memories of her. Here, Jake says, “sometimes I think she really was magical” followed by Mary Ann who says, “well, that’s how we all ended up here, right?”. Subsequently, Michael says, “I always felt like I’d been summoned here” to which Mary Ann responds, “Anna didn’t believe in coincidence. So neither shall we” (S01E10). Notably, sharing their memories about her around the table whilst making a toast reveals that Anna is granted a divine status within her chosen family, supported by the fact that this gathering is dedicated to commemorate her, arguably creating connotations to The Last Supper. Evidently, Anna’s ‘magical’ status as a godmother manifests gender performativity, whilst challenging ancient and religious ideals that equate ideal womanhood with maternity,

because Anna is essentially a biological man, who is idealized as a motherly figure. There, one can argue that Anna exemplifies a rejection of ancient beauty and body ideals, due to the fact that she ultimately embodies the mother role as a transgender woman, challenging traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity.

Mary Ann Singleton. Initially, Mary Ann appears to be the ‘odd one out’ at Barbary Lane, because she resembles a white, blonde, heterosexual woman, which comes across as atypical within the queer environment where gender identities are blurred. This becomes clear when Mary Ann shows up with her husband, Robert, to Anna’s birthday party years after she left the community. Prior to attending the party, Mary Ann struggles with her physical presentation regarding how to dress for the event, emphasized when she tries on a dress and says, “is it too obvious? I don’t know what’s appropriate for this sort of thing” (S01E01). Her comment appears ironic because within mainstream society she appears to be the most normative in comparison to the other people at Barbary Lane. However, she is ultimately the most obvious because her normality stands out, revealing that her normative expectations are challenged in terms of her physical presentation. Additionally, after greeting Shawna, it becomes clear that Mary Ann is influenced by traditional gender roles when she tells Michael that, “I shouldn’t have come here, Mouse. What was I thinking? And what was that? What was that thing? That thing she did with her hand. What is that a good thing? Is that an insult? I feel so stupid [...] She didn’t even give me a chance” (ibid.). Here, Mary Ann’s reaction reveals how she is influenced by traditional gender norms because she does not understand the way Shawna behaves, since it differs from traditional female behavior. As a result, she has trouble connecting with Shawna, because she does not know how to approach her when society’s social and behavioral codes are blurred. In this connection, it becomes apparent that Mary Ann has previously been in a relationship with Brian, with whom she adopted Shawna, wherefore she has previously embodied the mother role. However, Mary Ann eventually chose career over family life, which made her abandon Shawna. In contrast, Brian can be said to embody traditional femininity because he owns a flower shop and cares of the household. Yet, he idealizes Mary Ann who physically resembles the traditional female ideal, exemplified when all the women he matches with on a dating app resemble her. As such, Brian’s obsession with Mary Ann represents a mourning over the loss of the traditional woman, supported by the fact that he also expresses a frustration over the fact that women are no longer dependent on men. This is revealed when he tells a female friend that, “most women would kill for this. You know that, right?” to

which she responds, “excuse me? Kill for what? For some dude who gets all pissy when the woman he’s fucking doesn’t stop her world for him? Come on, honey” (S01E05). This draws attention to how traditional gender norms are challenged and somewhat reversed within contemporary society, since Brian is emasculated and struggles to accept his own redundancy to women. This also provides an understanding of Mary Ann’s situation, because she refused to sacrifice her own chance of self-realization in order to be with him. Thus, Mary Ann exemplifies the self-reflexive identity process because she did not want to embody the traditional role of a mother and instead pursued an identity as a modern career woman, which has traditionally been considered atypical for women. This becomes evident when Mary Ann says, “look, I know everyone judges me for choosing a career over raising a family. Men do it all the time. But when a woman does it, she’s selfish, she’s power-hungry, she’s an unfeeling bitch” (S01E02). This reveals how Mary Ann struggles to live up to society’s traditional gender norms, because she feels that she has to defend her choices, since they do not correlate with traditional femininity, revealing that the reason why she does not feel that she fits into mainstream society is because she has to embody stereotypical gender roles. As such, Mary Ann’s statement essentially reflects a feminist critique of traditional gender norms that have previously restricted women in society. Therefore, it can be argued that Mary Ann’s behavior results in a disillusion of motherhood, because she prioritizes self-realization instead of being a mother. This is also supported by the fact that she tries to evade her guilt by putting the blame on others, which can be seen when she says,

“She thinks I am her biological mother. I’ve been turning it and turning it over in my mind [...] If Brian never told her she was adopted, does that mean they’ve all been lying to her? [...] I mean, this is insane. Well, no wonder she hates me. Now, she thinks her actual mother left her [...] This is their fault” (S01E01).

This reveals that, despite her struggle to abide by society’s gender norms, Mary Ann has a traditional mindset because she believes that motherhood is determined by biology, wherefore she thinks that she has no responsibility. This correlates with Nevicka’s argument that narcissists primarily attribute successes to themselves and, if failing, they ultimately externalize the blame onto others, which is the case when she blames everyone for lying to Shawna, thereby denying her own guilt. As such, Mary Ann also fails to realize that she still embodies motherhood despite not being Shawna’s biological mother, which supports Lasch’s claim that emotional detachment often has a

damaging effect on the family. Therefore, Mary Ann can be said to exhibit vulnerable narcissism because she suffers from emotional instability, fragile self-esteem, and a need for recognition. Yet, she feels entitled because she has prioritized herself, having rejected both her own lifegiver as well as abandoning her dependable role as a lifegiver, thereby struggling to bind herself to a unity. However, Mary Ann still attempts to manage human intimacy by being in a heterosexual relationship with Robert, but her own identity conflict eventually causes her to leave him like she previously left Brian, revealing that she is unable to have a sincere and loving relationship with a partner, because she presumably does not value those types of commitments. This is consistent with the fact that people who are intimate with narcissistic individuals often experience that the relationship is not long lasting, because narcissistic people spend all their energy on themselves. Likewise, this coheres with Symington's claim that narcissists lack mental health objects, wherefore they need partners to guide them through changes in their lives, exemplified when Robert asks, "why did you want me to come? To be your security blanket?" (S01E01). Hence, this suggests that Mary Ann uses Robert to comfort her and be supportive, thereby exploiting him for her own benefit in order to maintain a façade to make herself look and feel good. Moreover, even though Mary Ann does not embody traditional femininity, because she rejects embodying the role of a mother as well as rejecting relationships, she behaves as an ordinary 'nice' woman in the eyes of society by virtue of being a television host, thus a reputable public face. However, despite having been in the spotlight, she starts to feel miserable as a consequence of having abandoned her personal relationships. In this regard, it becomes clear that she cannot maintain her façade despite her attempts to create temporary excitements, because she feels guilty for having left her family, worrying that she has lost her membership in the community. This is revealed when Michael asks her if he should reconnect with Harrison, causing her to shift the topic of conversation to revolve around her situation by saying, "it depends. [...] If it's a more angry... "Look at this amazing life that I built for myself while you left me to go feed your soul to your ambition and now I'm gonna rub your face in it" kind of way". Subsequently, Michael says, "just to be clear, I was never mad at you. Sad. A lot. But never mad", to which she responds, "do you wanna hear something ridiculous? I'm getting divorced. Again [...] It's not surprising. What's surprising is that it still feels so shitty. When did it all get so hard, Mouse?" (S01E03). This reveals that Mary Ann is not satisfied with her life, despite pursuing her career and living a heteronormative lifestyle, because she lacks a sense of belonging. This is relevant in relation to Lasch's argument that narcissism signifies a loss of self-hood, because Mary Ann's primary struggle is rooted within the fact that her identity is threatened

by disintegration, due to the fact that she has maintained a façade in order to cope in mainstream society. In addition, despite Mary Ann's strive for self-realization, feelings of guilt arguably cause her to struggle with her identity, which supports Symington's claim that rejecting the lifegiver is essentially a rejection of the self, whilst manifesting her narcissism as an example of self-hatred, consistent with Lasch's theory.

Furthermore, despite the fact that her body manifestation is visibly not queer, Mary Ann feels that she does not completely belong to the heteronormative community. This becomes clear after the birthday party when Robert says, "I will never understand those people" to which she responds, "'Those people?' Those people are my family", which is rejected by Robert who says, "come on. I know you're unhappy, but don't act like those people we were with tonight are *your* people". Subsequently, Mary Ann says, "well, maybe they are" to which he says, "fine. Believe whatever you want. Frolic among the freaks" (S01E01). In contrast to Brian, Robert exemplifies patriarchy and embodies traditional masculinity, which is also illustrated by the fact that he is dressed in blue pajamas, contrasting Mary Ann who is dressed in pink, highlighting the way in which society attributes different norms and ideals to the sexes by utilizing color distinctions to signify the binary gender division. However, Mary Ann struggles to accept traditional gender norms and ultimately decides to stay at Barbary Lane instead of leaving with Robert. Therefore, her decision also reveals that she contradicts herself when she uses biology to reject responsibility as Shawna's mother, while considering the people at Barbary Lane as her family, despite any biological ties. Therefore, it becomes clear that although being influenced by traditional norms, Mary Ann struggles with her own identity. This can be seen when she performs on the stage at Body Politic in order to appear more feminist, after which she has a conversation with Shawna where she says, "you're a lucky woman, Shawna. You know, you've created a beautiful life for yourself. You're surrounded by these interesting, fascinating people you love and who love you. That's amazing", to which Shawna responds, "yeah, I mean, I don't know what's fascinating about it" (S01E04). Subsequently, Mary Ann says,

"When I first got off the bus years ago, and I mean literally off the bus, this whitebread girl from Ohio, I had the strangest feeling that I'd come home. I mean, and don't get me wrong. I mean, this city, it scared the shit out of me. And I know that everyone who laid eyes on me gave me about five minutes before the before the gays and the and the queens would send me right back to Cleveland, but oh

God! Oh! How I must have looked to them! But on the inside, I was different. I mean, I knew that, you know, I—it didn't match how I looked on the outside" (ibid.).

Following Mary Ann's explanation, Shawna says, "well, shit, Mary Ann. Maybe you're queer after all, huh?" (ibid.). Thus, Mary Ann has never been content with her normative life, wherefore she has not felt that she could live up to the expectations towards her based on her sex and physical appearance. Besides, her statement challenges the way in which people are labeled based on physical appearance, specifically regarding stereotypes, which suggests that a person has to physically deviate from the norms in order to qualify as being queer. Therefore, the fact that she embraces the queer community is essentially a critique of prevailing body iconographies and a reflection of her desire to be freed from society's expectations of her based on her appearance. However, despite socializing with, and trying to fit in amongst the queer people, it becomes apparent that the community challenges her feminist values. This becomes apparent when she sees a curvy, African American woman who is exposing her body on the stage at Body Politic, to which Mary Ann reacts, "I just...I don't understand. How exactly is that feminist?", causing Shawna to tell the body positive woman, "you know, Mary Ann here's not sure that what you do is feminist", to which Mary Ann says, "No, it's just...You—were—you were lovely, really. It's...No, I was just saying that in terms of the feminism of *my* day [...] Well, I'm not a suffragette. My generation was trying to liberate women from objectification, not, you know...encourage it" to which the African American woman replies, "right. But, see, I don't feel objectified. I own my body. I'm making a choice" (S01E04). This reveals how Mary Ann's personal embodiment is influenced by the thoughts of second wave feminism, wherefore she struggles to understand the casual attitudes towards bodily expression within the queer community. In contrast, the other woman's statement reflects the attitude of fourth wave feminism in contemporary society, which focuses on the fact that women should reclaim their bodies and be able to express themselves, creating diversity within body manifestations through body positivity, thereby challenging society's restrictive beauty ideals. Notably, the fact that Mary Ann only comments on the issue in relation to the objectification of the female body suggests that she has restricted her own personal embodiment, wherefore it can be argued that she is envious of and/or fascinated by their liberated attitudes at Body Politic, which is supported by the fact that she seeks membership within their community. Therefore, despite her struggle to understand fourth wave feminism, Mary Ann's desire to be accepted in the queer

community can be considered a rejection of the body ideals in mainstream culture, whilst being a tribute to minorities, since the roles are reversed when she tries to erase the distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’ in her attempt to fit in amongst the ‘deviants’. This can also be related to Symington’s argument that the self is relational and needs to belong to a community in order to survive. In this regard, it can be argued that Mary Ann undergoes a personal development, where she realizes the importance of participating in social relations within a community as she strives to regain the lifegiver. In this connection, one can argue that Mary Ann could find similar relations within mainstream culture where her physical appearance would make her assimilate. However, the fact that she actively chooses to reject the normative community can be interpreted as a critique of mainstream society, since it is implied that she has only had superficial relationships that did not make her feel a sense of belonging, despite the fact that she physically resembles a normative woman. Besides, even though Mary Ann has used biology as an excuse to reject the possible symbiosis with Shawna, her eventual feelings of guilt also cause her to attempt to redeem her status as a mother by trying to reach out to Shawna. Yet, she does not succeed in doing so because she has rejected her own role as a lifegiver, wherefore it is arguably out of her hands to regain the position. Ultimately, the disillusion of traditional motherhood and the subsequent reincarnation of the motherly figure in the form of Anna’s embodiment contribute to the deconstruction of society’s binary gender division and understanding of the ideal body, because it dissolves the traditional female beauty ideal.

Shawna Hawkins. Shawna is a woman who identifies as queer, which her visual expression, or second skin, also asserts. The first time the viewer is introduced to Shawna, she is wearing a grey shirt, a black cap, and loose jeans, which can be argued to be clothing and accessories that traditionally signify the male body. However, the colors of her clothes indicate a more gender-neutral approach to her bodily narrative because she is not wearing traditional gender specific colors. Additionally, her clothes are oversized, which makes an objectification or sexualization of the female body more difficult, since her figure is visually absent. In this way, she epitomizes how the external corset, which some has argued to illustrate women’s constraining position in society, is not an embraced bias in the queer community. Also, in episode five, Claire states that Shawna is using her clothes as a means of disguise. In this connection, it would make sense that Shawna utilizes her second skin to camouflage her body, which subsequently functions as an extension of the self that is marked by emptiness and as being somewhat broken. This can also explain why she

wears loose fitting clothes because it is a more sufficient way of concealing one's self. Therefore, in contrast to Steele's theory, it can be argued that clothes not only serve as a method of promoting and supporting the narrative of the ideal self, since it can also aid in the concealment of the broken self. Moreover, Shawna is also androgynous in terms of her gender performance when it comes to aspects, such as postures and gestures. For instance, Shawna is seen slouching and greeting people with fist bumps, which does not reflect traditional female behavior. In contrast, the traditional female performance is often conforming to more conventional female mannerisms like wearing dresses and keeping a poised posture. Ironically, even though Shawna does not convey a typical gender binary body representation, she idealizes more common female embodiments and performances, when it comes to Mary Ann and Anna. These characters are initially somewhat elevated to a godlike status by Shawna, which is exemplified when she proclaims that she loves Anna more than herself, and when the audience learns that Shawna has an entire drawer of videotapes with Mary Ann that she regularly watches. Evidently, the two motherly figures also evoke religious connotations via their names, which further adds an aspect of divinity to their characters. Notably, the mother of the ultimate Christian maternal archetype, Virgin Mary, is named Anne. Besides, Virgin Mary and Mary Ann have somewhat similar names, and Anna Madrigal has a similar first name to saint Anne. Thus, the divine aspect these names invoke accentuates how Shawna idealizes these characters.

Furthermore, Shawna exhibits several implications of narcissism, which is evident in her constant pursuit of bodily gratification. In this relation, she engages in various sexual relationships with both men and woman, which can be considered promiscuous behavior. For instance, Shawna has sexual relations with Claire in an alley and partakes in a threesome with a married couple. Also, besides pursuing bodily gratification, in the form of sexual pleasure, she smokes a considerable amount of pot and is often seen consuming alcohol. This coheres with how narcissistic people often seek temporary excitement that produces an element of energy into their system in order to compensate for an inner emptiness. This emptiness is directly verbalized when Shawna says, "I just assumed that knowing my mom would take away this emptiness" (S01E05). Here, it is also indicated that she expected that Mary Ann, via her idealized maternal function, would serve as a savior that would supposedly fulfill her feelings of desolation. Yet, the separation from Mary Ann that Shawna endures, as well as her later refusal of her, serve as a direct parallel to how the infant is dependent on the mother only to eventually reject her, wherefore Shawna can be said to reject the lifegiver when she refuses to reconnect with Mary Ann. In this connection, the essence of

narcissism is a hatred of the relational, which subsequently results in the inability to form long lasting relationships, which can explain why Shawna displays an unwillingness to commit to her many sexual partners as well as Mary Ann. Further, in line with Giddens' argument, the emptiness that Shawna feels can be attributed to the self-reflexive identity process that often fosters a feeling of personal meaninglessness because nothing is certain or fixed in contemporary society. In this regard, since Shawna is situated within a queer community, one can argue that her self-reflexive identity journey seems even more comprehensive because reflections about her body and her identity are more actively and directly addressed. Hence, because Shawna lives in a place where neither identity, sexuality, or gender are fixed concepts, it can explain why she might want to pursue and fixate on Mary Ann, who represents a traditional, static, and conventional female body manifestation. However, Shawna also antagonizes Mary Ann throughout the series, when she refers to her as a disappointment, and flees from her in social settings. In contrast, Shawna also engages in affectionate behavior towards Mary Ann, when she initiates hugs between them on more than one occasion. As such, this love-hate relationship can be explained by the fact that, as a narcissist, one prefers short term relationships and resists deep and meaningful ones. The fear of deep connections and Shawna's preference for short term relationships are also highlighted when she addresses Brian, "do you know what cures love? Dates! Lots of dates. With lots of other people" (S01E02). This implies that her solution to cure a heartbreak is to have countless of casual (sexual) encounters, which is presumably a defense mechanism that her narcissistic self utilizes. However, although Shawna initially displays a preference for casual relationships, she also demonstrates tendencies that suggest otherwise when she goes on several dates with Claire, or when she says to Margot, "since when does being open-minded mean you have to be in an open relationship?" (S01E02). On the subject of relationships, Shawna also engages in one with a married couple whom she grows fond of through several sexual encounters. Although their relationship is predominantly fueled by its sexual nature, Shawna also opens up to them and shares her feelings of distress. Notably, the constellation of this relationship is reminiscent of a traditional family, which can explain why she is particularly drawn to them, since the affection she receives from the couple serves as a metaphor for the kind of love she never experienced from having both a mother and a father. Thus, Shawna seeks comfort by merely watching the married couple converse without engaging in their conversation. In this regard, it is unclear whether or not Shawna opposes matrimony, but due to her queer outlook, it is likely that because traditional marriage includes a considerable amount of heteronormative symbolic value, she cannot fully embrace it. In that relation, when two people, traditionally a man

and a woman, get married they receive an initiation from God, which to some extent elevates their bodies to a more celestial level, wherefore the couple is blessed and sanctified by God through the ritualized union of marriage. Additionally, it is conventionally implied that the marital union will be monogamous, which means that, figuratively speaking, an individual who agrees to this contract assigns ownership of his/her body to the other individual. Yet, it is important to stress that the metaphorical transaction of the body should be understood in terms of how the married body is expected to only be intimate with the body of the given spouse. Another element of marriage that elevates the body's value is that people traditionally adopt the roles of husband and wife, which ties the two individuals into the concept of a family. Hence, it is through the constellation of a family that the body is implied to eventually adopt the ideal roles of father and mother.

As mentioned previously, Virgin Mary has been considered an ideal woman, since she embodies motherhood while still remaining virtuous through her supposed virginity. In this relation, the ultimate Christian paternal archetype is considered to be God, which is highlighted by the fact that he is also referred to as Holy Father. Also, God's divine status entails that he does not inhabit a mortal corpus, since having a body implies mortality, which contradicts God's immortality. Nonetheless, the parental archetypes can be argued to be shrouded with divine connotations, which can explain why Shawna fixates on aforementioned characters, because they echo certain ideals that represent stability and security.

Moreover, it becomes apparent that Brian is not Shawna's biologically father, yet this does not hinder her from perceiving or referring to him as such. Hence, in line with Butler's argument about gender and sex not being inherently linked, the role of mother should be able to signify both the male and female body. So, if being a father is not biologically determined, as is the case with Brian, then the functions of mother and father also illustrate a role and not merely a biological function. This is also the case with Anna who, despite the fact that she was biologically born as a man, still performs as a maternal figure to a majority of the people who live at Barbary Lane. Additionally, Shawna also supports this argument when she responds to her Aunt Maura's claim about women being more maternal in comparison to men, saying, "I don't think it's a gender thing, Maura" (S01E07). Here, Shawna implies that the maternal quality is not exclusive to women, but is a separate quality independent from the biological sex.

Furthermore, another example of how Shawna covets the motherly figure at a more subconscious level is demonstrated in her pursuit of Claire, whom she might be enticed by due to her similarities to Mary Ann, because Claire is also a blonde woman who prioritizes her career at

the expense of social relations. Correspondingly, this is also addressed when Margot says, “I was wrong. You’re not dating yourself. You’re dating your mom” (S01E06). Moreover, there is a scene between Claire and Shawna in episode six that serves as a fitting analogy for how the logic of phenomenology perceives the body. In this scene, Claire asks Shawna to lie down in order to see San Francisco from a different point of view. In this regard, phenomenology argues that the way in which we position our bodies ultimately influences how we perceive the world, since the body functions as a filter that determines the human experience. In Shawna’s case, the bodily filter is highly influenced by a feeling of abandonment that makes her question her worth. For instance, she says, “but whenever I look at her, all I see is that I wasn’t enough to keep her here. I wasn’t worth it. I just feel like no matter how old I get, I’ll always be that kid whose mom left” (S01E05). Thus, as a consequence of Mary Ann leaving her, Shawna has internalized the blame, which compels her to conclude that the value of her ‘self’ is not adequate for people to want to create long term relations with, which is presumably reinforced when Claire eventually rejects her. Nonetheless, Shawna comes to believe that despite having issues with the value of her ‘self’, this can ultimately be mended. This is illustrated when she says, “I mean, I guess we’re all broken, but I mean, I don’t think we’re unfixable” (S01E09). This indicates how Shawna intensely engages in the self-reflexive identity process, because in order to fix the broken self, one must reflect upon possible solutions to heal.

Eventually, Shawna discovers that Anna has left her some money, encouraging her to travel and see the world, which she shares with Brian when saying, “I just think I should travel and like figure out who I am away from this place. And how to be attracted to people that aren’t insane” (S01E10). This reveals that Shawna struggles with her self-biography and that she has a hard time separating who she is outside of a queer context. Hence, this can also imply that the queerness she has adopted and internalized is conditioned, since being queer has served as the norm in the environment she grew up in. Also, this coheres with Mead’s theory regarding how the self originates through taking the role of the other, wherefore Shawna’s self is naturally mirroring the norms that exist in her given environment. To elaborate, the immediate referential markers that Shawna has been exposed to have mainly been people who have not conformed to traditional gender norms, wherefore queer embodiments have been a normative condition. Subsequently, Shawna’s statement also indicates how she wants to uncover other aspects apart from her queerness. Hence, Shawna proclaims, “like, last time, I felt like I was running away. This time, I feel like I’m running towards something. Just not sure what that is yet” (S01E10). The fact that Shawna aspires to travel in order to discover the

tale of her ‘self’ can seem rather ironic, since it implies that by traveling and being exposed to external factors, she will be able to disclose internal truths. Yet, traveling to uncover your identity is a common and reassuring theme that has been part of narratives across decades, commonly known as the hero’s journey, which is narrated through the quest structure. In this connection, Shawna can be compared to the protagonist of this narrative who begins an adventures journey of self-discovery, subsequently becoming a different and often improved version of him/herself. As such, it is interesting that Shawna, being a person who deviates from traditional norms, feels that she has to experience a transformative journey that is essentially traditional, in order to mend her genuine self. Likewise, Shawna’s quest for a cohesive identity will arguably be attained when she is exposed to alternative lifestyles that can influence her self-biography.

Jake Rodriguez. In the first episode, it becomes apparent that Jake is a transgender guy, who was previously in a lesbian relationship with Margot, but after his transition they identify as queer. In this relation, Jake tries to justify their queer relationship by saying that as long as they are aware of who they are, it does not matter how they are perceived by society because he believes that “gender is definitely a construct” (S01E01). Additionally, being mistaken as a straight-couple does not bother Jake, because he wants to pass as an ‘authentic’ man. Interestingly, Jake expresses how he is aware that gender is culturally constructed, yet in this instance he does not mind reflecting traditional masculinity. However, he feels that he has to justify his excitement to Margot, because he has changed their common social identity by transitioning into a man. Therefore, in correlation with queer theory, Jake categorizes them as being queer instead of heterosexual, because the queer label is flexible and enables them to engage in various aspects of identity expressions in contrast to the heteronormative label. This is evident because he believes that gender is socially constructed, making it essentially irrelevant what labels they use to identify themselves, because those labels restrict the meanings of both heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Moreover, since Jake is not a biological man, he has lived as woman, learning to adapt and conform to the norms and expectations by society in order to successfully socialize with other people. So, after his transition, he has difficulties with adjusting to how his new body is positioned and perceived by society, revealed when he says, “it’s just so weird you know? I’m in this new body, and it feels so good to finally look the way I always felt. [...] But the thing is, it’s not just my body that’s changed. The way the world relates to me is so different” (S01E01). As such, Jake is learning how to behave and look like a man in order to reflect his authentic self, which is

challenging since he is performing a new gender role, which entails new norms, ideals, and expectations that he has to adhere by in order to successfully take the role of the other. This becomes evident on several occasions when Jake and Margot socialize with his family. For instance, they go to his sister's gender reveal party, where one of his nephews is shouting "auntie Jake, auntie Margot", after which the other nephew corrects him by saying, "it's uncle Jake, now" (S01E03). Besides, Jake's mother perceives him as a traditional man, who is able to create a traditional family, which becomes apparent when she wants to know when him and Margot are having babies. Subsequently, while Jake is doing the dishes with his sister his mother tells him to go watch football with the other men in the family, because "doing dishes isn't for you anymore, papa. Go" (S01E05). This indicates that his family has a traditional mindset, forcing Jake to adjust to his new gender role by socializing with the men, and doing things that are considered 'appropriate' masculine behavior. This causes Jake to feel uncomfortable, because he is unfamiliar with his new masculine identity and the new dynamic within the family, since he used to be one of the women. However, per his mother's request, he joins the men in the living room, who are watching football, where they start to argue about "growing a pair". Adding to that, Jake's uncle tells him that he only calls him a doctor out of respect, which infuriates Jake who says, "because nurses don't deserve respect?", making his uncle respond with, "come on, lighten up, have a beer with us, nurse. [...] What? You want a wine cooler instead, a raspberry or some shit?", to which Jake's father tells his uncle to lay off Jake, prompting his uncle to say, "what? I gotta go easy on him just because he's a eh... [...] All I'm saying is, you hang with the boys, you gotta be able to take some shit. Just ask crybaby Stu over here. When did you all get some goddamn sensitive, huh?" (S01E05). Here, it is evident that traditional gender roles are dictating the dynamic in the family, wherefore Jake has to embody masculinity and not be sensitive to the banter going on between the men, since it is part of 'hanging with the boys'.

Ultimately, these examples indicate that his family is treating him differently because of his new identity, since they are a traditional family that have certain behavioral expectations and norms depending on gender. Thus, they are trying to re-socialize him into his new gender role by treating him like they typically would other men. However, Jake struggles with how they are perceiving and treating him differently, because he feels that he is the same person that he was pre-transition, stating, "I know it's hard to believe, but I'm still me. I just look different" to which his sister responds, "maybe if you listen to people who love you, you would realize that you're actually not the same person" (S01E05). Thus, even though Jake feels as though he is internally unchanged, his

sister emphasizes that he is different both internally and externally, because she believes that there are fixed gender roles that people unconsciously adhere to, especially within the traditional family dynamic. Besides, Jake arguably takes the role of the generalized other as a man in order to successfully engage with his family, who are particularly traditional, and therefore have traditional gender stereotypes. Yet, he tries to reconcile how to be the man he feels inside, with the man his family and society perceive and expect him to be.

Furthermore, Jake does not identify as a heteronormative man, since he does not want to have children with Margot but rather wants to explore his sexuality. However, he appears as a heteronormative man in the eyes of society because of his masculine appearance, which creates a divergence between how he feels and how he looks. Therefore, Jake does, to some degree, mimic traditional masculinity by embodying the role of a man, but he is not able to successfully perform the masculine ideal. As a result, he experiences an internal conflict, since he wants to be accepted for the type of man that he is instead of gaining societal acceptance by being a specific type of man that he does not identify with. Yet, according to Butler, there is no gender behind masculinity, wherefore Jake would ideally be able to be perceived as masculine without having to embody society's definition of masculinity. Also, he is disinterested in having children because he needs time to figure out his new body, which is emphasized when he says, "why is it so crazy to ask for a second to breathe to figure out what my body is doing before we make a person who'll take over our entire lives 24/7" (S01E03). Arguably, Jake's statement reflects the conflict between his body and the label he is attributed by society. Thus, he wants time to adjust to his new body and identity before raising and influencing children, since his confusion might affect them, which will presumably complicate their identity formation. Therefore, Jake is arguably engaging in a self-reflexive identity process, which is complicated by tradition but also by the many options provided, which he now has to consider when figuring out his genuine self. This is evident when he expresses to Margot that he might be feeling an attraction to guys, wherefore he asks for permission to explore his sexuality in order to uncover whether or not being with men is right for him. In that relation, it can be argued that when he was dating Margot, he was performing the idealized version of a heteronormative man, but since that does not coincide with how he identifies, he tries to discover other options as a part of his self-reflexive identity journey. In that regard, he does not consider Margot's feelings during his self-reflexive process, since everything is on his terms, wherefore it is ultimately at the expense of their relationship. Arguably, this can be considered as narcissistic behavior, since Jake is sacrificing his relationship with Margot for the benefit of his

self-realization. Yet, in line with Giddens', narcissism is fostered by the self-reflexive identity process due to the extensive focus on the self, wherefore it is presumably a condition of society. However, one can also argue that Jake is rejecting the lifegiver, in this case his relationship with Margot, which renders him as a narcissist, yet if he did not reject the lifegiver, he would presumably reject himself, which would entail living a fraudulent life. This is also demonstrated when Jake says, "I thought I could do everything the same. It started to feel like I can only be honest with myself or her, but not both" (S01E04). Therefore, his narcissistic traits resemble Lasch's theory, regarding how narcissism exists in everyone in varying degrees.

Moreover, after his transition, Jake is arguably trying to continuously maintain his self-biography of being a man, which is what ultimately shapes his identity. This can be related to Giddens who argues that one's self-identity is both fragile and robust. In the case of Jake, his self-identity is arguably fragile because his narrative exists among many possible narratives and he has to navigate the endless possibilities, which creates uncertainty about his new body, which is the case when he ends his relationship with Margot to explore his sexuality. Also, his fragile self-identity becomes evident when he is rejected by another gay man for not being cisgender, which results in an additional identity struggle, because he does not live up to being either a heterosexual nor a homosexual man. Also, he expresses to Margot that he has been "coming out" for a long time when he says, "it's so crazy. I feel like I've spent the majority of my life coming out. 'I'm a lesbian', 'I'm trans', 'I'm gay'" (S01E10). This illustrates that he has had changing narratives throughout his life, making his self-identity fragile because of its constant interchangeable nature.

On the contrary, Jake's identity can be considered robust, since his sense of self-identity is secure enough to weather major tensions within his social environments, such as the queer community at Barbary Lane. Thus, despite the tensions surrounding his self-reflexive identity process, where his performance might vary due to cultural and social factors, he is secure enough in his own self-identity as a man. Hence, Jake tries to embrace the traditional and modern options in the self-reflexive identity process in order to ultimately create his own lasting biography. In doing so, he is arguably mirroring others in the search for the socially valued self. For instance, this becomes evident when Margot and him are talking about his curiosity for other men where it becomes apparent that Jake studied their behavior for masculine cues prior to his sexual attraction to them. This also relates to Norbert Elias' theory because Jake's body and personality structures are manifestations of socialization and internal self-regulations influenced by group

interdependencies, such as his family, his friends at Barbary Lane, and his new sexual relations with men. In addition, Jake's internal structure of the 'self' determines how he successfully interacts and engages with various social groups. Here, Jake's 'me' causes him to create a conscious self-image by seeing himself through the eyes of other people. This becomes evident when he goes out on a date with a guy for the first time, where he is self-conscious about revealing that he is transgender, because he is aware of how that might be perceived, causing him to have a fear of rejection. For instance, he says, "I'm trans. I know I should have told you, but I didn't expect things to go this far. This is all new to me. I don't even understand the app. Shit, I feel so stupid" (S01E02). This shows that his self-image is created on the basis of how he believes others will perceive him as transgender, causing him to be self-conscious about the fact that he might be different from other gay guys, since there are norms within the gay communities that he may not accommodate. This is also made apparent in the bar scene when he engages with a gay guy, who says, "oh, hey, look, if you're into them, no shade. I'm cool with trans guys. I mean I don't date them. I'm dick gay" (S01E07). This causes Jake to feel rejected while being reminded that he is different from those he identifies with. As such, Jake internalizes people's attitudes towards him, and this is ultimately what gives him a sense of self.

Moreover, according to queer theory, there is no absolute truth to gender, since it is constructed through performativity. Therefore, Jake's self-realization that he is gay should not render him as being less of a man, because he is still performing the male gender. However, he does not transition into a traditional understanding of how a man is supposed to look and act despite having a masculine appearance. This is evident because he is a short, slender, and unmuscular while having feminine features from when he was a woman. This becomes apparent in the scene where Margot is presumably drawing Jake's face as it looked like before his transition, making his jawline rounder and erasing his beard. However, this appearance is not that different from his current facial features, indicating that he still resembles aspects of his former self. Therefore, Jake arguably embodies feminine as well as masculine features, making him queer in terms of his physical appearance. Thus, one can argue that before his transition, his body was not an extension of his self, because his gender did not correlate with his external and physiological sex, wherefore his previous body could be considered a personal prison. Yet, since his new body is not deemed as an 'authentic' man due to traditional societal expectations, it can be argued that his current body constitutes a new form of prison. However, he might feel content because he bears resemblance to how he feels internally, despite feeling rejected by society for not mimicking an idealized man.

Furthermore, after his transition, Jake's body has become a reflection and extension of his genuine self, because his internal self-perception now correlates with his external appearance. Therefore, Jake's decision to alter his corpus is ultimately based on the inadequate seat of the self that he had in the past. Hence, it can be argued that Jake's need for bodily alteration is fueled by his self-reflexive identity process in order to reach his socially valued self as a man. Additionally, Jake's desire to get reassignment surgery can be considered an act of bodily transgression against biology, since he will change his physiological sex on a fundamental level, wherefore it goes against traditional ideals of gender as being a fixed concept. This can be related to Giddens' argument regarding the way in which the body used to be a fixed aspect of nature, yet Jake's transition challenges this notion by making himself omnipotent through altering his own biology. However, despite the fact that Jake's fluid gender approach is transgressive in mainstream society, it is merely considered the norm within the queer community that he belongs to, wherefore it is no longer deemed transgressive. Also, in relation to Butler's argument, Jake's future reassignment surgery is neither considered a transgressive act because gender is arguably unfixed, wherefore having surgery cannot be considered transgressive, thereby making the surgery redundant. However, Jake's body manifestation ultimately challenges society's traditional gender roles and normative beauty ideals by emphasizing that masculinity and femininity are cultural constructions, suggesting that beauty ideals must also be regarded as fictional constructions and not as absolute truths.

Margot Park. The audience is first introduced to Margot when she is picking up a birthday cake for Anna, while conversating with a young child and her mother, who believes that her and Jake are a straight-couple. Margot is upset about the woman assuming that they are a straight-couple due to the fact that they identify as queer. In that regard, Margot is also frustrated that Jake is excited about passing as straight, revealed when as she says, "if a couple of queers walk down the street and no one knows it, are they still queer?" (S01E01). Here, she rejects the idea of being part of a heteronormative narrative that maintains traditional gender roles in society, which relates to Giddens' argument that the body is directly relevant to what narrative the individual promotes. Therefore, seeing as her and Jake appear as a heterosexual couple, people outside of their community are more likely to label them from a normative point of view. In the example, Margot feels as if she is being attributed a traditional social identity based on her sex, which does not coincide with her authentic biographical narrative as a gay woman. However, Margot's identity is not determined based on the woman's assumption about their gender identities, but rather by her

own ability to maintain her personal narrative as a lesbian, which is difficult to preserve if society perceives her as heterosexual. However, from a traditional perspective, given that Margot is ‘passing as straight’, she embodies the traditional female behavior of a woman by being with a man. Yet, before Jake’s transition, they were in a lesbian relationship, wherefore being perceived as straight by society causes a new and comprehensive self-reflection in order for her to understand how to position herself in society.

Additionally, Margot’s comment about not being queer if society does not recognize it also has a connection to traditional gender norms that favor the heterosexual institution. Thus, in line with Giddens’ theory, Margot is bound to feel a sense of personal meaninglessness, since she is not acknowledged for who she truly is, because of how her relationship with Jake is considered traditional in the eyes of the public due to their body manifestations. Furthermore, after Jake’s transition, they refer to themselves as queer, yet Margot expresses that Jake is the one who labeled them as such. Yet, she does not fully identify with the label because she says that, “I miss being a lesbian. I always dreamed I’d have a wife and kids. We’d take road trips to Carmel. Get a pug from a little rescue. I didn’t exactly love the idea of Jake transitioning, but ultimately it didn’t matter because I love Jake and I love being with Jake” (S01E02). Thus, she is conflicted with trying to embody queerness, when she identifies as a lesbian, wherefore she feels guilty for not embracing their new lifestyle. This can be an expression of feeling that the constant flow of new information creates an existential uncertainty, because there are more options and choices to consider regarding one’s identity. Therefore, Margot is arguably engaging in a new self-reflexive identity process, because of the label of her relationship. Besides, during a conversation with Shawna, who says that Margot might still be a lesbian, she responds, “Jake says we’re queer now”, meaning that she is willing to be queer for him, even though that is not how she identifies (S01E02). As such, the changing conditions in Margot’s life are not beneficial for her because of the uncertainty that it generates. This also becomes evident when Margot says to Jake, “why is it always about your body. Why not *my* body and the words *I* wanna use? And how you can’t give a shit about how shitty it makes me feel?” (S01E03). Here, it becomes apparent that Jake’s transition has been difficult for her because of how it has attributed them an entire new gender identity, which further reveals how the changing conditions of their existence have not been beneficial for her. Besides, this also demonstrates how the body is granted significant importance in contemporary society, since it is a reflection of the self, emphasized in the way in which Margot focuses on the body in relation to her identity rather than her internal state. Also, from a traditional perspective, it can be argued that

Margot is sacrificing her authentic identity as a lesbian in order for Jake to achieve self-realization, making her an embodiment of a traditional woman making sacrifices for her husband, since she suppresses her own desires in order to accommodate her boyfriend despite them not coinciding with hers.

Furthermore, the fact that Margot and Jake identify as queer correlates with Butler's argument regarding gender and sex as being cultural constructions, because even though they are referred to as a heterosexual couple, they do not identify with those correlational and restrictive gender ideals. Also, Butler argues that there are no original gender identities because these are essentially imitations of each other, and constantly changing among a range of different roles and positions drawn from a limitless pool of potentialities. Thus, in line with this argument, Margot and Jake are switching among different gender identities, depending on whether they are performing as a heterosexual couple, a homosexual couple, or a queer couple contingent on the social group with whom they engage with. As a result, moving between these different positions also depends upon whether or not they are in the company of Jake's parents, the queer community at Body Politic, or at Barbary Lane. This can also be connected to Mead's concept of the generalized other, since they take on the role of the generalized other when they switch their gender positions according to the social setting. As such, they are aware of the certain social attitudes in each of the social groups, internalizing these social norms and incorporating them into their own performances in the respective situations. Ultimately, despite Margot's adjustment and unfamiliarity with being queer, she would rather be identified as such than as a traditional woman in a heterosexual relationship. However, from a traditional heteronormative perspective, a woman is expected to marry a man, have children, and care for the domestic sphere, while acting appropriately and dressing modestly. Yet, in Margot's case, there is a divergence between rejecting a traditional gender identity and embracing traditional gender values. This divergence occurs because she does not care to embody traditional female gender norms in terms of her appearance or sexuality, but she embraces traditional gender expectations in terms of wanting to become a mother. For instance, she says that, "just the idea of being one half of a mom and dad. So gross" (S01E03). Consequently, she feels that being in a queer relationship creates a "verbal straitjacket when it comes to having kids" (ibid.), because that is not how she envisioned starting a 'proper' family, revealing how she feels that being queer conflicts her desire to have children. However, from Butler's perspective the roles of mother and father become redundant since both are socially constructed. Therefore, each parental role can have the same connotations, without societal expectations to how one should act as a parent. In this

regard, Margot also struggles with her queer identity, because she has internalized traditional norms ingrained in her regarding motherhood, which do not coincide with her supposed queer identity, since she wants to be a traditional mother to her own child, instead of a queer parent embodying both parental roles. However, despite Margot's internalized feelings about motherhood, she also rejects embodying a traditional gender role when she says, "you can't seriously expect me to be a mommy in Lululemon yoga gear with her gender-revealed baby, waiting for daddy to drive us to straight-people glitter parties, right?" (S01E03). This demonstrates that Margot does not want to raise children as a queer couple, yet she rejects the idea of embodying a traditional mother, since this is not how she identifies either, thereby correlating with Butler's argument regarding how there does not exist fixed gender roles. Therefore, seen in relation to Butler's theory, Margot will be considered maternal through the performative acts of being a mother, such as giving birth and raising a child, which Margot intends to do. However, from a traditional perspective, Margot deviates from traditional motherhood, and the idealized version of a woman, since she will be raising a child on her own as a lesbian without the support of a man.

Furthermore, she also deviates from the other queer characters in relation to sexuality and the idea that an open relationship can lead to a successful and meaningful self-reflexive identity process, because she favors the traditional value of monogamy within a relationship. This becomes evident during her discussion with Shawna who asks, "when do you get to explore with other people?" to which Margot responds, "oh my God. What is wrong with you people? I don't actually want to fuck everything that moves. I want to fuck one specific person, and that person was ... *is* Jake" (S01E02). Here, she expresses that she is more traditional and prefers to be in a monogamous relationship rather than determining her identity process based on other people's preferences. Eventually, Margot is confronted with her queer identity when Shawna asks, "why are you so eager to put his needs in front of your own?", questioning why Margot is willing to forego her own values and needs in order to meet Jake's, to which Margot answers, "he's going through a phase, Shawna" (ibid.). Thus, Margot alters her traditional values in order for Jake to explore his own sexuality as part of his self-reflexive identity process, thereby neglecting her own.

Moreover, Margot also struggles with the straining relationship she has with her in-laws, since her and Jake were not accepted as a couple prior to Jake's transition. However, after his transition, they successfully pass as a straight-couple in his family, causing their relationship to be accepted. This becomes evident when Jake's mother says, "so? when are you two having the babies? [...] I'm so happy to think that your baby will have a mommy and a daddy, just like a normal child. A whole

proper family. God works in mysterious ways” (S01E03). Yet, Margot later says that her mother-in-law is in denial about their situation, stating that, “when I was a lesbian, she barely knew my name. Now she’s like “where’s the straight-couple wedding and straight-couple babies?” It’s like “Marisol, do you even know how queer babies are made?”” (ibid.). Here, it appears that Jake’s mother is ignorant towards her own son’s embodiment by assuming that they can have children biologically. However, the fact that they appear to live up to the traditional gender roles causes Margot to be validated in the eyes of her mother-in-law, but despite this acceptance, Margot rejects embodying traditional gender values. This is also emphasized when Margot decides to pursue motherhood on her own, making the choice to deviate from the traditional family constellation. Therefore, despite challenging the biological nature of reproduction, she reinforces the traditional feminine ideal of embodying motherhood.

Furthermore, Margot and Jake eventually separate because of their conflicting gender identities, which causes Margot to embrace her identity as a lesbian and date an older woman named DeDe. During their first meeting, Margot is surprised to learn that DeDe has previously been with women, which is revealed when she asks, “wait, you’re queer?”, to which she replies, “30 years in San Francisco and I still have no idea what that word means. It’s like the price of oil. Changes every day” (S01E04). Here, DeDe’s comment is an expression of how the older generation struggles to understand the changes in contemporary society where the body is under constant reflection. This is particularly due to the self-reflexive identity process, which has become part of the younger generation’s self-realization since modern technologies have created more options for the individual, through the constant flow of new information and ideas. Subsequently, Margot questions DeDe’s self-identification by asking, “you prefer just plain old “dyke”?” to which DeDe responds, “honey, at this point, you’d have to pry it open with a crowbar, so who cares what you call me?” (ibid.). Here, it is evident that DeDe is aware that being an older woman is not traditionally linked with PA in contemporary society where youth is a preferred quality, revealing how the beauty myth creates tensions between generations so that the younger women fear older women and vice versa. This is also rooted in the fact that the young female body has traditionally, from a socio-historical perspective, been desired for its high fertility, wherefore the aspect of youth has presumably been incorporated into the idea of the optimal female body. Contrastingly, DeDe’s body reflects a corpus that is closer to decay in comparison to the younger body, wherefore she does not embody society’s beauty ideals. However, when Margot engages in a sexual relationship with DeDe, the older body is sexualized, which challenges the ideals of beauty in relation to ageism, because the younger woman

is desiring the older woman. As such, despite not embodying society's ideals, DeDe contrasts the depiction of the aging female grotesque and how society endorses the narrative that 'good' is embodied by women through youth and subsequently have come to standardize the perception of female beauty.

On a different note, Margot's physical appearance is untraditional and un-idealized from a religious standpoint, because she has a slim figure that is not associated with maternity. However, in early 20th century, the curvaceous body was substituted with a slender body type with small breasts, slimmer hips, and long legs, making for a more boy-ish look, which Margot's body type resembles. In contemporary society, this androgynous body manifestation can be identified as a queer body, because femininity and masculinity can be attributed both a male and female body depending on the performativity. Yet, she is categorized as a female because of her continuous performative acts as a woman. However, in the queer community, the norms and ideals are different, interchangeable, and unfixed, because the body is used to express sexuality, religion, race, class, gender etc., in a setting where those categories are embodied by multifarious people. In that relation, Mead argues that the body is an apparatus that ensures the origin of the self, while also working as a device that mirrors society and reflects the individual's identity. Therefore, Margot's body functions as an apparatus that creates her true self, embodying both masculine and feminine features whilst mirroring the community she belongs to that embraces diversity among body manifestations. Thus, it can be argued that her body type is more accepted in the queer, subcultural community because it does not have a fixed or favored body ideal in relation to beauty.

Ultimately, in terms of embodying the traditional female ideal of a modest and pure woman, Margot further deviates from this in terms of not refraining from attracting attention from men. This is evident in one scene in particular, where Margot is performing at Body Politic, wearing nothing but small briefs, a silver wig, and pasties to cover her nipples (S01E01). Here, her body is exposed, leaving nothing to the imagination, which can also cause the body to be perceived as ordinary, as argued by Steele, because of how the body is exposed within the environment of Body Politic. In this instance, Margot is appealing to both men and women, who are equally cheering her on, making sexual comments about her performance, which also causes her to do a lap dance on one of the female spectators. As such, given that Margot's body is on display, she is acting against the idealized version of the modest woman, since she is actively seeking the attention of both the male and female spectators by appearing mostly naked in a sexualized manner. Moreover, it can be argued that the ambiguous manifestations at Body Politic make her more confident in her own

body, even though it does not reflect the body ideal dictated by mainstream society. However, she feels comfortable displaying her body, since it involves her own empowerment rather than exemplifying a body type that is supposedly 'perfect' in the eyes of mainstream society. Also, it can be argued that she is engaging in the first act of bodily transgression because in public places, such as bars and nightclubs, one usually wears some type of clothing to cover one's body. Yet, Margot appears naked during her show, thus challenging how it is expected that people wear clothes at public places. Nonetheless, other people at Body Politic also expose their half naked bodies, causing the transgression to no longer be valid. This is also due to the fact that when acting as a transgressor, there is a limitation for how long the act of transgression can be sustained, wherefore even though Margot challenges the societal norms in terms of her appearance, she is prone to end up in a subcultural category, where she is simply mirroring the ideals in that particular subcategory. This is also due to the fact that the ideals of appearance at the bar are ambiguous and unfixed, which means that other women are showing their bodies as well as an act of self-empowerment. Nevertheless, Margot's untraditional way of dressing and behaving in a public domain has become a normative behavior in that particular subcultural context, because she belongs to a subcultural group where societal deviance is considered the norm.

Lastly, in relation to Foucault's argument, Margot's body is arguably caught up in a system of constraints and prohibitions by society, wherefore her sexually charged performance can be considered as an act of defiance against those prohibitions, since she actively uses her body as a means to express and exercise her right to express herself with limitations. Thereby, she releases herself from societal constraints because she feels liberated in terms of utilizing her body as a spectacle, without concerns regarding possible punishment by mainstream society. Finally, the fact that Margot utilizes her body as a political device correlates with the self-empowering agenda at Body Politic, wherefore it demonstrates a critique of contemporary beauty ideals by encouraging alternative body manifestations.

Michael & Benjamin. One of the first things the audience learns about Michael is that he goes to the gym two hours a day, six days a week, which is also apparent due to his highly muscular physique. This excessive gym routine presumably implies that Michael suffers from the Adonis complex, since this is an expression of how men can obsess about achieving a muscular body. Also, in the first episode, Ben refers to Michael as a 'daddy', which is mainly due to the age-gap between them, since Michael is 54 and Ben is 28. This statement reveals how there is a preference or fetish for the

fatherly rendition of the male embodiment, also within in the gay culture. However, it would be misleading and generalizing to postulate that this embodiment is a preferred body performance in gay communities. To elaborate, in homosexual relations, the male body is often expected to adopt either the role of the subordinate, which is traditionally linked to femininity, or as the dominant, which is conventionally associated with masculinity. Therefore, the various traits that the gay body is allowed to encompass are more diverse than just that of one specific embodiment. For this reason, the homosexual male performance can be considered more flexible than that of the traditional heteronormative masculine embodiment, wherefore multiple ideals are bound to occur in the gay community in order to accommodate different preferences. Notably, the gay male embodiment is still considered an inferior re-enactment of the male body, wherefore it is not widely considered an idealized performance. Also, in the case of Michael and Ben, it is interesting to note how the younger man desires the older man, as well as how it is the younger body that is sexually dominant and the older body that is sexually submissive. Traditionally, the sexual codes of conduct in terms of the body imply that the older body is typically more assertive in the sexual act, whereas the younger, and less experienced body, inhabits a more submissive position. Also, the fact that Ben finds Michael physically attractive speaks to a more common belief regarding how the male body does not have the same ‘expiration date’ as the female body. This can partly be explained by how traditional appealing traits of the male body include how it should provide and protect, which are aspects that do not necessarily decrease with age.

Furthermore, the untraditional power dynamic between Michael and Ben highlights how the notion of the traditional and ‘appropriate’ body performance is not widely accommodated and embraced in gay culture. However, society has a tendency to organize same-sex couples into well-known concepts by labeling them as either the man or the woman of the relationship, because they regularly resemble a recognizable gender binary dynamic in an otherwise untraditional relationship. In other words, this emphasizes that society needs structure to cope with untraditional concepts, such as a gay relationship, since it refuses binary gender divisions. Therefore, the untraditional aspect of a same-sex couple challenges the normative expectations of how the body should preform, since the standardized binary gender roles and how they should relate to one another is non-existing. However, this predicament resonates with the core of queer theory, which aims at deconstructing the normative views in terms of the expected paired gender opposition. Also, the concepts of man and woman can only be understood in relation to one another, since they serve as each other’s opposites, wherefore everything that is masculine is the opposite of the feminine and

vice versa. For this reason, the masculine becomes somewhat redundant in the absence of the feminine, which is accentuated by a gay couple, since this type of formation blurs the traditional gender codes that are part of a traditional heteronormative pairing, wherefore these opposites only gain symbolic value when they coexist. Also, in many homosexual body performances, both masculinity and femininity are incorporated, which Michael exemplifies by being sexually subordinate and 'feminine', while also being considerably muscular, which alludes masculinity. In this relation, as categories aimed at distinguishing between different types of body performances, masculinity and femininity contrastingly serve as two signifiers of one body, wherefore the two categories can be said to somewhat neutralize each other in Michael's case.

Moreover, the TV-series comments on how the body is turned into a commodity in contemporary society when Michael says, "God damn it, you're lucky you're so cute" to which Ben replies, "yeah, it's my main currency" (S01E01). Here, the principle of how PA equates a form of human currency is explicitly addressed, wherefore the body can be perceived as a product that fuels the increased pressure to make sure that it constantly appears marketable, since the body is always on display. This can explain why Michael feels an urge to sculpt his body, since this is arguably a successful body performance in society where PA is granted much importance. This also coheres with the panopticon hypothesis, because Michael's need to be muscular is an example of self-policing, since he feels compelled by the societal gaze to embody certain male ideals. Additionally, another example of how Michael's fixation on the body is demonstrated when he expresses what he finds attractive in a man, saying, "oh, in that case, when I turn 90, please remember that I like money, tropical vacations, and that one go-go boy at Beaux with the biceps and the butt" (S01E01). Here, Michael's comment can be considered somewhat dehumanizing, because of the increased focus on the external values of the body, emphasizing the negative effects of PA, because it can cause individuals to disregard the internal human qualities.

Moreover, when the audience learns that Michael has HIV, it conjures connotations about the infected body and from a Christian perspective, one can draw parallels to how sexuality and excessive indulgences are linked to sin. Also, a man lying with another man is further considered an abomination according to the Bible, which has been a reason for religious extremists to often refer to HIV and AIDS as being a punishment from God (Murphy 154). Moreover, HIV is often associated with promiscuous behavior because it speaks to how the individual is exhibiting primal traits when driven by urges and not by virtue and abstinence, wherefore it be argued that this prejudiced discourse further dehumanizes homosexuals, because they are framed as primal.

Besides, since there is no cure for HIV/AIDS, these diseases are forced to be integrated into the individual's self-biography, which can cause a decrease of human value in the eyes of society because the body is often judged based on PA. Thus, even though Michael's exterior can be deemed attractive, his internal physiology can arguably be deemed less desirable, while contrasting the popular idea that the muscular body is equivalent to a healthy and attractive one. Also, since Michael's disease does not manifest itself visibly, he can choose to shield it from the world, which he does towards Ben. However, if he did not conceal his diagnosis, he would presumably be faced with prejudice because a diseased body often signifies fragility and mortality of human beings, which can elicit unpleasant feelings wherefore it is frequently suppressed. In that relation, it becomes evident that the reason why Michael was left by his ex-boyfriend, Harrison, was due to his diagnosis, causing Harrison to exemplify how a contaminated body is rejected, or at least deselected, which also addresses the underlining matter of how the unhealthy body can be considered a liability because it endangers other individuals.

On a different note, a scene that frames the gay culture as having a very open relationship to sex is when Michael and Ben are watching animated gay porn that portrays two young and extremely muscular male bodies. This echoes Bordo's claim, concerning how idealized beauty manifestations often maintain the disappointment in the 'real', providing an illusionary solution to people's insecurities. Thus, if the referential markers that the individual is exposed to are animated and retouched images of the body, then people are bound to be disappointed in their own natural body, since it will never come to mirror the optimized and fabricated body representations endorsed by digitalization. This incident between Michael and Ben also illustrates how there is a hypersexualized focus on the male body in metropolitan gay culture, which is why this subcultural group is sometimes referred to as body fascists. This hypersexualized focus on the male body is exemplified in episode six where Michael and Ben attend a gay wedding where there is a tent for the guest to have sexual encounters in, while the grooms' outfits, or lack hereof, consist of leather harnesses and fully exposed buttocks. As such, this demonstrates how the body is often the focal point in gay culture, wherefore it is turned into a commodity that ultimately seeks to experience 'a quick fix' in terms of sexual bodily gratification, emulating narcissistic behavior. Another interesting aspect is the usage of leather, which is worn by several guests at the wedding, wherefore it exemplifies the second skin. In this context, leather can symbolize the masculine performance because it connotes the trait of dominance, since the material is traditionally retrieved through asserting dominance over other species by the use of strength and power, which is commonly

associated with masculinity. In this connection, the usage of leather can also be related to Steele's theory regarding how clothing can excite curiosity about the body, since it aids in sexualizing and fetishizing it.

On a different note, Michael and Ben discuss celebrities from popular culture whom they believe have high levels of PA. These celebrities include Ryan Reynolds, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Idris Elba, which are men who embody heterosexuality, a muscular physique, and traditional masculine behaviors. These preferences exemplify how there exists a common consensus, regardless of sexuality, about what comprises an ideal male body, thereby supporting the argument that beauty is objective in nature rather than being solely determined by subjectivity. Subsequently, the discussion about the attractive male body causes Michael and Ben to agree on having a threesome, wherefore they decide to create a profile on a dating app using words, such as "athletic couple, well-hung, hot young techie and sexy daddy" in order to effectively attract attention to their bodies (S01E06). In this regard, it is interesting how they refer to themselves by the use of appealing stereotypes, which indicates that it is not only the body that is a selling point, but also the fantasy of how the body can represent certain ideals. In other words, it is also the fantasy of the body and what it is able to mimic that is fetishized and not just the body itself.

Lastly, the show also exemplifies how alternative body manifestations experience prejudice and discrimination, which is illustrated when Ben, being the only African-American at a gay dinner party, corrects one of the middle-aged white men for using the word "tranny". In this scene, he explains why it is important to use certain terminology about minorities, when he says, "what you call someone is important. It's about dignity. It's about visibility... I think we owe that to people. Especially when you're coming from a place of privilege" (S01E04). Subsequently, his statement causes one of the other guests to respond by saying,

"All of it. This entitlement you now have to dignity and visibility as a gay person... Do you even know where that came from? Do you know who built that world? Do you know the cost of that progress? No, of course not. Because it would be more than your generation could ever bear to comprehend. So, if a bunch of old queens wanna sit around a table and use the word tranny... I will not be told of by someone who wasn't fucking there" (ibid.).

Here, their discussion draws attention to the concept of ageism, because Ben's view on how to correctly address certain groups of people is not recognized due to his age, and it is further implied that since Ben was not part of the hardship his opinion is not valid. As such, Ben can be argued to be in a significantly vulnerable social position due to his ethnicity, which has traditionally been considered inferior to the Caucasian race. Besides, one can argue that, despite the fact that all of the men who attend the dinner party have inferior social positions due to their sexuality, they all do to some degree reap the benefits of white male privilege besides Ben. This is due to Ben's vulnerable intersectional identities as a younger, homosexual, and African-American man, which positions him at the bottom of the power hierarchy at the dinner party. This also illustrates how the visual appearance of one's body can affect the value of said person's opinions and the overall value of the self, when it fails to reflect parts of idealized body manifestations. Moreover, when Ben addresses how using politically correct terminology to refer to specific social groups, he recognizes how this practice is a way of validating and respecting their given embodiments. Therefore, one can assume that Ben, having a particularly vulnerable social identity, understands more than any of the other guests how referring to marginalized groups in a respectful manner is a way of integrating them and normalizing their unidealized body performances. Additionally, another guest at the party asks, "why is your generation obsessed with labels?" (S01E04). Generally, labels can be considered important markers in terms of describing, categorizing, and identifying the body. As a consequence, within the younger generation, there is a tendency to produce a vast amount of additional sub-categorical labels to more concisely specify aspects regarding sexuality and gender. Ultimately, this challenges traditional body categorizations, such as man and women or gay and straight, suggesting that they have become somewhat inadequate when describing the body and the narrative that it is immersed in.

"Ani & Raven". The identity project of Ani and Raven is a manifestation of the self-reflexive process, because the twins, whose real names are Jennifer and Jonathan, attempt to become recognized on social media, which is evident during when Jennifer says, "we're two months behind on rent, right? And we need to make money fast. What if, like, we tried to be famous on Instagram?" (S01E01). In addition to their Instagram account, the twins decide to create a new look and change their identities in order to stand out by taking on the personas of "Ani and Raven". This is exemplified at Anna's birthday party when Margot comments on Jennifer's different look to which she responds, "oh, actually, I'm going by Ani now [...] You should follow us on Instagram"

followed by Jonathan's comment, "it's "Twintertainment1" totally bananas that "Twintertainment" was already taken, right?" (ibid.). This reveals how the twins are focused on creating awareness about their new personas, whilst distancing themselves from their previous identities. Besides, the fact that they have to use the name "Twintertainment1" also emphasizes the irony in their attempt to be original, since the username is a manifestation of being a copy. Yet, they attempt to stand out by utilizing their bodies to create an interactive art piece, where people write their assumptions about them on their bodies. As Jonathan describes it, "it's kind of a comment on the commodification of identity" (ibid.). Thus, asking people to write on their bodies ultimately makes the sign literal, because of the explicit nature of physically 'labeling' the body based on the opinions of others, thereby drawing attention to the way in which this frequently occurs when people judge others based on physical appearance. In this relation, their body manifestations can also be related to Butler's theory regarding gender performativity, because they use non-binary names on their social media and are always dressed similarly. Thus, they are challenging traditional notions regarding masculinity and femininity, because their physical appearances come across as experimental and gender neutral, manifesting their queer identities. However, their self-reflexive identity project causes them to become self-centered, which is revealed at Body Politic when they are sitting at the bar where Jonathan says, "dude, we have 722 followers already. People are loving the party content" to which Jennifer responds, "wait, do you think Raven would say "content"? It's a little corporate" (ibid.). Evidently, no one at the bar shows interest in their social media progress, which emphasizes their narcissistic behavior. Also, Jennifer's comment regarding Jonathan's choice of words also highlights that they constantly reflect on how to embody their personas, wanting to distance themselves from dominating characteristics associated with power within mainstream culture, in their attempt to appear unique and challenge society's ideals. Moreover, their visual performance, on the stage at Body Politic, can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the self-reflexive process, because their show portrays their bodies as blank canvases splattered with paint while they articulate, "*who am I? Who am I? Identity, oh! It's itchy and sticky, what? Be heard, be seen – Unstick your sticky! Identity, oh! It's itchy and sticky – Unstick your sticky*" (S01E03). This metaphoric imagery implies that identity is something that human beings attach to themselves like a sticky label that can be removed, supporting the idea that identity is fluid and not pre-determined. Besides, referring to identity as being itchy suggests that there is an irritable element to it, because identity is something that people constantly have to reflect on and solve as a mystery. In this relation, the twins visualize the complexity of identity by using multicolored body visuals to

emphasize how the identity project can often seem overwhelming for the individual, because it project can be compared to an artwork that one has to create, which is often influenced by society's body ideals and gender expectations. As such, it becomes clear that their identity project is a way to rebel against society's body and beauty ideals, because they deviate from the norms, whilst breaking the 'rules' of fashion, consciously using their bodies and clothes as communication tools to express their 'unique' identities. This can be related to Steele's argument regarding how fashion is a powerful entity, since it attracts attention and creates curiosity about the body, demonstrated when the twins utilize makeup and clothing to constantly change their physical appearances in order to remain relevant and preserve the interest of their followers. However, their physical expressions differ from the way in which clothes have previously been used to highlight the differences between the two sexes, since they utilize clothing to erase this binary distinction, rather than accentuating it.

In addition, their goal of reaching as many followers as possible causes them to utilize social media in their deceiving attempt to portray their lifestyle in a grandiose manner in order to achieve a socially valued self, which becomes clear when they try to convince DeDe into letting them host a party in her mansion. In this example, Jennifer tries to exploit her by saying, "in the spirit of un-othering the other, we propose drawing back the velvet curtain and streaming the life of an actual one-percenter on Instagram, revealing the true tale of privilege, unvarnished, and real" (S01E06). This reveals how the twins attempt to turn themselves into a commodity in order to gain recognition, emphasizing how they believe that material goods will grant them popularity, whilst contradicting their claim of revealing "unvarnished and real" content. Likewise, their attempt to remove feelings of alienation by un-othering the other when supposedly bringing people closer together arguably has the opposite effect on social media, because people ultimately risk alienation from themselves when they are constantly portraying the 'best' yet less authentic version of the self. This is also the case of Jonathan and Jennifer, since their actual lives are not reminiscent of what they portray on social media, because they spend most of their time getting high, which can also be interpreted as an escape from reality. Thus, in line with Giddens' argument in relation to consumer society, their joint self-reflexive identity process can be regarded as a manifestation of narcissism, due to their body obsessions and desire for recognition on social media. Additionally, it also reveals how they are dependent on others in order to handle unexpected changes in their lives. This is demonstrated when they face the reality of possibly being homeless, causing them to manipulate and exploit DeDe for housing and grandiose social media content in order to maintain their online validation. Similarly, it can be argued that their social media obsession is a way to compensate for

their inner emptiness, because they get temporary excitement and energy whenever they gain new followers, emphasizing how their self-esteem is dependent on being in the spotlight and enjoying their ‘fifteen minutes of fame’. As such, it becomes clear that their behavior emphasizes Nevicka’s claim that narcissism consists of a sense of uniqueness, grandiosity, and desire to exemplify an overly positive ideal self. Hence, the twins can be said to embody grandiose narcissism and public self-absorption, because they take advantage of others, have inflated self-esteems, and exemplify feelings of entitlement and arrogance. Additionally, they are concerned with other people’s thoughts about them, which is exemplified in their continuous need to feel admired by others. However, their personal embodiment is subjected to a continuous change of style, which also draws attention to how the self-reflexive identity project can ultimately make the individual feel lost. This is also evident in the case of Jonathan and Jennifer, because they eventually realize that they miss who they were at the beginning, exemplified when Jennifer articulates, “I miss Jonathan sometimes” to which he responds, “yeah, I miss Jennifer” (S01E06). As such, this reveals that the self-reflexive process can be overwhelming and exhausting for the individual, due to the constant reflection, self-contemplation, and possible confusion. Hence, this correlates with Giddens’ argument that this ever changing condition is not beneficial for the individual, because it creates existential uncertainty. Thus, the fact that they eventually begin to miss their old selves can be considered a critique of the narcissism epidemic that exists in contemporary society, where self-admiration and need for social-recognition dominate social media platforms, because people ultimately become exhausted when constantly having to revise their self-expressions. In addition, one can also argue that the deceptive nature of their social media is causing them to become more alienated from their actual selves, because they only portray positive and ‘impressive’ life events, thereby blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, causing them to become disassociated from their authentic selves. Thus, Jonathan and Jennifer challenge contemporary society’s obsession with appearances and the constant desire to expose and promote oneself, because they come to realize the superficial nature of social media, since it does not provide them with loving commitments that are genuine and long lasting. Also, the fact that their behavior is often presented in a humorous manner can also be interpreted as a critique of the superficial attempts to seek recognition on social media within contemporary society. This is arguably due to the fact that humor functions as a way to emphasize the absurdity of this type of behavior and the way in which the extension of the self is turned into a public spectacle, constantly subjected to either praise or shame on social media. Ultimately, their situation can be interpreted as a critique of trying to live up to society’s beauty

ideals. On the contrary, when everything becomes relative, the individual is arguably not sufficient in its own naturalness, because the freedom of self-expression can result in a pressure of having to be able to stand out and appear unique. This is similar to the pressure of having to live up to norms and ideals that are prescribed by mainstream society, which arguably further complicates the individual's personal embodiment.

Similarly, another character in the series named Claire exemplifies a contemporary tendency regarding the way in which people manipulate the content they share in our medialized culture when she says, "you think that matters? The truth is irrelevant. I can edit all of you out of this. I can make this story whatever I want it to be" (S01E10). To elaborate, her statement reflects how mainstream and popular culture manipulate the truth through retouched body depictions, but also how a majority of people on social media utilize filters in order to imitate what they believe to be an idealized depiction of the human body. As a result, by optimizing their appearances by the use of technology, they will appear to portray an 'appropriate' body. This also coheres with Giddens' notion regarding how people live as though they are surrounded by mirrors through which people search for the appearance of the unblemished socially valued self. As a consequence of the widespread discourses of the perfected body, people will often try to mimic these depictions because within these lie an implied element of social validation. However, in the same instance, the queer community responds to Claire's threat about altering the narrative of her documentary by saying "done being erased" (ibid.). Here, the queer people refer to how they are a marginalized group that have historically been suppressed because they deviate from traditional norms. This also speaks to how their embodiments have been considered shameful and left out of the public, consequently deemed as being inferior body performances. Hence, their statement is powerful because it functions as body activism that challenges society's mainstream beauty ideals and discrimination of queer embodiments through lack of queer representations in the media, drawing attention to the fact that they should be included and recognized within society.

The Queer Community. A considerable amount of characters in *Tales of the City* are examples of untraditional body performances namely due to factors, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism, queerness, and drag. This is because all of these concepts exemplify deviance of heteronormativity, which has normalized and idealized heterosexuality through various discursive practices, suggesting that embodying your sex through gender 'appropriate' body performances serve as a 'proper' body manifestation. Also, Ida, a drag queen from Body Politic, verbalizes this

form of bodily disobedience when she says, “cause if there’s one thing I know about queers, it’s that we’re not too keen on obedience” (S01E10). In relation to Ida, the performance of a drag queen is to literally perform the stereotypical features of a woman. As such, Ida’s performance as a drag queen can be considered both a parody and a pastiche to the female body performance, but also a parody of the male body. For instance, a male body that incorporates any female attributes into the given body performance is often perceived as less of a man, because femininity has traditionally been associated with weakness, wherefore this male body performance is often deemed inadequate. Hence, the male body has conventionally been expected to embody masculinity that stands in clear contrast to femininity. Additionally, since it is most commonly gay men who perform drag, the bodily transgression they engage in can be considered minor because they already exemplify facets of bodily deviance. Similarly, being gay can also be considered a bodily transgression, since it exemplifies a ‘failed’ body performance that is nonconformist to the binary gender division because it rejects heterosexuality. Moreover, the reason why a drag performance can be interpreted as a pastiche to the female body performance is because it merges the traditional masculine autonomous traits with the feminine exterior, thereby implying that femininity also encompasses these traits. Besides, within popular culture, drag has also reached cult status, since it is considered an art form that pays tribute to the feminine performance. Contrastingly, drag can also be considered a parody, without being derogatory to women, since it focuses on entertainment, wherefore it does not exclusively entail an actualizing of internal feminine traits. Also, the parodical aspect of drag lies within the hyper feminine body performance, which is exemplified by Ida who wears sparkling dresses accompanied with big wigs and excessive make-up. In addition, this is also exemplified by another drag performer, namely a man with a full moustache and a hairy body covered in glitter, who is wearing make-up while being decorated with different floral accessories. This visual body manifestation, where the male body is clearly noticeable while at the same time being accessorized highly effeminate, can be argued to evoke feelings of ambivalence. This is due to the fact that the body is engaging in two contrasting narratives that are traditionally perceived as two opposing forms of expressions. This type of body manifestation is commonly known as ‘gender fuck’, since it is ‘fucking’ (i.e. disrupting) the normative expressions of gender, causing confusion about the body that appears somewhat androgynous. Furthermore, a lesbian woman is interviewed in the same episode explaining how “it felt like I was being forced in a girl costume for Halloween or something” (S01E06). In this relation, the dresses she was expected to wear as a woman further exemplifies the gender norms and codes that society inflicts on people through socialization and

symbolic gender attribution. Interestingly, she refers to the dress as a costume, thereby implying that a dress is an integrated accessory when embodying a woman. Her statement also reflects how she struggles to live up to traditional gender norms, because wearing a dress does not reflect the authentic version of her self. In other words, the dress she was expected to wear did not cohere with her inner narrative and thus utilizing a dress as a second skin would be incoherent as an extension of the self.

Evidently, when talking about the queer environment, it is apparent that they actively engagement in the self-reflexive process, because they partake in contemplating and revising concepts that appear inherent and somewhat fixed in terms of identity. The concepts of sexuality and gender are often mistaken as fixed truths, since they reflect the behavior of the majority of people. These widespread body performances are rooted in tradition and reflect society's repeated practices, echoing Butler's theory, which states that these performances have become internalized and subsequently perceived as genuine and 'natural' body performances. Regardless, when homosexual and transgender people question and challenge these inherited practices, they showcase a direct commitment to the self-reflexive identity process, exemplifying how modern society allows everything to be reflected upon. Similarly, it is interesting how the bar is called Body Politic, since it implies that the body is a political device, which emphasizes the immense symbolic value the body inhabits, since the body partakes in the narrative that consequently mirrors the self. Correspondingly, unconventional performances, such as drag, homosexuality, or transgenderism can all be considered forms of body activism that reclaim the bodily narrative and challenge traditional heteronormative narratives that mainstream beauty ideals originate from. This is also emphasized when Ida says, "see, everything we do here is about empowerment" (S01E04). In other words, the different kinds of body performances at Body Politic aim at not only reclaiming the narratives, but also the ownership of these narratives that have traditionally been influenced by societal constraints. As such, a person who exposes one's body at Body Politic is only objectified or ridiculed on his/her own terms, wherefore ownership of the bodily narrative depends on the individual, which is presumably a way to criticize society's objectifying and/or mocking gaze.

Insatiable

Following the analysis of *Tales of the City*, this section will feature an analysis of the TV-series, *Insatiable*, in order to examine how the body manifestations within this series comment on contemporary beauty ideals. The reason for including *Insatiable* is because it specifically addresses

how beauty ideals affect both men and women in their struggle to embody specific ideals, wherefore it is relevant to examine due to the explicit focus on the body within this series.

Patty Bladell. At the beginning of the series, the viewer is introduced to Patty who struggles with her own body image, which becomes apparent in her initial monologue where she says,

“I’ve heard stories of girls who grow up happy and well adjusted...with a healthy relationship to food and their bodies. Screw those bitches! I went on my first diet at just eight years old. For as long as I can remember, I’ve been hungry. Insatiable, really. I spent my entire adolescence hating my body, the target of bullying and cruel jokes. So, while my classmates were out losing their virginity, I was at home, stuffing another hole, binging my brains out” (S01E01).

Here, it becomes clear that body image is a dominant theme within the series when Patty’s internal struggles are emphasized in relation to how she has been subjected to an ideal that she did not successfully embody. As a result, this has caused her to be rejected and bullied by her peers, which contributes to the fact that she feels dissatisfied with her own self. However, Patty’s life takes a drastic turn after she has been assaulted, causing her mouth to be wired shut, wherefore she loses weight because it restricts her ability to eat. In this connection, the mouth wire can be interpreted as a symbolic indicator of patriarchy and the way in which it has restricted women’s position in society to being passive and looking beautiful. Also, the mouth wire silences Patty, which suggests that a woman’s value is still attributed her physical appearance within contemporary society, which arguably explains why Patty struggles with her own body image, because the value is predominantly based on physical appearance.

However, after her weight loss Patty has to adjust to her new body and the fact that the world perceives her differently and treats her in a more favorable manner. This becomes apparent when Bob is introduced to her for the first time and immediately notices her beauty, causing him to want her to enter the pageant world, thinking, “she was a diamond in the rough. A beauty queen just waiting to happen [...] I knew from the moment I saw her, Patty was my great white hope” (S01E01). As such, the fact that Bob changes his initial opinion about Patty due to her physical appearance emphasizes how PA causes her to have more opportunities after her weight loss. Besides, the fact that he refers to her as his “great white hope” indicates that Patty embodies an

exclusive societal beauty ideal, which is strengthened by the fact that a possible connotation of the word 'white' implies a racial bias, whilst creating a parallel to the virtuous characteristics of ancient female beauty ideals. In addition, it becomes apparent that Patty is now considered attractive, which is also revealed following her makeover after which she is admired by the gazes of both men and women, when she is walking down the hallway at her school. In this scene, it becomes apparent how her 'improved' physical appearance causes her to be objectified by the guys, while her appearance is envied and desired by the girls, emphasizing how Patty is a manifestation of the attractiveness bias while being an embodiment of the beauty myth. Yet, Patty is particularly excited about the way in which men are noticing her, which is revealed during a conversation with Nonnie where she says, "did I tell you? Bob called me pretty. Sorry, no one's ever said that to me before", which Nonnie rejects by saying, "I do. all the time" to which Patty responds, "yeah. But it's different, you're a girl. He's a man. And a total DILF" (S01E01). This demonstrates how Patty is influenced by traditional gender norms, since her statement reveals that she feels dependent on a man to validate her beauty, thereby supporting the power of the patriarchy, because Patty's increased male attention is arguably what causes her to realize the power and value of her PA. In this connection, Bob encourages her to utilize her beauty to her own advantage by saying, "start reading about Catherine the Great, Cleopatra, anyone who uses their beauty for power. This testimony, it's not just about facts, it's a seduction" (S01E01). This draws attention to how historical and prominent women have utilized beauty as a powerful tool, presumably due to the fact that patriarchy has taught women that their primary asset was to look beautiful. This ideology has arguably been internalized as norms, which explains why Patty begins to utilize her PA in order to receive favorable treatment, which is demonstrated when she benefits from her beauty on several occasions. For instance, during her hearing, Patty is performing the role as a 'nice' girl, wearing a white dress to illustrate innocence, which exemplifies how physical appearance has a significant influence because it aids in the process of evaluating her personal character. This can be related to how the body functions as an extension of the self, since Patty's body manifestation creates certain connotations about her as a person. Notably, she successfully manages to utilize her body to deceive the jury when she is performing the role as the innocent 'girl next door', which subsequently causes Bob to validate her achievement by saying, "you won your first. Being in front of a judge, that is the biggest pageant there is" (S01E01). This suggests that a person's body manifestation is determined by the role that the individual performs, which can vary depending on the social setting, thus correlating with Steele's argument.

Contrastingly, Patty uses her body differently when she takes advantage her sex appeal to distract the witness, which causes him to testify for her benefit, demonstrating how PA can be used to influence the outcome of situations. Evidently, it also becomes apparent how her perception of her new body causes her to have grandiose fantasies about herself, exemplified when she is standing in front of a mirror, thinking,

“Usually, when I looked into the mirror, I could only focus on my flaws. That my stomach wasn’t flat enough, my thighs weren’t thin enough. My butt wasn’t high enough. But I finally had something else to focus on. It made me feel invincible. King Arthur had Excalibur, and now, I had a crown. I was going to be a queen and nothing could get in my way” (S01E05).

In this example, Patty has grandiose thoughts about herself after having won the pageant competition, comparing herself to the heroic and influential King Arthur, thus emphasizing her ‘larger than life’ ideal that she strives to embody. This is also reminiscent of the way in which body manifestations during the Edwardian period were often influenced by grandiose fantasies about the self, as well as being a manifestation of private self-absorption. Therefore, this correlates with Lasch’s argument regarding the fact the narcissism cannot be described as being either a masculine or feminine behavior, since it does not recognize sexual differences. Yet, interestingly, she compares herself to a man rather than a woman, which suggests that she does not mirror herself in the passive role of a traditional woman, thereby challenging traditional gender norms.

On another note, Patty can be said to engage in a self-reflexive identity process because she is perceived as a new person in the eyes of society, which does not correlate with her self-perception, wherefore she has to reflect on and adjust to her ‘new’ identity. For instance, Magnolia tells her, “just because you’re skinny now doesn’t mean you can steal someone else’s boyfriend. Got it?”, and Brick cannot believe that she is the same person when he says, “no way. uh, Fatty Patty’s huge” (S01E02). Here, Brick’s comment illustrates how Patty was previously perceived negatively because she did not resemble mainstream beauty ideals. Contrastingly, Magnolia’s comment suggests that Patty has become a threat due to her new physical appearance. Hence, Patty’s situation can be compared to Mead’s concept of the ‘me’ and how it influences the individual’s understanding of oneself, since Patty arguably has a change in her ‘me’ due to her new self-perception, because perceives herself differently through the eyes of other people after her weight

loss. Additionally, a significant part of Patty's self-reflexive process is that she wants to overcome her past by showcasing her new body to people who have bullied her in the past and subsequently getting revenge, which is addressed when she thinks, "I want revenge against anyone who has ever been mean to me" and "I could be famous [...] So all those jack holes who made fun of me will be so jealous, they can't even breathe" (S01E01). As such, after Patty experiences a taste of victory, she begins to utilize the power of being a 'pretty' girl in order to get validation through people's jealousy. However, Bob emphasizes that "the best revenge is a life well lived", whilst encouraging her to be a role model for girls who struggle with their weight, instead of striving for vengeance (ibid.). Yet, the fact that he wants her to encourage other girls to lose weight by illustrating its positive side effects is arguably a manifestation of the prejudice and the stigma towards overweight people, because it implies that that their embodiments are insufficient, wherefore they have to embody society's ideals in order to achieve an unblemished socially valued self. Hence, one can argue that Patty's function as a role model counteracts the purpose of helping, because it is essentially based on a premise that over-weight people have to become skinny in order to be considered successful. Besides, it can be argued that Patty's awareness of people's changed perceptions of her is what fuels her passion to get revenge, wherefore it becomes apparent that she exemplifies narcissism and public self-absorption, because she worries about the opinions of others in her attempt to get validation.

Furthermore, in relation to Foucault's theory regarding power relations, the pageant world can be said to represent a power structure because it is influenced by traditional gender norms and ideals that the contestants have to abide by and embody in order to gain success. This can be seen when Bob explains how being a beauty queen is not only measured in terms of physical appearance, but also in relation to one's behavior, saying, "when is the last time you heard of a beauty queen slash high school dropout slash blackout drunk?" (S01E02). Here, Bob stresses that Patty has to correct her behavior in order for her to win the title as Miss American Lady, which reveals how Patty is restricted by patriarchal norms, emphasized by the fact that Bob arguably polices her behavior similar to the way in which a traditional father would when raising a daughter. As such, it is necessary to change her behavior, in order to conform to society's traditional gender norms, which supports Gehlen's notion that human beings need institutions to provide guidelines for how to behave in order to achieve a successful social identity. Simultaneously, this further demonstrates how Patty's behavior deviates from traditional femininity, because her body performance does not exemplify 'appropriate' female behavior. Hence, it becomes apparent that self-regulation is

necessary if she wants to become a beauty queen, emphasizing how she is under pressure to live up to traditional ideals of femininity that are particularly reinforced within the pageant world. This is also illustrated when Bob stresses that Patty has to maintain a proper reputation, revealed when she shows up with her breasts taped together in order to look more attractive with the intention of seducing him. Here, he responds by saying, “I said skinny is magic, not skanky is magic”, which emphasizes how ancient beauty ideals that entail how women are supposed to be modest and virtuous are still reinforced (S01E03). In addition, this scene can be considered a critique of the sexualized and cosmetically enhanced beauty ideals in contemporary society, illustrated in the way in which Patty’s body manifestation arguably functions as a parody of the stereotypical ‘bimbo’. Evidently, it becomes apparent that the pageant ideal supposedly equals perfection, which is also exemplified when Bob suggests that Patty should ease into the pageant world by entering the Miss Magic Jesus competition. However, the title creates connotations to something that is divine, wherefore this contrasts something that is easily attained, thus signifying how Patty has to live up to high standards in order to embody supposed perfection. As a result, Patty becomes obsessed with her own body manifestation, thinking that winning the pageants will be the solution to her problems because it will re-write her narrative. Also, in relation to her own self-perception, she is heavily influenced by Bob who encourages her to be body confident and redefine herself, which is demonstrated when he says, “trust me, skinny is magic. You are not Fatty Patty anymore” to which she responds, “so, who am I then?” followed by Bob who says, “whoever you wanna be. Today is the day we write your pageant narrative, the story that you will tell on the pageant stage [...] You can be the former fatty turned class president, or cheerleader, or homecoming queen. You are a blank slate. So, let’s make you a pretty picture” (S01E02). Bob’s statement emphasizes the myth that a person can accomplish anything as long as he/she is beautiful in the eyes of society. Besides, the fact that Patty has to convey a narrative implies that she has to perform an identity that represents an improved and ideal version of herself in order to turn her into a ‘pretty picture’ in the eyes of others. This can be compared to Steele’s argument regarding how people are always on stage when interacting with others, and how the ‘roles’ that an individual performs are not necessarily expressions of the authentic self, but rather manifestations of the ideal self. Besides, Patty was previously limited, because people’s judgment restricted her ability to express who she wants to be. However, Patty eventually realizes that she can write a new narrative in order to achieve a positive social identity, revealed when she thinks, “maybe Bob was right. I could write a whole new story. I felt like Cinderella” (S01E02). Subsequently, she states that, “for the first time

in my life, I was pure potential. The world was my oyster” (ibid.). So, Patty begins a self-reflexive process where she strives to form a self-biography that expresses her ‘ideal’ self, emphasized through her beauty pageant narrative. However, the fact that she felt limited before her weight loss can be compared to Bordo’s claim regarding how people who are bullied because of their weight are likely to internalize the scrutiny, since Patty has internalized society’s negative attitude towards being overweight by thinking that she had no potential in the past. This draws attention to how society’s stigmatization generates low self-esteem and body image issues amongst individuals who do not resemble society’s beauty ideals.

Interestingly, although Patty physically resembles society’s female beauty ideal, her behavior does not correlate with traditional femininity, since it is arguably an expression of traditional masculine behavior, wherefore this correlates with Butler’s notion that masculinity can apply to either sex. This is the case in relation to Patty, because she is an active subject that deliberately uses her sexuality to her own advantage, whilst refusing to embody the traditional role of a woman as being a passive object. This can be related to the way in which the body can be perceived as a influential currency, which is demonstrated when Patty utilizes her body as a means of persuasion to gain access to the evidence material, thus ‘trading’ her body for benefits (S01E02). Similarly, when Nonnie tries to talk her out of using her sexuality to get revenge at the expense of her own purity, she answers by saying, “nah, I’d rather have revenge” (S01E01). Shortly thereafter, the power of beauty is demonstrated when Patty is portrayed as a ‘femme fatale’ when she uses her body to seduce the guy who assaulted her, leading to his demise. These examples illustrate how Patty contrasts traditional female archetypes that entail that a woman should be pure and virtuous because Patty is willing to sacrifice her virginity. Besides, her casual attitude towards her own sexuality can also be related to Symington’s claim regarding how narcissists do not value long-term commitments, since Patty rejects the traditional idea of the intimate bond that arises from a sexual interaction. However, throughout the series, Patty engages in several relationships with different guys, some of which resemble the stereotypical ‘bad boy’ or ‘the most popular guy at school’, despite the fact that she does not value the intimate union with a partner, thereby suggesting that she merely exploits them for confirmation. This is demonstrated when she is intimate with Brick while thinking,

“For years, losing my virginity felt just as impossible as losing the weight [...]

But now... I wanted to take out my new body and see what it could do. I still

wasn't totally comfortable in my new skin, but feeling Brick's skin against mine was driving me crazy. I was making out with the guy I'd been crushing on since junior high. It was my schoolgirl fantasy come true. I didn't care if it was love. For the first time in my life, I was hungry for something other than food. And I wanted more" (S01E06).

Here, Patty functions as an active subject because she initiates the physical interaction with Brick, whom she perceives as her conquest due to his high level of PA. Also, she develops a hunger for male attention that is fueled by her fascination with "what her new body can do" in relation to how she arouses the opposite sex. This also correlates with Symington's claim that narcissists often seek temporary excitement and validation from others through sexual encounters. In addition, another reason why she pursues relationships with guys is arguably due to her internalized heteronormative ideal, illustrated when she says, "I lost 70 pounds. So now it's my turn to get the guy" (ibid.). Similarly, when she is intimate with Christian she thinks that, "I had spent so much of my life thinking I was cursed to be fat and unlucky...and alone. But I had finally found true love...and now, I felt blessed. Here was this beautiful, sexy, amazing guy, and he had picked me" (S01E08). Hence, it becomes apparent that despite the fact that she does not embody traditional femininity, Patty is influenced by traditional heteronormative ideals when she thinks that displaying 'true love' between a man and a woman will be an advantage that will cause other people to envy her. However, her idea of love is arguably distorted, since her statement reveals that she associates love with their affirmation of her beauty. This reveals how she has internalized the beauty myth, because she believes that she only deserves to experience love and happiness because she is considered 'beautiful' in the eyes of the majority. However, Patty's internalized scrutiny is challenged when a woman at the church opposes her view, telling her that, "being skinny doesn't mean shit if you're ugly on the inside" (S01E06). This statement challenges the stereotypical narrative of the skinny and 'beautiful' girl getting the 'hot' guy, as well as the common misconception that beauty is solely measured based on physical appearance. In this connection, Patty's self-absorption is criticized from a religious perspective, which is also demonstrated when the priest says that "a woman worthy of winning Miss Magic Jesus needs to focus on serving others, instead of self-gratification" (S01E06). Subsequently, Patty questions the issue of self-gratification, saying, "I deserve to be happy. I've spent years being miserable" to which the priest replies, "the source of all misery is selfishness" (ibid.). This is arguably an indirect critique of the

way in which the focus on self-realization within contemporary society is often manifested in self-gratification when trying to embody the ‘ideal’ self, without being mindful of the feelings of others. This is one of Patty’s main issues during the series because she thinks that the way to avoid feeling miserable is by achieving a ‘perfect’ body. For instance, she temporarily ends the relationship with Christian because she says that she is “trying not to be selfish” (ibid.). Yet, she spontaneously ends her relationship with Brick, subsequently dragging Christian along, thinking, “I knew exactly what I wanted. And exactly what I had to do [...] Pastor Mike was wrong. It wasn’t time to be selfless... It was time for me to finally get what I want” (ibid.). Thus, Patty’s disillusion with the Christian notion that happiness can only be achieved when people learn to behave in a selfless manner, which illustrates how religion has arguably lost its credibility in contemporary society where human beings have increasingly become more self-righteous and occupied with their own self-actualization.

Furthermore, despite the fact that Patty embodies society’s beauty ideals after her weight loss, she still struggles to embody her authentic self, because her self-esteem is still influenced by the fact that she has internalized the criticism she endured when she was overweight. Therefore, Patty continues to have negative thoughts about herself despite being validated by others. This is revealed on several occasions when she is reminded of experiences from the past, seen in the form of flashbacks. For instance, this can be seen when Patty is standing in the school cafeteria, thinking, “I was anxious. Stressed. Paralyzed with fear. Sure, I was scared I might be a murdering arsonist, but that was nothing compared to facing a high school cafeteria [...] I was used to being invisible [...] I needed to find a place where the new me fit in” (S01E02). Here, Patty’s irrational emotions emphasize that she has difficulty adjusting to her new identity, because she is still influenced by her past experiences, despite thinking about herself as a new person. This is also revealed when she is invited to sit next to the ‘popular’ girls, which causes her to think, “for the first time in my life, could I actually be popular?” (ibid.). However, even though they do not recognize her, she ultimately leaves the table when she sees the girl who bullied her in the past. In this case, Patty’s thoughts reveal her internal conflict when she tells herself that, “maybe everybody else had forgotten about Fatty Patty, but I couldn’t let her go” (ibid.). Thus, her identity conflict causes her to continuously struggle with her own self-image, wherefore it can be argued that Patty’s issues are fueled by the fact that she cannot link her own identity and self-perception with people’s current perceptions of her. This is also demonstrated prior to the charity for people who struggle with body image and eating disorders, where Patty experiences an emotional breakdown due to the fact that

she is dissatisfied with her body in a bikini. In this scene, Patty is crying on the dressing room floor, saying, “I’m gross”, to which Nonnie responds, “no, you’re not, you’re beautiful”. Subsequently, Patty denies it by stressing, “I’m ugly. On the outside and on the inside. I hurt Bob, I hurt you”, causing Nonnie to say, “Patty, stop! When you’re mad at yourself about something, you always decide that you’re fat”, to which she responds, “I am fat. I’m disgusting, and fat, and awful and I don’t deserve to live” (S01E05). At the beginning of this scene, the series utilizes dramatic music to accentuate Patty’s emotions, which is arguably done to illustrate the irony in her distorted body image. In addition, her dissatisfaction with her own body correlates with Bruch’s definition of perpetual disturbances, because Patty clearly overestimates her body size. Also, Patty’s statements reflect how she has internalized society’s stigmatization, whilst demonstrating the tendency of never feeling content with one’s body. This is consistent with Bordo’s claim regarding how many people are in constant pursuit of perfection due to feelings of never being good enough, wherefore they search for ways to improve and perfect the body.

Moreover, the fact that the girls intend to showcase their slender figures during a charity for people who struggle with eating disorders, is also ironic since it is arguably counterproductive in order to prevent body image and eating disorders. In this connection, Patty also questions the appropriateness of sexualizing themselves at the charity, to which Magnolia responds, “yeah, it’s for a good cause, girl” (S01E05). This reveals how Magnolia and the other girls have internalized the societal gaze, because they believe that showcasing their bodies will be an effective way to raise money, drawing attention to how the female body is often sexualized within commercials due to the common belief that ‘sex sells’. This is arguably a critique of how the ‘attractive’ body is taken advantage of when it is utilized as an effective currency in contemporary society. Likewise, the series also comments on how women are often sexualized when Patty becomes an ambassador for Wiener Taco and receives the title of “Wiener Queen”, which arguably functions as a humoristic critique of the fact that the female body is often sexualized in order to appeal to the male gaze, emphasized in the sexual connotations of the word ‘wiener’.

On a different note, the fact that Patty is still influenced by the negative perceptions that characterized her previous self eventually causes her to doubt the authenticity of her new identity, since the self-biography she is currently creating is centered around erasing the past, instead of incorporating it into her narrative. Nonetheless, Patty questions the motive behind her assault in the courtroom when asking, “are you saying I deserve what happened? Just because I was fat?” (S01E01). This arguably raises a question regarding how overweight people are treated less

favorably because they do not resemble society's beauty ideals, wherefore it can be interpreted as a critique of the way in which PA often includes certain benefits. In this connection, she also tells Bob that, "I'm afraid if I get fat again, you won't think I'm beautiful" to which he responds, "you are beautiful. Inside and out" (ibid.). Here, her statement draws attention to how society's beauty ideals reinforce the myth that one has to embody traditional femininity and be thin in order to be considered beautiful. Hence, when Bob tells Patty that she is beautiful "inside and out", it can be questioned whether or not he would have made the same statement if she did not embody society's standards of beauty, revealing how he exemplifies the attractiveness bias.

Ultimately, the pressure to live up to the ideals within the pageant community also causes Patty to struggle with her own self-regulation. This can be seen when she is standing in front of a mirror in her underwear while pinching the flesh on her hips, thinking, "my demon was out and she was hungry. Insatiable. I still felt empty. Like the same pissed off fat girl. And I would have done anything to make that feeling go away" (S01E01). Here, there is a double meaning in the word 'hungry' because it emphasizes how she is hungry for revenge but also hungry in the literal sense because she has to restrict her food intake, which causes her to constantly fixate on food. Notably, this can be compared to Foucault's theory regarding the societal inspecting gaze, which Patty has internalized wherefore she is self-policing because she feels that she has to live up to certain expectations in order to remain beautiful. This is also exemplified when she is about to eat a chocolate bar but instead throws it away as an act of self-regulation. Also, the fact that she describes herself as a demon draws attention to how society's discourses often dehumanize overweight people when stigmatized by society. Yet, one can also argue that this is a stereotypical and discriminating representation that merely supports society's beauty ideals, because the way Patty describes her past creates negative connotations about the life as an overweight person, thereby confirming the stigma. In this connection, Patty also reinforces another stigma concerning eating disorders, because her body manifestation supports the stereotypical misconception that eating disorders are spoiled white girls diseases.

Moreover, her identity struggle is illustrated by how her mindset is constantly changing when she believes that skinny is magic, yet in another moment she states that, "skinny isn't magic. It doesn't take away all the years that I got treated like shit" (S01E02). This reveals how she is aware that she is still the same person internally, despite the fact that society has a different perception of her. Therefore, it becomes clear that she feels ambivalent regarding her new appearance, which further demonstrates the complexity of her self-reflexive identity process, since the pressure of

constantly having to reflect on her behavior, in order to successfully take the role of the generalized other within the pageant community, causes her to overindulge in food whenever she is emotionally distressed. This is the case when Patty participates in an eating competition, thinking, “it was such a relief to stuff my face” (S01E03). Here, it is revealed how the pressure of constantly having to restrict herself causes Patty to struggle with self-policing, wherefore she potentially damages her reputation as a poised beauty queen. However, despite creating emphasis on society’s stigmatization, one can argue that the scene is equally condescending in its humoristic depiction of a person who struggles with overeating, since the scene is arguably repulsive in the way it portrays Patty’s excessive eating as an insufficient way to deal with her emotions. Also, this correlates with the fact that overweight people are often stigmatized as primal and greedy due to their lack of self-control in relation to food, which is supported when Patty expresses that “maybe there was evil inside me. I always knew there was something wrong with me. My eating, my rage. What if I wasn’t cursed? What if I was possessed?” (S01E08). Here, Patty’s negative thoughts cause her to de-evaluate herself, wherefore this depiction can be said to merely enhance the stigmatization of overweight people.

On a different note, in contrast to the representation of traditional beauty ideals, the series also features alternative body manifestations, which is exemplified when Patty critically examines her own body, and is interrupted by a transgender girl who shares similar frustrations regarding her own body, saying, “I do that too. I get stuck in the mirror, looking at my body, wishing it were different” to which Patty replies, “you have an amazing body. I used to be fat” to which she responds, “I used to be a guy. Well, no. I mean, I’ve always been a girl, I just had the body of a guy. I’m trans. If anyone understands feeling uncomfortable in their own skin, it’s me. I thought once I had my surgery, I’d feel better about myself” (S01E05). Thus, the series arguably tries to promote inclusivity by revealing that there is a similarity between people who have distorted body images due to struggles with their weight, and transgender people who have body image issues due to feelings of being born in the wrong body. In this regard, the show also criticizes the focus on physical appearance in both cases, revealed when Patty says, “I just keep wishing I looked perfect” to which the transgender girl responds, “sometimes I wonder if I’m gonna spend the rest of my life waiting for it to start” (ibid.). As such, the series arguably criticizes the goal of achieving physical perfection by emphasizing that neither gender reassignment surgery nor weight loss will solve their identity problems. Subsequently, they are both portrayed in a humorous manner when encouraging each other to walk out in their bikinis with confidence. However, this confidence is merely a

performance, which is revealed when they agree that they feel self-conscious about exposing their bodies thus covering themselves. Here, the comical aspect arguably functions as a way to reflect the ambivalent feelings within body positive movements in contemporary society, suggesting that the need to reflect confidence is presumably a manifestation of self-consciousness. In that regard, it can be questioned whether or not a person who is in fact confident in his/her own body would need to demonstrate it publicly, wherefore the example arguably suggests that it is not an act of confidence. This is presumably also the case when Patty is marketing herself by using slurs, such as “bitch” in order to reclaim the narrative as part of a feminist protest against the way in which women who expose their bodies and express their sexualities are often judged and labeled as promiscuous. Yet, ironically, when Patty later protests against bullying, it can be argued that she is hypocritical, saying “when I was bullied for being fat, did anyone apologize to me? No. Because no one cares about bullying. Not unless you’re pretty or rich or special. But if you’re fat, or ugly or just uncool... you just let them suffer” (S01E09). Here, her hypocrisy is revealed because she fights against both sexism and bullying with the intention of being the center of attention and not due to a genuine interests in the causes, since she is continuously de-evaluating her previous self, whilst trying to embody the ideals that she criticizes.

Finally, it becomes apparent that Patty’s self-reflexive identity process results in self-destructive behavior, wherefore she realizes that she is not being her ‘best’ self, despite the fact that she physically embodies society’s beauty ideal. This can be seen when she says, “this is horrible. I’ve become the person I’ve always hated. I’m turning 18, and I’m, like, literally the worst possible version of myself” (S01E10). Thus, even though she attempts to embody her ‘ideal’ beautiful self, she ultimately exemplifies an internal ugliness. This is demonstrated when Patty’s narcissism and public self-absorption is at the expense of other people, revealed when she wants to ruin Bob’s marriage, but also in relation to her friendship with Nonnie, whom she constantly overlooks because she is solely occupied with her own self-realization. Thus, Patty is merely taking advantage of the fact that Nonnie gives her confirmation whenever she feels bad about herself. For instance, Patty is ignorant towards the fact that Nonnie is also in the midst of a self-reflexive process where she is discovering her sexuality and slowly learning to embrace her lesbian identity, because she is not paying attention when Nonnie tries to open up to her about her identity conflicts. As such, it can be argued that Patty rejects the lifegiver in the form of her best friend, Nonnie, because their friendship is challenged when Patty is mesmerized by the grandiosity of entering the pageant world. In this connection, it also becomes apparent that Nonnie has previously been fascinated by the

pageant world, but has later become disillusioned by its strict beauty norms and traditional gender roles, wherefore she represents a contrast to Patty and the pageant world.

Moreover, Patty's destructive behavior is also emphasized when she commits murder and is unable to realize her own guilt, which implies that she feels entitled to get revenge since she perceives herself as a victim and denies own responsibility. The fact that her thoughts are predominantly fueled by rage and jealousy also emphasizes a dissonance between her inner state and her physical appearance, illustrating how beauty is making her conceited. As a result, Patty's embodiment contrasts the notion of the aging female grotesque, since her behavior reveals that beauty does not necessarily entail good behavior. Additionally, her narcissistic behavior correlates with Symington's claim that people who are in close relationships with narcissistic individuals often experience unhappiness, which is the case when Nonnie realizes that Patty deprives her of loving attention when she disregards her emotions. Similarly, she also damages her relationship with Bob when she exposes his sexual relationship with Bob Barnard, which causes him to tell her that, "I never should have thought because you were beautiful that your insides matched your outsides. Please don't be the most you, you can be, because who you are is... ugly" (S01E10). Here, Bob's statement challenges the myth that beauty embodies good, whilst commenting on the misconception that beauty is solely measured based on physical appearance. Therefore, despite embodying society's female beauty ideal, Patty is arguably not exclusively considered beautiful because she is the embodiment of an 'ugly' personality. Yet, Patty undergoes a personal development where she realizes that being skinny is not 'magic', emphasized when she becomes disillusioned about her own beauty, thinking that "I thought if I lost weight, I'd have a fresh start. If people liked me, if I had a boyfriend, if I got the crown, but none of it mattered. It was always the same story, which meant [...] I couldn't save myself [...] I was a loser. Always had been" (S01E12). Thus, Patty becomes aware of the fact that happiness is not achieved by embodying a specific beauty ideal, wherefore the development of her newfound self-awareness is arguably a critique of the beauty myth. Moreover, it becomes evident that her eating disorder is also fueled by other underlying problems that have nothing to do with body image, and she decides that, "it was time to write my own story. I wasn't a loser when I was fat, and I wasn't a loser now. I was a winner, and winners win. Period" (S01E12). Subsequently, Patty begins to reflect on why she struggles with eating and realizes that her own negative self-perception may be rooted in her childhood and the fact that she has not had stable parental role models as a child. In this relation, the lack of a father figure presumably explains why Patty is initially attracted to Bob and desperately tries to get his

admiration and validation. Similarly, it also becomes apparent that Patty has lacked a positive female role model, revealed when Patty's mother, Angie, is unsupportive when she joins the pageant community, causing Patty to confront her by saying,

"I can't believe you. I finally found something that makes me feel good about myself, and you decide to become my competition? When is it my turn? It's never about me. Every single time in my life when it should have been about me getting attention, you've always made it about you. On my fifth birthday party, you had sex with the clown. You got drunk at my middle school graduation. [...] And now, you're showing up trying to steal my spotlight? What kind of mother does that to her daughter?" (S01E04).

Here, Patty emphasizes how her mother has failed to be supportive and present in her life. However, despite confronting Angie about her neglect, it becomes apparent that Patty's destructive behavior mimics her mother's, because she also strives for attention and wants to sabotage others similar to the way in which Angie is trying to sabotage her. Hence, one can argue that Patty's need for constant validation stems from the fact that she has been emotionally neglected by her life-givers in the form of her parents, which arguably explains why she has a vulnerable self-esteem and struggles with her own body image. Besides, her complicated relationship with her mother also causes her to join the mother-daughter pageant competition with Coralee instead of Angie. This is because Patty does not feel that she can 'fake' a positive relationship with her mother, because she deviates from the traditional female ideal that is endorsed within the pageant community. In this regard, Patty's social heritage arguably also explains why she struggles to live up to the norms within the pageant community, since it can be compared to Bordo's theory regarding how a parent's negative self-esteem can be passed on to the child, if he/she has witnessed how the parent has dealt with body image issues. Hence, Patty is arguably conditioned to be the way she is because she deals with similar issues as her mom who also struggles with her own body image and wanted to join the pageants when she was young. Therefore, Patty has arguably inherited her mother's negative self-esteem, which is also illustrated during her speech at the mother-daughter pageant, where she expresses how Angie has taught her that "Bladell women never win" (S01E04). However, Patty continues by stating that, "I'm not bound to my past", which suggests that she wants to overcome her social heritage (ibid.). This also illustrates how the past is consistently presented in a negative

light, wherefore it can be questioned whether or not she would gain a more positive self-image if she accepted her past, instead of trying to erase it from her narrative. Also, when she says to Coralee, “thank you for loving me before I could love myself”, it becomes clear how Patty rejects her authentic self by pretending to have a genuine and loving relationship with Coralee whom she barely knows (ibid.). This correlates with Symington’s claim that narcissists often exploit other people to make themselves look and feel better, because Patty uses Coralee to visually demonstrate a ‘perfect’ mother and daughter relationship in order to improve her chances of winning the competition. Thus, it becomes apparent that Patty’s narcissistic behavior and rejection of her previous identity in favor of creating a ‘perfect’ narrative causes her to become alienated from her authentic self. In this connection, Patty’s confusion regarding her own identity can be said to correlate with Giddens’ argument regarding how the self-reflexive identity process is often overwhelming for the individual.

Furthermore, the fact that Patty is ‘insatiable’ arguably suggests that she experiences a personal meaninglessness, because she struggles to find happiness in her life despite achieving her goal of becoming beautiful. Hence, it can be argued that, because she is so focused on her appearance, she neglects other meaningful aspects of her identity, emphasizing how she is portraying a façade that is disconnected from her genuine self when she takes on the role as the generalized other within the pageant community. Ultimately, Patty realizes that she has internalized people’s negative perceptions of her and made it her personal ‘truth’. Thus, Patty is arguably forced to present a ‘false’ narrative about herself by editing out the truth in order to portray a successful narrative. This can be compared to the way in which people on social media often attempt to present the ‘best’ and improved versions of themselves in order to gain validation from others, since Patty is similarly editing her truth in order to be perceived as likable, which is apparent when she allows herself to be a false inspiration. Yet, the fact that the show provides access to Patty’s thoughts which reveal that she feels guilty for lying to everyone, it can be argued that this is a critique of how narcissism is arguably fueled by the norms and expectations in contemporary society, wherefore it can be said that Patty has no choice but to suppress her genuine self. In this connection, the fact that she continuously feels unable to embrace her authentic self is arguably also what causes her self-destructive behavior. Therefore, it can be argued that Patty’s behavior is ultimately a reflection of Lasch’s argument that narcissism is rooted within self-hatred rather than self-admiration, since her biggest issue is that she has a low self-esteem and struggles to create an authentic and coherent narrative. On the contrary, Patty eventually seeks help to solve her problems with food, whilst

trying to be a positive inspiration to a young girl named Becky by sharing her own story, despite the fact that it is ironic that she has to embody the role of a strong female role model. This can be seen when Becky idolizes Patty and says, “look at you. You’re beautiful and skinny...and perfect [...] I wish I could just get punched in the face and wake up looking like you” to which Patty responds,

“Becky, listen. I wasted years of my life just fantasizing about what things would be like if I looked different. And then my outsides changed and didn’t make me any happier. You know what I would wish for instead of getting punched in the face? A clean slate. I would let go of all the things I hate about myself. I would go back in time and learn to love myself just the way I am [...] Just trust me. If I had known then what I know now, I wouldn’t have waited to try and be happy. But you don’t have to make the same mistakes I did” (S02E04).

Notably, the comical aspect in Becky’s statement is presumably utilized to indirectly critique the tendency in society where people are almost willing to do anything in order to achieve an enhanced PA, even if it includes pain and suffering. Besides, Patty encourages Becky to be body confident rather than wanting to be skinny, wherefore it can be argued that she manages to be a positive role model, despite the fact that she does not live by her own advice. Nonetheless, the fact that Patty tries to inspire Becky to love herself by explaining that physical appearance should not matter is problematic due to society’s beauty ideals, which is also revealed when Becky calls her a liar after learning that Brick would not date her prior to her weight loss. Contrastingly, Becky later expresses body positivity by claiming that she is confident in her own skin, yet body confidence from one individual will arguably not change the opinion of the majority, emphasizing the negative aspects of how physical appearance matters in society in relation to whether or not people are attributed positive social identities. Finally, Patty decides to share her personal truth in her final speech during the Miss American Lady competition, causing her to embrace her authentic self. This is revealed when she has to answer what it means to be a lady in contemporary America, to which she says,

“Being a lady means you have to lie. They say that the truth will set you free, but there’s no freedom. Not when you’re a lady. You have to smile pretty and hide every flaw and pretend to be someone you’re not. Because nobody really wants the truth. People don’t want to know who you really are, how you feel, what

you've done. They say they do, but they just want the version of you that they think you are. Because the real you is too much and never enough" (S02E10).

Thus, Patty's disillusion with society's traditional female beauty ideal reveals how she exposes the beauty myth, wherefore this critique suggests that the lack of authenticity is due to the fact that people in contemporary society are forced to lie and reject their authentic selves in order to be recognized and gain an unblemished socially valued self both virtually and in reality. Conclusively, it is also implied that her dissolution is a necessary insight in order for people to be able to embrace their genuine selves, revealed when she rejects her negative self-perception and decides to reclaim her own narrative by re-writing her self-biography from a more genuine perspective, without denying or demonizing her previous self. Thus, she arguably manages to create a positive self-biography by being true to herself, suggesting that people should rather strive for a personally valued self if being recognized in society entails that you have to be unauthentic. However, the fact that Patty ultimately gets away with murder and embodies an ugly personality suggests that she embodies a youthful and beautiful female grotesque, because she becomes the 'worst' possible version of herself because she is arguably an uglier person now than she was prior to her weight loss emphasized by the virtue of her evil behavior. Therefore, Patty's body manifestation is essentially a critique of the myth that beauty always equals good.

Magnolia Barnard. During the series, Magnolia is one of Patty's biggest competitions in the pageant community, because she has won several pageant competitions, wherefore she is considered a threat to the other contestants. This is due to the fact that Magnolia successfully embodies the beauty ideal that exists within the pageant world, causing her to be admired due to her high level of PA. Yet, Magnolia is biracial which is interesting considering the fact that her character is portrayed as a strong competitor, whom the white contestants have to beat in order to win. As such, her body manifestation arguably challenges mainstream beauty ideals within society that are predominantly Caucasian, since Magnolia idealized within a community that has high beauty standards, wherefore this can be perceived as a critique of the lack of mixed race representations within the beauty industry. On the contrary, the reason why she is successful within the pageant community is presumably because she successfully takes on the role of the generalized other by assimilating to the white majority and behaving according to their norms, which is exemplified when she predominantly socializes with white people and straightens her natural hair,

emphasizing how she embodies the beauty myth because she does not resemble the average African American woman. However, her body manifestation arguably challenges the stereotypical portrayal of African American women as being larger in size and being less attractive in comparison to white women. Moreover, in relation to Mead's definition of structure of the self, Magnolia can be said to be strongly influenced by her 'me', since she behaves according to the norms that have been determined by white people, presumably in order to gain a sense of belonging and acceptance. This can also be due to the fact that her reason for joining the pageant community is predominantly influenced by her white father, since her mother frequently travels, wherefore she is rarely present in Magnolia's life. Thus, one can argue that Magnolia has been unable to fully develop an authentic self, because her assimilation to white culture has been at the expense of her opportunity to embrace her African American roots. This is demonstrated when her father confronts her about using drugs, asking if she is doing it to get back at him, to which Magnolia responds, "I am so tired of having to be perfect all the time. I can't make a mistake, I can't get a bad grade. I can't even leave my room without looking like I'm off to a fashion shoot. I am so over being Magnolia Barnard" (S01E05). This suggests that Magnolia is only participating in the pageants to please her father, wherefore she does it in order to keep up appearances despite the fact that it is at the expense of her own happiness. As such, this implies that the ideal self is a myth because she is disillusioned with the perfect image that she has to portray. Besides, the pressure of having to embody supposed perfection reveals that she is disconnected from her genuine self, due to the overwhelming focus on her 'me', which is revealed when she speaks about herself in third person, perceiving 'Magnolia Barnard' as an identity performance that is separate from who she really is. In this connection, the reason why she uses alcohol and drugs is arguably to escape her superficial reality because she feels an inner emptiness. However, she later considers whether or not she should sign herself up for an African American college, saying, "yeah, well, I'm just not sure I'd fit in at an all-black university" (S02E04). This suggests that she struggles with her own identity because she worries if she will fit in, due to the fact that she does not perceive herself as black because she has assimilated to a culture that is predominantly Caucasian, thereby revealing her fear of being considered a deviant. Yet, it becomes clear that she wants to explore a part of her identity that she has neglected in the past, which is also supported by the fact that she starts to display her natural hair. Therefore, she can be argued to engage in a self-reflexive identity process by modifying the extension of self in order to create a new narrative. Also, it becomes clear that she struggles with her own personal identification, which is revealed during a conversation with Brick where she says, "this college rep

suggested an all-black university, which never would've even occurred to me. I mean, I'm not even all black" (ibid.). Notably, her statement draws attention to how biracial people might struggle with their identities, due to the fact that they do not fit into the separate categories of 'black' or 'white'. In this regard, it is also interesting how the hierarchy has been reversed when Patty and Nonnie are not allowed to enter the African American school, since this ultimately maintains the racial power dynamic, which reinforces an 'us' vs. 'them' distinction instead of promoting racial inclusion. Yet, the exclusion of non-African American people at the school is arguably a way to draw attention to, and reveal, the absurdity of the implicit racial exclusion within society, since Magnolia's struggle with her own identity can be translated as a critique of labeling and excluding people based on race and physical appearance.

On a different note, besides being Patty's direct competition during the pageants, she is also her competition in relation to guys, which becomes clear when they both alternately date Brick. In this regard, Magnolia's relationship with Brick reveals that she does not want to rush into a relationship by labeling them as a couple and says, "until I decide, I'm not letting you flirt with some other girl" (S01E02). Here, Magnolia is playing 'hard to get', wherefore it becomes apparent that she is confident and aware that she is desired. Hence, one can argue that she takes advantage of certain aspects of traditional femininity in order to keep his interest, because she does not immediately give in to his desires but instead makes him long for her. This might initially cause her to be perceived as a virtuous girl, however, the fact that she has control of their relationship can be said to differ from traditional feminine behavior due to the way in which she dictates his actions, which causes their gender roles to be reversed. This is also the case during the preparations for their magic show, where he suggests that Magnolia wears a costume that exposes her body, which she rejects by saying, "if I wear this, I will seriously set back feminism 25 years", to which he responds, "the sexy assistant is an age-old magic tradition" (S02E08). Therefore, she forces him to wear the costume, causing his body to be exposed instead of hers. This reveals how Magnolia challenges society's traditional gender norms, because she refuses to submit to the male gaze, wherefore this is arguably a critique of the objectification of the female body, whilst empowering the female gaze by turning the idealized male body into a sexualized passive object. This gender reversal is also highlighted when Magnolia encourages him to watch videos in order to become a better kisser, which dissolves his image as the 'perfect' guy because he is inexperienced and unaware of how to please a woman. As a result, he begins to follow advice from a guy online, who resembles a stereotypical 'nerd', wherefore this challenges the myth that high PA equals perfection. Moreover, Magnolia is arguably

the only one who truly cares about Brick because she supports his personal growth, which is also emphasized during an argument between Patty and Brick where he says, “Magnolia doesn’t make everything about her [...] At least Magnolia listens to me” (S02E06). Thus, it can be argued that Magnolia embodies good rather than evil in comparison to Patty because she cares about the feelings of others and is not obsessed with her own appearance, wherefore this challenges the prejudiced way of judging people based on the color of their skin due to the connotations of white, which signifies good and innocence, unlike black, which signifies immorality, wherefore this color is often attributed to villains. Likewise, her biracial embodiment ultimately challenges society’s beauty ideals because she is disillusioned about the pageant world that reinforced society’s exclusive beauty ideals.

Stella Rose. Stella Rose is middle-aged woman who, despite her age, is admired within the pageant community due to her years of experience. In this connection, she exemplifies the way in which the embodiment of a mature woman can be perceived as intimidating to men, because her age is traditionally associated with power. This is exemplified when Bob is anxious about meeting her due to the fact that he considers her to be superior to him, saying, “I just haven’t seen Stella Rose in almost 20 years and she is a bit of a harsh critic. She’s even more direct than I am [...] Trust me, she’s a legend. Before she started directing, she coached three Miss USAs, one Miss American Lady—Oh, my God, she’s here” (S01E03). In this scene, it can be argued that Bob is somewhat emasculated because he is threatened by the older and experienced woman. Besides, the fact that Stella Rose greets Bob when she is surrounded by two younger and muscular guys, who embodies society’s masculine beauty ideal, also emphasizes Bob’s demotion, because he is not considered on par with their muscular physique. Thus, it is interesting how Stella Rose is illustrated as powerful due to her age, whilst her power is further enhanced by the fact that she appears to be desired by younger men. Therefore, her body manifestation arguably challenges the aging female grotesque, and the way in which youth is idealized within contemporary society, since this scene portrays younger masculine bodies as being submissive to a middle-aged woman. Moreover, Bob also expresses his own powerlessness when he feels dependent on Stella Rose to coach Patty, saying, “okay, I am desperate. For redemption, and Patty is my last chance [...] Oh, come on. Stella Rose. She just won’t listen [...] Can you just tell me what I’m doing wrong? Please?” (ibid.). This reveals how the traditional gender roles are reversed since Bob is begging a woman’s help, thus revealing that he is a man who feels dependent on a woman in order to succeed. This is also exemplified

when he thinks, “I was about to coach before the coach of coaches. It wasn’t just about what Stella Rose thought of Patty, it was about what she thought of me” (ibid.). This demonstrates how he feels dependent on her acceptance, whilst rendering himself subordinate to her. Contrastingly, Stella Rose is represented as an assertive, stereotypical ‘boss lady’ who dictates how Bob should regulate Patty’s behavior, thus revealing an inverse distribution of power between the sexes, which correlates with Butler’s notion that masculinity and femininity are constructed gender performances.

Moreover, it becomes apparent that Stella Rose exemplifies narcissism, because she wants to ruin Bob’s chance at success when she tries to create distrust between him and Patty by persuading Patty to be coached by her instead, revealed when she says, “Bob needs to learn to back off. If he’s not careful, he’s gonna ruin this for you before it even starts. Bob only looks out for himself. He’s a complete and total narcissist” (ibid.). Here, her own narcissism is manifested when she tries to discredit Bob’s abilities as a coach. Additionally, it becomes evident that, despite deviating from traditional gender norms, Stella Rose takes advantage of traditional femininity by behaving similar to a ‘damsel in distress’ in order to distract Bob, revealed when she falsely exhibits signs of weakness by pretending to have been heartbroken after Bob left her, saying, “do you have any idea how much it hurt when you left? I gave up on men completely” (ibid.). However, she is unable to maintain the innocent façade when she subsequently tries to sexually seduce him, wherefore she can be said to resemble a femme fatale, since it becomes clear that she utilizes her femininity and her sexuality in the attempt to entice Bob and ruin his opportunities to win the pageants. In this regard, since a femme fatale is usually embodied by a young and attractive woman, her body manifestation presumably challenges societal ideals that associate youth with beauty. Yet, Stella Rose arguably represents a tension that is part of the beauty myth, since she is trying to steal Bob’s attention from Patty, thereby exemplifying feelings of agony and jealousy towards the younger generation. This is also supported by the fact that she is represented as a villain, wherefore she is ultimately an embodiment of the aging female grotesque by virtue of her actions, even though her body manifestation challenges society’s beauty ideals because she is portrayed as being sexually desired despite her age.

Bob Armstrong. Bob is another predominant character who besides being a father and a husband also coaches beauty pageants and works as an attorney for his father’s company. In this connection, being a beauty pageant coach is arguably a reflection of his genuine self because he expresses that,

“I had a booming law practice, a wardrobe to rival Andy Cohen’s, a picture perfect family, but my greatest joy was the time I spent moonlighting as a pageant coach” (S01E01). Besides, he describes the pageant career as his true calling because he is able to help young ladies become their ‘best’ selves. Also, it becomes evident how much coaching means to him when he tries to kill himself after he is falsely accused of being a child molester, which subsequently ended his career as a pageant coach (S02E01). Thus, when he thought he was unable to do what he feels destined to do, he felt that he might as well end his life, which reveals that being a pageant coach is an important aspect of his identity. Also, Bob frequently expresses feminine behavior by wearing shapewear and by using make-up, which he describes as his daily “armor”. Additionally, at one point, he makes an effort to make amends with his son, Brick, because he has failed to recognize his problems, and in his attempt for reconciliation, he offers to take him shopping. This is traditionally considered a more feminine hobby, and not a way for a conventional man to bond with his son. Therefore, these instances arguably render Bob’s behavior as being considerably more feminine than masculine. However, it becomes apparent that he was forced to suppress his feminine tendencies during his childhood due to his father, who has ridiculed him his entire life for not being able to live up to his gender expectations. This is illustrated on several occasions when his father patronizes him, when saying things, such as, “you were just so damn fragile. Any other kid I’d have sent off to military school or conversion therapy, but I felt sorry for you. So I put up with your pansy-ass bullshit” or when he says, “I know you and I haven’t had the easiest relationship. I’ve been hard on you your whole life. There’s a reason for that...” to which Bob replies, “yeah, it’s because the only ball I could throw was the one where people danced” (S02E05, S01E08). As such, Bob has been rejected by his father for not successfully taking on the role of other men. Yet, it can be argued that he has successfully performed a heteronormative identity because he married a woman, fathered children, and educated himself in order to have the means to provide for his family, which are all traditional masculine behaviors. Therefore, despite his father’s opinions, it can be argued that Bob has gained a sense of self as a husband, father, and lawyer by successfully taking the role of the other as a man. This is a result of the gender expectations that he was assigned at birth for being a biological man, which has caused him to have a restrictive social identity bound by tradition, because self-actualization was less prominent in traditional society. In that regard, it becomes evident that even in his adult life, he has felt pressured to perform the role as a man, when he expresses that, “the night before I was scheduled to take the bar, I got offered a sales management position at Bergdorf Goodman. But she [Coralee] wouldn’t let me take it, said it wouldn’t give us the lifestyle that she

wanted” (S01E03). Here, it is revealed that he has sacrificed his own dreams in order to do what was expected of him by choosing to maintain the role as provider for his family. However, Bob discovered his authentic self, when he was introduced to the pageant world by his mentor, Stella Rose, who gave him the option of following his passion, which coheres with Mead’s argument that an individual gains a sense of self through interaction with culture. Thus, when Bob became emerged in the beauty pageant culture, he felt a sense of purpose that arguably directed him towards his true self. As a result, his passion for the pageant world is presumably also a reflection of his feminine nature, while illustrating Giddens’ argument regarding how society is obsessed with appearances. However, since gender is not a manifestation of sex according to Butler, Bob’s significant interest in traditional feminine behaviors cannot be rendered as “pansy” because they can be enjoyed equally by men and women regardless of gender, wherefore Bob embodying femininity does not render him as less of a man. This also coheres with the argument that gender identities are a result of cultural performativity, wherefore there is no right or wrong gender behavior, and thus the postulation of a true gender identity can be considered a regulatory fiction.

However, Bob is eventually confronted with his sexuality, when his nemesis, Bob Barnard, reveals that he has been in love with him since they were 14 whereupon they share a kiss. Initially, Bob rejects the idea that he might be gay, because he has spent his life practicing heterosexuality. However, he starts to have an affair with Barnard as a way for him to explore whether or not he is in fact a homosexual. Thus, it can be argued that he engages in a self-reflexive identity process where he is able to experience in a more liberated self-realization, because he is issued with alternative options to consider in regards to his identity, since he is no longer bound by tradition. Also, according to Giddens, individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options, however, these changing conditions are not beneficial for the individual because of the existential uncertainty they might generate. This becomes evident in relation to Bob due to the confusion regarding his own sexuality, since he still loves his wife and is afraid to leave his old life behind. For instance, he says, “I feel like a lesbian, Bob. We moved in together after a week. I don’t know, you and I, in this house, living like this, I didn’t choose it” (S01E11). This reveals that the changing conditions are not entirely beneficial for him, because of the uncertainty regarding which lifestyle that most accurately reflects his self-identity. This is also illustrated when him and Barnard have spent the night together for the first time, where he expresses that, “I was naked, terrified, and confused. How could I have sex with a man? And Bob “Boy-Crazy” Barnard?” (S01E10). Subsequently, they have a conversation about their relationship status where Barnard expresses that

he wants them to be in relationship, because he is tired of being in the closet, to which Bob says, "I'm not. This is all new to me. It didn't even occur to me that I was bisexual", causing Barnard to correct him by saying "gay", making Bob respond with, "I'm pretty sure gay men don't like having sex with women, which I do" (ibid.). These examples demonstrate that there is a collision between traditional and contemporary cultural influences that complicate his self-reflexive identity process. Additionally, it becomes apparent that exploring alternatives to being in a traditional heterosexual relationship with Coralee has negative effects on his identity because his self-realization is causing him to experience existential uncertainty. This becomes evident when he tells Barnard to stop kissing him, causing him to ask why, to which Bob responds, "because I love it! And I don't know how it fits into the rest of my life!" (S01E10). Here, Bob is uncertain about what these new implications have for his self-reflexive identity journey, because he has to negotiate between his optional lifestyles, which ultimately complicates his ability to sustain a coherent biographical narrative. In that regard, according to Giddens, one's identity is determined based on the ability to consistently sustain a particular narrative, as opposed to the individual's behavior or the responses from other people. However, it can be argued that Bob has created his identity based on the opinions and responses from his father, who is a manifestation of traditional masculinity. Thus, in line with Giddens' argument, it can be argued that certain narratives can be considered inaccurate representations of the self, which is also the case when Bob's narrative does not correlate with how he actually identifies. Yet, Bob is eventually able to create his identity independently from the traditional imposing factors from his father, which is demonstrated when he considers a homosexual relationship with Barnard. Interestingly, despite being confused about his sexuality, Bob recognizes how the act of exploring can help determine one's sexual identity, because it can generate a feeling of being one's authentic self, supported when he says, "I thought about it, and I understand now how sleeping with another man, even just the one time, could make you have realizations about yourself" (S01E10). Also, he acknowledges that his sexual identity might be different from traditional heterosexuality, which can be seen when he says, "maybe there was a part of myself I had refused to accept" (S01E09). Moreover, during Bob's self-reflexive identity process, his sexual identity is also under further negotiation, which is revealed when he proposes a 'throuple' relationship with Barnard and Coralee because he is unable to choose between them. As such, it can be argued that he is unable to consistently maintain one particular narrative, wherefore his sexual identity can be considered as fluid and intangible. This also correlates to queer theory

that considers sexual identity as a meaningful achievement that is continually undergoing negation rather than being a natural given.

Furthermore, Bob's identity can be considered fragile, because his changing self-biography is a single narrative among many possible narratives about the self. This becomes evident when Brick asks him, "what exactly are you? Gay? Bi? Pansexual? Polyamorous?" to which Bob replies that he only understands designer labels (S02E04). Notably, this emphasizes his fragile sexual identity, because he is confused about all of the possible narratives that might represent him, which is also apparent when he refers to designer labels, since they are more tangible for him to comprehend in comparison to identity labels. This is presumably also due to the fact that Bob is from a generation where there did not exist as many identity labels. However, his identity can also be considered robust because his sense of self-identity is secure enough to weather major tensions within his social environments. For instance, despite portraying feminine behavior, he has always been secure in his masculinity to let his wife pursue a career outside of the domestic boundaries, because he has no issues with sharing the role of provider. This is supported when his wife says, "it takes a really secure man to put his ego aside and let a woman shine. And you've been doing that for me since the moment I met you" (S01E08).

Moreover, according to Giddens, given that the body has been released from societal expectations, masculinity and femininity are no longer fixed parts of one's identity, which can create an even more puzzling and comprehensive self-reflexive identity process for the individual. This argument correlates to Bob's identity, since it is influenced by both masculine and feminine features. Therefore, when he engages in a self-reflexive identity process, he is puzzled by the fluid nature of identity, because he was used to embody traditional masculinity in order to appear and behave accurately masculine. As a result, he is unaware of the non-existing guidelines for behavior and appearance, which is evident when he says, "I'd always admired women's things. Did I desire men's things too? Had I been lying to myself my entire life?" (S01E10). This reveals that the fluid nature of identity arguably causes inexpedient results in relation to his self-realization, because it challenges his perspective regarding how to portray a 'correct' male performance.

On a different note, body image issues are traditionally associated with feminine behavior, because of the dominating emphasis on women within advertisements and the beauty industry. Yet, in contemporary society, high standards have been imposed on men as well, causing it to be a confusing time to be man due to the constant, wherefore Bordo claims that men in contemporary are more body-conscious than ever. This also relates to Bob who is extremely self-conscious about his

body not living up to the existing muscular ideal, which is illustrated when Bob is jealous of Barnard, who has a particular toned and muscular physique, but also because he has previously been ridiculed for being overweight. Therefore, he arguably feels inadequate due the pressure of having to act masculine as well as experiencing the pressure to attain an idealized body type. His feelings of inadequacy are revealed on several occasions, for instance, when he stands in front of a mirror and continues to retract his stomach in and out in order to look slimmer, after which he sighs because of his dissatisfaction with his body. Eventually, it also becomes apparent when he refers to Barnard as, “my nemesis in life. With his perfect hair and his perfect smile and his perfect beard” and, “his perfect man beard. and his perfect man chest, and his perfect man arms” (S01E01; E10). In this connection, men in contemporary society are experiencing how being a sexualized object is creating anxieties about not measuring up, wherefore they are also developing eating and body image disorders that once were thought of as only applying to women. This also relates to Bob who has struggled with eating and body images issues because of how he used to look when he was significantly larger, which becomes clear when he tries to talk Patty out of excessively eating, saying,

“We both know where this leads. It starts with some crawfish, but then you feel guilty, so you eat a box of donuts to make yourself feel better. The next thing you know, you’re at the drive-thru five times a day, eating a whole stick of butter in the dark. We’re the same, Patty. That is why I wanna coach you. You’re the only person I’ve ever met who’s just as hungry as me” (S01E03).

Here, it becomes apparent that Bob has internalized the ridicule he was subjected to when he was overweight, which has caused him to be self-conscious regarding food and his body. Similarly, this is also emphasized when he declines Patty’s offer to have some potato chips, because he says that, “once I start on those, I can’t stop” (S01E03). This accentuates that he is particularly careful about what he eats due to his desire to embody the masculine beauty ideal. Besides, he is also confronted with his eating habits by Barnard when they cross paths at Wiener Taco, where he says, “eating your feelings, Bob? Aw... just like freshmen year” (S01E07). Similarly, when he talks about their initial mutual hatred, he also makes a comment about Bob’s body, saying, “oh, come on, Bob, everybody knows you hate me. It’s as much a part of you as your dad belly” (S01E07). Hence, when Barnard continues to bully Bob about his eating habits and his body, it further contributes to

his eating and body image disorders, because it generates feelings of inadequacy. In addition, it can be argued Bob's issues have been internalized because of society's idea of what constitutes 'appropriate' bodies, which is also evident when he is going to the gym or practicing fitness at his house several times. Thus, Bob is arguably influenced by the societal gaze, which affects his body and behavior, causing his body to become part of a political field that demands 'appropriate' iconography from people, consistent with Foucault's argument. Therefore, Bob is actively self-policing with the purpose of attaining the 'perfect' body, in an attempt to embody the muscular masculine ideal, which can also be seen when he monitors his calories as a form of dieting. For instance, he explains to Patty, "I shot up six inches in high school, got skinny. I decided to make a change, so I started to control my portions. I started to exercise, you know, eat better. That kind of thing. [...] It's easy. I mean, you just put that note on your refrigerator. You snap that rubber band on your wrist" (S02E01).

Besides, another example of Bob's self-policing is when he wears make-up to disguise his flaws, and wears a toupee in order to appear younger. Thus, he tries to be the 'ideal' version of himself, which is why he covers his wrinkles and baldness because they are signs of aging, which are undesirable traits in contemporary society because they connote the decaying body. Additionally, his body issues are further manifested when he loses his toupee in front of Barnard, which he surprisingly responds to with a declaration of love. However, Bob cannot reconcile his body image with being desirable to other people, and especially not to Barnard, whom he considers perfect, because he has been conditioned to believe that his body is not mimicking the ideal. This is also due to the fact that Bob is intimidated by Barnard because they have been constantly compared to each other, wherefore Bob has been perceived as 'the other Bob', and thereby the 'lesser' Bob. For instance, this becomes evident when they both order a green juice at their gym where Bob's cup is labeled "the other Bob", which he is not pleased about, to which Barnard says, "come on, they have to distinguish between us somehow. You prefer Older Bob?" (S01E04). This illustrates that Bob feels inadequate because he has always been referred to as the 'secondary' Bob by being too large, too feminine, or too average in comparison to Barnard who has always been categorized as the 'right' Bob. This accentuates the attractiveness bias, wherefore Barnard is favored in their community and by society based on his 'superior' physical appearance. Moreover, Bob expresses how being 'the other Bob' has influenced his life negatively, because it has made him feel like he had something to live up to in order to be accepted, which has affected his own self-identity and self-worth. For instance, this becomes evident when he says, "I can't imagine how different my life

would be, if someone had encouraged me to be myself, instead of spending my entire adolescence being the other Bob, being obfuscated by the dazzling light that is Bob Bagina Barnard. Plus, he's so perfect all the time!" (S01E01). As a result, it can be argued that Bob has internalized other people's perceptions of him as 'the other Bob', wherefore these perceptions cause him to ultimately feel as 'the lesser Bob'. Also, when he runs for mayor against Barnard, they have a conversation where Barnard asks him if he even wants to win the election, or if he is solely running for mayor in an attempt to beat him, which Bob denies, but then confesses in a voiceover that, "I had never won anything in my life, and the idea of it scared the shit out of me. Was I getting in my own way? Self-sabotaging because I was afraid to win?" (S02E08). Besides, his self-sabotaging is expressed when he says, "how the hell is Mr. Makeover going to compete with Mr. Law & Order?" (S02E09). Here, it is clear that Bob does not think that he can become a winner because he does not live up to Barnard's idealized embodiment. However, when he becomes aware of his own self-sabotage it causes him to realize that he is the source of his own 'faux' inadequacy that prevents him from winning.

On another note, it can be argued that Bob is a manifestation of narcissism and public self-absorption, because his feelings of inadequacy is a reflection of excessive worries about what others are thinking about him, which often leads to self-doubt. In that regard, higher levels of both private and public self-absorption can lead to higher levels of narcissism, which Lasch argues is a way to realistically cope with the tensions in life that tend to bring out narcissistic traits in people. However, those circumstances may also affect the family dynamic, which becomes evident in relation to Bob and his family. Therefore, it can be argued that the anxieties and prevailing conditions that Bob is facing in regards to his sexuality, body, and eating issues have modified his family life to such a degree that he is unable to preserve his marriage as well as being unable to have a deep relationship with Brick. This also relates to Lasch's argument that a generation that fears it has not future is unlikely to give much attention to the needs of the next generation. Thus, this is illustrated when Brick is trying to understand the dissolution of his parents' marriage, wherefore he asks Bob for answers. However, Bob brushes him off by saying that it is not a good time for them to talk, causing Brick to say, "yeah right, let me know when you can work me into your schedule" (S01E05). Similarly, Bob also tells Patty that he is unable to continue to coach her because he says that he needs to "figure out his life first", during a time where she is struggling to keep her life together (ibid.). These examples indicate that Bob leaves little attention to his son, who is struggling with the changing conditions within his home, or to Patty, who needs guidance from

an adult, because he is more concerned with his own problems. Hence, this is an example of narcissism, which is also manifested when he externalizes blame onto others when he is at fault, which is seen when he blames Patty for ruining his marriage, after which he has to do an unethical favor in an attempt to win Coralee back, wherefore he says, “it’s my best chance of getting her back after the stunt you pulled. So, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go swallow my pride and compromise my morals because of your bad judgment. [...] Maybe you should have thought of that before you decided to blow up my life” (S01E05). Here, it is revealed that he is unable to recognize his own responsibility, despite the fact that he is the one who jeopardized his marriage. Similarly, when Bob has another affair with Barnard after having repaired his relationship with Coralee, he blames Patty for publicly announcing it. Thus, when she wants to talk, he rejects it, saying, “about what? About you ruining my reputation? About you destroying my family? Or about you robbing me of any choice I had in a very confusing, very complicated, very personal matter?!” (S01E11). Here, his narcissistic personality is further revealed because, instead of accepting and acknowledging his own faults of cheating on, and lying to his wife, he blames Patty for revealing his misconducts. Additionally, Bob also mimics a narcissist’s superficial mindset regarding relationships, because he exploits Patty’s legal situation after she has been suspected of killing three girls. This can be seen when he refuses to take her case, despite her desperation, because he explains that he is too busy running for mayor, after which he realizes that he might actually use the situation for his own personal gain, revealed when he thinks that, “being associated with an accused serial murderer wasn’t exactly going to help me win votes. Unless I could use my newfound notoriety as a way to get out my message” (S02E08). Another example is when he worries that Patty will be a convicted arsonist because it will not benefit his life, which is clear when he thinks that, “I needed Patty to be innocent. Without her, my coaching career would be nothing but a distant memory” (S01E02). Both examples illustrate his narcissistic mindset because he only commits to Patty or tries to help her as long as it benefits him, instead of genuinely caring about helping her.

Ultimately, despite sexual orientation, both men and women suffer from the pressure of trying to attain the ideal body types. This also correlates with the pressure Bob feels concerning his body, which is fueled by the eating issues that still torment him as well as the comparison he experiences to Barnard. Thus, his body manifestation presumably challenges traditional gender norms and beauty ideals, because he is portrayed as a man who is struggling with body image issues, which has traditionally been considered a feminine diagnosis. However, despite the fact that he is initially introduced as a heterosexual man who coaches beauty pageants, which would deviate from

traditional masculine behavior, his representation is ultimately stereotypical, because he is an effeminate man who struggles with problems that are traditionally perceived as 'feminine' issues.

Bob Barnard. Initially, Barnard is the manifestation of a traditional man, being a provider, father, and husband. Also, he embodies the idealized male figure, because he has a muscular physique that is desired by both men and women, which he takes advantage of by being shirtless on any given occasion. In fact, Barnard describes how he works out twice a day every day, which indicates that this excessive need to maintain his physique is the result of an Adonis complex, because he is obsessed with achieving a muscular body. For instance, he is often seen working out at home, at the gym, and at one point Bob Armstrong walks in on him while he is working out in his office, to which Barnard says, "I thought I could squeeze in a quick work out" (S01E05). This reveals the power of the inspecting gaze because Barnard actively engages in self-policing, since he has internalized society's ideas of what constitutes an 'appropriate' body, wherefore he excessively works out to attain and maintain that ideal. Moreover, despite showcasing his body all the time, even at inappropriate times, he also utilizes his muscular physique as a part of his mayoral campaign video, as a means to get votes. In the video he says, "in fact, I'm so committed, I'll give y'all the shirt off my back", after which he rips off his shirt, and in the next clip he works out, where he says, "Masonville needs a strong mayor. Someone who can flex their power. Throw another couple of 45s on there, Joe" (S02E05). Here, he exemplifies how the imagery of the 'healthy' and 'fit' body is often used as a metaphor during elections to signify a person's ability to perform duties that require strength and resilience, wherefore this is arguably an effective way to utilize his body as a currency to reassure the public about his abilities and gain their trust. In addition, he relies on the attractiveness bias, which is the notion that attractive people are treated more favorably in society, because they are often perceived as being more honest and more successful. Thus, by exposing his body in a public campaign video, he expects this prejudiced societal dynamic to favor him by helping him win the election. This belief coheres with narcissism because such individuals use platforms to display their supposed physical attractiveness as a means to pursue status and attention, since they commonly believe that they are more attractive than others. This can also be seen earlier in the series when Barnard and Bob cannot agree upon who should portray Jennifer Grey or Patrick Swayze during the musical number "The Time of my Life" from *Dirty Dancing* (1987). In that regard, Barnard makes the argument that, "I work out twice a day, every day. Obviously, I'm Patrick Swayze" (S01E04). Here, he deems his physical appearance

superior to Bob's, wherefore he believes that he should portray the desirable man, since he embodies the traditional masculine ideal. Moreover, these instances of favoritism, due to the attractiveness bias, also correlates with Aristotle's recognition of the positive influences of PA, which he believed to be a greater recommendation than any letter of reference. Therefore, the power of PA will presumably grant Barnard more votes when he utilizes his idealized beauty. This is also demonstrated in a scene where Coralee knocks on his door and is greeted by him while he is shirtless, subsequently offering to iron his shirt and clean his house after seeing his muscular physique. This comically illustrates the power of PA because she is immediately willing to do chores for him after having seen his attractive body, wherefore it is presumably a way to criticize how PA grants certain people favorable treatment in contemporary society.

On a final note, it can be argued that Barnard's initial gender manifestation as a traditional heteronormative man stems from traditional society's gender behavioral expectations. This becomes apparent when he explains to Bob why he married a woman, when he knew he was gay from an early age, saying, "I needed things to look a certain way, so I got married to a doctor. A beautiful, strong, sexy, successful woman who's never around. [...] But her schedule gives me freedom to do what I need to do" (S01E09). Thus, he married a woman due to traditional gender norms, while still being able to live his authentic self as a homosexual man, since he was too afraid to publicly embody a role of a non-traditional man. Notably, Barnard also describes to Bob how he engaged in a self-reflexive identity process that was confusing for him by saying, "look, Bob, I get it. You're scared, ashamed, confused. Hell, I felt that way the first eight or nine times I had gay sex [...] I love Etta Mae and Magnolia, but what they don't know can't hurt them", causing Bob to say that he is still lying to them, to which Barnard responds, "it's better than lying to myself, trying to convince myself I felt unfulfilled when I wasn't" (S01E10). This reveals that Barnard is deceiving his wife and daughter in order to achieve his own self-actualization, while still maintaining a traditional family construction to keep up appearances and live up to traditional society's norms and values. Ultimately, Barnard's body manifestation supports the attractiveness bias because he is an embodiment of the male beauty ideal in contemporary society, despite being a homosexual. Yet, the fact that he is depicted in a humoristic manner that essentially ridicules his character, suggests that his embodiment functions as a caricature that criticizes the beauty ideal that he resembles.

Coralee Armstrong. Coralee is initially the manifestation of a traditional heteronormative woman, being a stay-at-home mother, who maintains the domestic sphere, while taking care of her son, and

being supportive of her working husband. Also, she physically resembles a ‘proper’ lady, who wears dresses, high heels, and pearls, similar to a 1950s housewife. Thus, her physical appearance is her second skin because it functions as an indicator of her personal identity. This is revealed in a flashback, where her husband, Bob, gives her a makeover, causing “trailer-trash” to transform into a refined southern socialite, consequently making her appearance mirror a traditional woman.

However, she initially rejects the idea of changing her appearance by asking if he is displeased with the way she looks, to which he responds, “I love you. You are beautiful, and fierce, sophisticated. I just want you to wear all that on the outside too” (S01E03). Subsequently, after the makeover, Bob asks her how she feels, to which she replies, “like the very best version of me” (ibid.). This example correlates to Steele’s argument that clothing enables the individual to decorate her body and showcase it in a way that mediates her own personality, which leads to the concept of the ideal self. This is due to the fact that clothing can emphasize and draw attention to the body, creating a particular image that expresses the ‘ideal’ version of the self. Thus, after her makeover, Coralee feels like the best version of herself, which generates a different identity that separates her from the stigmatization that characterized her previous identity, which she tries to distance herself from. As such, in line with Steele’s argument, her new appearance is a form of self-presentation, a compromise between who she is and who she would like to be, her personal self-image and a ‘self-for-others’. So, she allows Bob to change her physical appearance in order to assimilate to, and properly socialize within high society, causing a change in style and subsequently in personality. This also relates to Steele’s notion that a person’s style signals his/her personality, and the image can vary depending on the social setting due to the fact that people engage in social role-playing when they are constantly ‘on stage’, wherefore physical appearance changes accordingly.

Subsequently, her makeover enables her to embody the role of a socialite, wherefore Coralee lies about her sister’s identity to the neighbors, telling them that she is a charity case from the trailer park, because she is afraid of how it might ruin her established image, due to the risk of being associated with her previous lifestyle and identity. However, her lie is discovered by Barnard, after which she apologizes, saying that she was afraid of what he might think of her, to which he responds, “are you kidding me? I’m hell impressed. You are so good at playing a socialite. No one would ever know that underneath it all, you’re still...”, causing her to respond with “trailer-trash?” (ibid.). In this instance, Mead’s concept of the ‘me’ is presumably what causes Coralee to consciously create a self-image that is based on how she thinks other people perceive her. Thus, she fears that by socializing with people from her past, she will be regarded as one of them, which

would jeopardize her upper class image. This can be seen when she explains to Barnard why she lied about her sister's identity, by saying, "I didn't want you to think less of me" (S01E03). Moreover, this also relates to Mead's notion of the generalized other, because the social group that she engages in provides her with a unity of self. Thus, she successfully takes on the role of the generalized other, because she has internalized social norms and attitudes within the upper class community and incorporated them into her own self-biography in order to experience a successful socialization. This becomes evident because in order to successfully engage with the people of the high society in Masonville, Coralee has to embody traditional femininity, which entails staying home, taking care of the house, hosting 'superficial' charities, while looking good on the arm of her husband. This is also apparent when Coralee suggests a way for Bob to greet people at their charity, to which he says, "you could just stand there and look pretty in that dress that I picked out for you" (S01E01). Additionally, in order to effectively engage with the people of high society, she knows that she to become a part of the Junior League, which is demonstrated when she is upset that Bob ruined their chances of becoming members, stressing, "all my hard work. [...] And now I can't join the Junior League. Back to square one" (S01E01). This reveals the immense social value of being in the Junior League, wherefore not being accepted as a member suggests that they will have a harder time proving their social status and become part of high society.

In this relation, Coralee expresses that she is envious of Barnard's wife, Etta Mae, because of her status within their shared social group, thinking, "I know I was supposed to hate Etta Mae Barnard, but the truth is, I wanted to be just like her. She was the president of the PTA, the church sisterhood, and the Junior League. To top it all off, she had the sexiest husband in town" (ibid.). This reveals that Coralee believes that she will get a sense of unity of self by internalizing the norms and values of the highly esteemed social groups, which will supposedly grant her an 'appropriate', positive social identity. Moreover, Coralee is arguably portraying narcissistic features by bonding with Patty long enough for the two of them to win a mother-daughter pageant, after which she says, "well, getting those ladies to accept me was all I ever wanted. You and your mom, y'all could really drag me down" (S01E04). This indicates that instead of genuinely caring about Patty, she exploits her need for motherly attention, wherefore Coralee is only committed to their relationship for as long as it benefits her. Hence, this reinforces the notion that narcissists often manipulate and exploit other people to make themselves look and feel good.

Furthermore, in order to join the Junior League, Coralee is dependent on her husband to fulfill an outward appearance of an idealized, heteronormative constellation. This becomes apparent when

she thinks that “for the Junior Leagues ladies to accept me, everything had to be perfect. Without Bob, I was missing my most important accessory” (S01E03). Therefore, in order to embody the role of a traditional, dependent woman, she needs her husband in order to fulfill the performance and be guaranteed acceptance by the high society of Masonville. In this regard, one can argue that besides her clothing, Bob can also be considered a form of her second skin when he is described as an important accessory. In that connection, when Coralee discovers that her husband has been unfaithful, she is forced to engage in self-reflection, because it dissolves the traditional, heteronormative image that she has tried to maintain. Consequently, the self-reflexive identity process offers her the opportunity to re-write her own narrative such as being on her own while raising her son, which proves to be beneficial for her. This is revealed on multiple occasions, for instance, during a conversation with Bob, where she says, “so when I was on my own, I realized that in all that time, I never stopped to consider what I wanted”, to which Bob replies, “what do you mean? You wanted to get out of the trailer park, be a Southern socialite. I helped you do that”. Subsequently, Coralee says, “I know. But once you made me over, then I became your creation, and I’ve been on autopilot ever since. [...] It made me realize that, Bob, I gotta stop playing dress-up and be who I am. But the only trouble is, I’ve been role-playing for so long, I don’t even know who that is” (S01E09). Thus, it is apparent that Coralee has been influenced by Bob’s traditional idea of how a ‘proper’ woman should be, wherefore this can be compared to the way in which patriarchy has traditionally restricted women by forcing them to embody specific identities. However, the fact that her self-reflexive identity journey provides her with various options regarding her own self-biography is presumably overwhelming for her, because she has never had the chance to create a narrative that was not predetermined. Yet, the self-reflexive identity process ultimately enables her to independently reflect on who she wants to be without being limited by her husband. This is also revealed in another example, where she says, “I swear losing Bob might be the best thing that has ever happened to me. Because now, I can be the me I always wanted to be without Bob getting in the way” (S01E11). Lastly, she expresses how spending a day alone makes her realize that, “I’d avoided being alone for so long, I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed my own company. Maybe being alone wasn’t so bad. I could do what I wanted whenever I wanted” (S02E06). Consequently, as a result of her self-realization, she tries to become a self-employed woman by starting her own business. Therefore, the changing conditions in her life can be compared to the way in which women have become liberated in society, when she is ultimately the embodiment of an independent working woman.

On a different note, it can be argued that Coralee is a manifestation of the beauty myth, because she believes that women must want to embody beauty and men must want to possess it. Simultaneously, by being subjected to endless images of beauty, she experiences that she is unable to measure up to the existing beauty ideals. Hence, she engages in acts of self-policing by frequently working out at home or at the gym in order to fit a certain ideal. This is also illustrated when she initially defends herself for not being a working mom, stating, “I work every single day of my life on myself. And that’s the hardest work of all, thank you very much” (S01E04). Here, it is highlighted that it takes actual work to feel good about yourself as a woman in contemporary society, because the beauty myth tries to infuse women with physical obsessions, fears of aging, and the dread of losing control by exposing them to millions of images of unrealistic beauty ideals. Moreover, the beauty myth tries to divide and create tensions between women, which also relates to Coralee’s relationship with Patty because she is threatened by her young, beautiful body and the fact that she tries to gain attention from her husband. For instance, she uses degrading language about Patty such as, “look at her, she looks like an underage hooker” and “that blonde girl was a catastrophe. Showing up at our gala looking like a whore” (S01E01; E02). This emphasizes the negative effects of the beauty myth because Coralee’s demeaning language contributes to the division and tension between them, which is ultimately caused by her own fear of aging and of lost control.

Contrastingly, Coralee undergoes a personal development, which is also revealed when she begins to display acts of feminism by actively trying to remove the stigma surrounding women’s bodies and their menstruation by hosting a party celebrating it as part of her launch of an improved tampon, referred to as tampazzle. Here, Coralee’s activism is a direct opposition to the ancient stigmatization regarding menstrual cycle, which stems from a religious belief that women had to be excluded from public events because menstruation was considered as being ritually unclean. Consequently, menstruation has become a taboo subject because it can generate feelings of embarrassment and disgust, wherefore Coralee tries to demolish this stigmatization and liberate women from their inferior position to men. Finally, her activism is also expressed when she says, “why can’t we just be proud of our bodies, and all of the amazing things that they can do. We should have a contest for the best period story. You know what I mean? Reclaim our narratives and take the stigma out of menstruation. [...] We have to make this a feminist event” (S02E04). Thus, Coralee’s statement is arguably a manifestation of body positivity and a critique of the way in which traditional, patriarchal beauty ideals still reinforce a societal pressure on women’s bodies.

Angie Bladell. Similar to Coralee and Patty, Angie is also a manifestation of the beauty myth because she has a physical obsession with her appearance and a fear of aging, which also creates tensions between her and Patty. This is revealed when she refuses to let Patty compete in beauty pageants, because that used to be her dream, which she had to forego due to her unexpected pregnancy. For instance, she says, “absolutely not. I will not have my daughter sexualized, objectified. Especially not by older men” (S01E01). Here, she tries to conceal her jealousy towards the fact that Patty is doing pageants by pretending to be against it because of the objectification and sexualization that the pageant world entails. Arguably, this is hypocritical because Angie continuously tries to appeal to the male gaze by dressing and acting promiscuously, wherefore her statement reveals that she is envious of her daughter getting favorable treatment due to her level of PA. This also creates a division between the two, wherefore Angie abruptly leaves Patty on several occasions to either engage in self-realization such as having plastic surgery in order to appear more desirable, which is also an effect of the beauty myth. Besides, Angie’s yearning for youthfulness also contributes to her act of rejecting the lifegiver, in the form of her relationship with Patty, because Angie is seeking short-term commitments to help stimulate her in order to compensate for her inner emptiness. This narcissistic behavior can be traced back to her childhood when she was neglected by her own narcissistic mother in favor of her boyfriend, who also took sexually advantage of Angie, which arguably causes her to be trapped in the mentality of a teenager, which she also recognizes by saying, “everything I did after you was fucked up. It’s like I got stuck at 14”, to which her ex-boyfriend says not to blame all of her problems on him just because “guys aren’t paying attention to you like they used to. [...] You’re old enough to have a teenage daughter” (S01E10). This indicates that Angie was raised within a family dynamic where the older generation felt like they had no future, wherefore this created an emotional detachment that not only had a damaging effect on her family but also transcended a narcissistic personality structure to herself and her daughter, damaging their relationship as well. Moreover, it becomes clear that the resentfulness that Angie experiences towards Patty is because the pregnancy caused her to end her pageant career, which she expresses to Bob, saying, “it can’t be easy, you know, looking like that and having a mother who looks like me. [...] I was almost Miss Georgia back in the day, but I got knocked up, had Patty, and started working at the Weiner Taco” (S01E01). As such, she blames Patty for ruining the opportunities she would have gained from the pageant community, but also because of the fact that Patty is living her dream, while being regarded as more beautiful than her. In that regard, she tries to impose fear onto Patty, which is arguably an effect of the beauty myth,

revealed when she stresses that she is not going to gain anything from being beautiful, because she will eventually grow older and then her beauty will no longer be able to grant her favoritism in society. In Angie's own words, "you think these pageants are going to make you happy, but they're not. I used to be like you. I used to think if I was pretty enough, someone would come along and swoop me up and save me too. [...] Don't get your hopes up, Patty. Bladell women don't win. They get screwed" (S01E04). Thus, Angie tries to deny Patty the opportunity of living their common dream, disclosing that her embodiment is a reflection of how the beauty myth suppresses women by turning them against each other, while maintaining the psychological pressure on women to attain beauty in order to be successful and ultimately secure patriarchy.

Dietland

In contrast to *Tales of the City* (2019) and *Insatiable* (2018), *Dietland* (2018) is a more confronting text in relation to how it targets issues, such as body positivity, feminism, media culture, and beauty ideals. Therefore, we have found it relevant to analyze this series because it features an overweight woman who explicitly struggles with her own body image due to society's brutal discrimination of her body, resulting in a conflict of trying to embody society's beauty ideals. However, by incorporating elements of levity, the show makes the brutality of the narrative somewhat more digestible. In that relation, the humor of the show can be said to attempt to remove a degree of taboo that exists within the topic of being (morbidly) obese. Also, through the recurring animations that are incorporated into the realistic depiction of contemporary society, *Dietland* reminds the audience of the fictional nature of the series. For instance, the animated constituent of the series is utilized in the intro, which is embedded with overtly symbolic motifs, emphasizing the prominent themes of the narrative regarding beauty ideals, since the intro serves as a metaphor for Plum's struggle and desire to attain the idealized skinny female body. Here, Plum gradually transforms into a slim woman while she climbs a mountain that consists of tempting obstacles in the form of cakes and sweets. Notably, the mountain can be translated as a symbol of the social ladder because her social value is increased the higher she reaches, emphasized when she is pursued by two men, revealing that her new body makes her more desirable. Also, she passes a picture that illustrates a woman kneeling in front of a man, alongside the words, "where she belongs", which demonstrates the traditional ideology that entails how a woman is expected to be subordinate to a man. This imagery suggests that series tackles the subject of patriarchy and how the show predominantly villainizes men. In that relation, the fact that men are traditionally the 'protagonists'

of society is alluded to when Plum says, “because I didn’t want to be the hero. I still wanted to be the hero’s girlfriend” (S01E04). This reinforces the traditional notion regarding how men have typically been portrayed as being in the foreground as the hero, thereby alluding to traditional gender roles. Nonetheless, when Plum finally arrives at the top of the mountain, she has become emaciated and lost her hair, and when she reaches for the sign that says “Dietland”, she collapses wherefore the pursuit of her idealized body is portrayed as an unattainable endeavor. In addition, the title of the show further speaks to how contemporary society is embedded with the notion of self-policing, since being on a diet is a form of policing one’s body. Therefore, Plum’s dieting is an example of how she has internalized the societal gaze, which compels her to modify her body in order to reach an idealized female weight. This also resonates with how the beauty myth has been said to be implemented in order to mitigate women’s pursuit of power, since the unrealistic body ideals keep women occupied because the goal of attaining a ‘perfect’ body requires a comprehensive amount of attention.

Furthermore, when the viewer is first introduced to Plum she refers to herself by saying, “that’s me. Alicia Kettle. But everyone calls me Plum because I’m succulent and round. Also known as fat. It’s OK, I’m allowed to say it” (S01E01). Contrastingly, she refers to her ideal, skinny self as Alicia Kettle when she says, “after the surgery, when I was thin, I wouldn’t even be Plum. My name would be Alicia. And I’d burst out of my sad diorama into a big, sexy life” (ibid.). As such, this arguably challenges how the body functions as an extension of the self, because it is evident that Plum does not recognize her body as a reflection of her internal self. Thus, one can argue that her internal self has come to reflect the negative perceptions that the societal gaze has inflicted upon her, which means that she has internalized the shame and ridicule that she is constantly exposed to. This further explains why she engages in excessive self-loathing, and why she refuses to use her birth name, because she does not fully claim ownership of her body. Additionally, the fact that she feels a disconnection from her body is further emphasized when she says, “my body was just a thing I used to move my head around. So I missed a lot” (ibid.). Here, it is implied that her body does not feel as an extension of the self, but merely considered an apparatus that she utilizes to contain and transport the inner self. However, even though her body does not coincide with her inner narrative, it still functions as an extension of a narrative in terms of her self-biography because it represents a behavior or a bodily condition. Besides, since the body and the self are codependent, they are bound to influence one another one at some level, wherefore Plum’s body cannot be completely disregarded from her own narrative.

On another note, Plum attends Waist Watchers meetings as part of her weight loss journey in order to ultimately be eligible for her bypass surgery. Interestingly, the name Waist Watchers overtly refers to the societal gaze as well as the direct policing that occurs in society. Besides, a woman named Janice participates in one of their meetings but, in contrast to the other members, she illustrates an example of body positivity, which is highlighted when she says, “screw this ass-sucking crap. I came here to get some help losing weight because I have back problems, not because I hate my body [...] I am a unicorn. I am a goddess. And I get more hot dick than I can handle” (ibid.). As such, in contrast to the negative stigmatization of overweight women, Janice indicates that the voluptuous body can be sexualized and desired. In addition, when she refers to herself as a goddess, she also implies that her body is worthy of worship, which she supports by mentioning how she has multiple sexual partners. Thus, Janice associates the large female body with divinity, which coheres with previous idealization of the full-figured female embodiment. Hence, this illustrates how beauty ideals are somewhat unfixed and ever-changing, but also how some ancient societies did not minimize the importance nor the size of a woman, but rather embraced her. However, Janice’s proclamation of self-love is invalidated by the counsellor of Waist Watchers who condescendingly says, “that’s so sad, right? So much denial” (ibid.). This comment alludes to how embracing the obese body is widely unacceptable, wherefore the only plausible explanation for Janice’s self-love is delusional behavior. Arguably, one of the reasons why the obese body is predominantly deemed undesirable in contemporary society is because it is associated with an unhealthy body due to the risk of an untimely death. Hence, to some extent, one can argue that the overweight body manifestation is rejected and hidden because it confronts people with their fear of death. This is also illustrated when Plum is diagnosed as morbidly obese, which by the title indicates that obesity can result in death.

Moreover, the show arguably criticizes how the obese body is fetishized, which is revealed when Plum describes the objectification of overweight women as “a kink. A fetish. They screw girls like me but marry women like this. Kitty Montgomery” (ibid.). Thus, Plum implies that the sexualization of her body is limited to a deviating perversion, wherefore it suggests that her body is only able to satisfy a fetish, and not considered ‘appropriate’ for long-term relationships. This is also illustrated on several occasions, such as when Plum is rejected by a blind date after the first five seconds of their encounter, and when another date walks out on her. Yet, she encounters a man named Jake who finds sexual satisfaction in watching voluptuous women eat. This is exemplified when he says, “you could eat a whole bowl, couldn’t you? I want you to. I wanna watch you. Come

on, you know you want it” (S01E05). Evidently, this scene creates connotations to The Fall where the devil, in the form of a serpent, tempts and convinces Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. As such, this indicates that Jake is presumably aroused by the mere fact that Plum embodies the sin of gluttony and overindulgence, which is something that is still frowned upon and ‘forbidden’ in contemporary society where self-control is an admirable trait as argued by Bordo. Besides, one can argue that Plum’s embodiment is an unwilling act of bodily transgression, because her appearance unconsciously provokes the ideals and norms in society.

Furthermore, Jake’s behavior is rejected by Plum who calls him a pervert and states, “you thought what? Since I’m fat, I should be desperate? I’ll be grateful for whatever I can get? Guess what. Your face is a three. Four tops. But I was willing to overlook that maybe because you seemed nice. You’re just like the rest of them. You’re a creep and a user” (S01E05). As such, Plum recognizes how Jake is simply using her to satisfy a fetish, accusing him of taking advantage of the fact that society has deemed her unattractive, wherefore she should tolerate and settle for other ‘deviants’. Ironically, Plum utilizes the same discriminatory lookism discourse that is used against her when she de-evaluates Jake’s appearance, wherefore she exemplifies how ingrained beauty ideals are in society, even for those who struggle to embody them, since one would presumably expect a greater degree of tolerance and understanding from people who deviate from the ideals. Yet, Plum decides to give Jake another chance, which culminates in Plum getting sexually assaulted. Later, she discusses this incident with Sana and blames herself when she says, “I feel like I could’ve stopped him. I could’ve fought harder, left when it got weird. I mean I outweigh the guy!” (S01E09). Interestingly, she makes the argument that she outweighs Jake, wherefore she would be able to physically resist the assault. Therefore, her self-discrimination is arguably a critique of society’s emphasis on PA, because she suggests that she would not be considered as a ‘proper’ victim. Also, the statement indicates that Plum has internalized the notion that the female body is supposed to appear weaker in comparison to men’s, wherefore it can be argued that her passive behavior illustrates a placebo effect. However, her reaction can also be explained by the fact that it is common for people to adopt a freeze state when something traumatic and unexpected occurs.

Moreover, the reason for the excessive consumption of food is commented on by the counselor of Waist Watchers when she says, “I would say 90 percent of my people say stress is what makes them binge. Well, that and loneliness. But everybody’s lonely” (S01E01). Here, her statement draws attention to the fact that individuals are bound to experience feelings of loneliness, which is

arguably due to a societal narcissistic epidemic. Also, the desire to reach the unblemished, socially valued self arguably causes humans to suffer because they strive for perfected bodies in order to gain status and social validation. However, when relations are solely based on the external part of the self, the meaningfulness and depth of said relationships become superficial, fragile, and cursory. Hence, this may lead to feelings of personal meaninglessness consistent with Giddens's argument, since the comprehensive and stressful nature of the self-identity project can result in negative existential feelings that are further complicated by the lack of stability and safety that deep and static relationships can provide.

On another note, Plum engages in dieting, which coheres with Foucault's claim that the body is subjected to constraints, obligations, and prohibitions in society. In that relation, the concept of excess is prevailing in many Western societies, wherefore the idea of modifying and constraining the body to not engage in overindulgence may prove itself strenuous. Correspondingly, the head of Calliope House, Verena, compares food to sin when saying, "food was the sin, and Mama was the sinner" (S01E04). This perception of how overindulging in food is considered sinful and thus how limiting one's intake of it represents high morality. This correlates with Bordo's statement regarding how restrictive eating is perceived as an admirable ability, since it represents an individual that is able to control his/her urges to overindulge in a world of excess. This also speaks to how people are considered to differ from animals by their ability to control their primal instincts, and tame their internal 'beasts' by not fully succumbing to their fundamental urges. This further explains why obese people are often victims of dehumanizing discourses, since their bodies are considered manifestations of the lack of self-control. This is accentuated when Plum says, "and that's how I felt, like a creature. Less than human. What did it matter what a creature does? Who cares about consequences when you aren't even afforded the consideration of a dog?" (S01E05). Notably, her statement implies that people who do not mirror contemporary beauty ideals are not just considered less attractive but also considered less human. Therefore, this also mirrors the attractiveness bias and how overweight people are denied certain opportunities, which might include the mere right to fully be considered human.

Moreover, Plum's inferior position is also emphasized when she says, "I think it was Margaret Atwood who said that women's biggest fear is that men will kill them. Men's worst fear about women? Being laughed at. I had both" (S01E02). Besides, this example also draws attention to the unequal power relation between men and women, entailing how women's fears are presumably more legitimate, since they are based on their immediate survival. This also supports how men have

traditionally been considered superior to women, as well as how strength and physical superiority are qualities that have originally been attributed to men. Besides, the ridicule Plum endures can be considered to perpetuate the societal gaze, since she is not merely self-policing, because the practice is also executed directly by members of society. Nonetheless, Plum undergoes a personal transformation, which is revealed when she utilizes the weapon of laughter against men. This can be seen after she has been called a “fat bitch” by a man, and hysterically starts laughing at him (S01E07). In this scene, Plum ridicules and undermines the man’s superior status when she laughs, because she challenges his authority and his implied superiority. In fact, Plum can be said to mock the male body performance, which indicates that she ranks herself higher than him. Further, Plum also realizes that the self-loathing that she experiences is an internalized disapproval of her from society, when she states,

“What I realized was I don’t hate myself. The world hates me! For being like this!
Every day I walk around in this skin, people look at me like I have the plague.
They act like I’m a stain. They stare and laugh and yell. Worst of all, they tell me
I have such a pretty face. And then they lecture me on how I can fix my body.
Because how I am is wrong” (S01E03).

Firstly, this is an example of her ‘me’ because her structure of self is determined through her self-perception based on how she thinks other people perceive her. Secondly, it is also an example of how she experiences a direct policing, since the comment on Plum’s physical appearance reveals how society strips away the agency of choosing to embrace her current body. Correspondingly, she is expected to be dissatisfied with her body, wherefore the choice concerning whether or not Plum wants to maintain her physique is not recognized as a valid option. As a result, it can be argued that the agency of her body is not fully hers because society feels entitled to suggest various bodily alterations to ‘fix’ her ‘invalid’ appearance. In this connection, Plum is exposed to various opinions about her weight in all social arenas of her life. For example, her best friend, Steven, encourages her to lose weight to be healthier, and her mother and Verena want her to embrace her body, whereas society generally dictates that her body manifestation is wrong. As such, due to Plum’s size, there is nowhere for her to hide from the judgmental gaze of society, which is also addressed when she discusses with Steven, who is a homosexual African American man, who is the most oppressed. Here, she says, “well, game over. Fat woman wins! I can’t pass. There’s nowhere I can go to

escape. Not work, not home, not the bus. Not even inside my own damn head” (S01E06). In this scene, she suggests that a gay man is able to pass as straight, but obese individuals are not able to pass as being ‘appropriate’ in any given context. In the same discussion, Steven feels entitled to comment on Plum’s embodiment when he says, “how about staying fat will kill you?” (ibid.). Therefore, this confirms Plum’s feelings regarding of how society feels entitled to evaluate and police certain body manifestations. However, if absolute, personal agency over one’s body existed, then the choice to remain morbidly obese should be validated and not be subjected to any interference by the means of policing.

On the contrary, it can be argued that women who are overweight pose a particular threat to traditional gender roles, since they can be argued to emasculate men because when women surpass men in size, they arguably represent a superior status. This is due to the fact that being large indicates dominance and power, which are traditionally considered masculine attributes, wherefore this presumably explains why being overweight in contemporary society is often considered ‘unfeminine’. In this connection, when women are larger than men, they are able to physically overpower them, which stands in clear contrast to how women are conventionally supposed to be protected by men. Thus, when the traditional power dynamic between a man and a woman is challenged, one can argue that heteronormative gender roles are also subjected to scrutiny. Hence, if the reason behind dividing human bodies into gendered categories is in order to support heterosexuality as the norm, as claimed by Butler, then the former hierarchal system of a traditional heterosexual couple will be somewhat redundant, if it entails that a man is expected to protect his female partner who is proportionally larger than him. Notably, one can argue that it is no coincidence that the ideal sizing for women within the contemporary fashion industry is a size zero, since it presumably indicates how much space a woman was traditionally allowed to fill in society.

On another note, Julia, who works at Austen Media, challenges the mainstream favorable depictions of women in the magazine, *Daisy Chain*, when she says, “I have to ask, who is more oppressed, a woman covered from head to toe in a burka or one of the bikini-clad models on the cover of your magazine?” (S01E01). To that end, she adds,

“Austen Media is part of the dissatisfaction industrial complex, a hugely profitable machine. They get us to pay them to tell us how broken we are. And then we pay for the products to fix it. But we’re never fixed. Because there’s

always some new way we don't please the eye of our big brother beholder. I say enough. Time to change the game" (ibid.).

This statement criticizes how consumer society profits from the unrealistic beauty ideals that the discourses of various media platforms endorse. Additionally, it also exemplifies how self-policing is secured through these discourses, because they dictate that people should enhance their PA, in order to improve their 'value' as human beings by purchasing various body modifying products. In addition, it is interesting how Julia claims that people are authorizing this form of discourse when it can generate low-self-esteem. However, this can be explained by the fact that humans have always been fascinated by aesthetically pleasing visuals that exemplify the sublime, which connotes divinity. Moreover, when the media frames these body ideals as being attainable and as a natural rendition of the body, it presumably fuels people's desire to embody them. Additionally, since these ideals somewhat echo divinity, it is implied that by reaching them, one will embody the unblemished socially valued and ideal self, because the divine has always been subjected to worship and admiration. Yet, since the ideals are fictional, cultural constructs, the body will never come to mirror divine perfection. This also explains how Plum's body functions as an inconvenient and inadequate seat of the self, because it stands in the way of her self-actualization. In addition, Plum reflects on how human beings have been conditioned to believe that the remedy for the broken and imperfect body is found externally when she says, "so many of us live for the idea that a thing, a person, a place will fix us. But it never happens. Not really. We all have to live with the parts of us that are broken and find a way to be happy" (S01E10). This claim coheres with Julia's statement that involves how consumerism fosters the belief that various material commodities are the solution to the alienated feeling that modern society has instilled in the human consciousness.

Correspondingly, Plum's statement accentuates how the socially valued self is often dependent on another individual, because engaging in a relationship also supports the idea of how people are in search of their significant other who will 'complete' them. On that note, her statement also alludes to how the body is considered a more successful performance when it engages in a heterosexual relationship because it mirrors traditional and idealized heteronormativity. However, the series suggests that people should embrace the fact that humans are flawed and subsequently find contentment in that realization, rather than trying to embody society's restrictive beauty ideals.

Contrastingly, Plum is introduced to a woman whose purpose is to make Plum 'bangable', which entails trying to instate the appearance or illusion of purity in a woman, since the woman claims

that it is a desirable trait. As such, this echoes how the archetypical idealization of the virginity and purity of Virgin Mary has transcended across time and culture, since it is still considered a favorable quality in contemporary society. The woman further addresses how the optimal appearance of a woman is dictated by men when she says, “no, no, no, it’s not about literal banging, silly. And it sure as hell is not about what you want. It’s about what men want” (S01E04). This also coheres with how the beauty myth is presumably imposed by men in order to disempower women. Nonetheless, Plum gets Botox and Restylane through her process of becoming bangable, which affirms how the idealized woman must show no signs of aging and thus not embody the aging female grotesque. Subsequently, Plum confronts the woman with her questionable intentions regarding Plum’s body modifications by saying, “you’re trying to get me to understand that becoming thin is becoming bangable and becoming bangable is like a prison of its own” (ibid). This arguably means that even though being obese is considered a prison in itself, due to the intensified policing by society, becoming skinny can be deemed as another prison because it entails that one conforms to society’s norms and is more prone to objectification. Thus, by conforming to the norms, an individual who embodies society’s beauty ideals will still be exposed to new forms of constraints, which exemplifies how the body is still marked by suspended rights in line with Foucault’s argument.

Moreover, the ability and the flexibility to change the body to make it adhere to specific narratives also resonates with Giddens’ notion regarding how one’s self-identity can be considered fragile. As such, the fact that Plum aspires to change her narrative by becoming skinny exemplifies how her self-identity is fragile, because she has the ability to alter her narrative, revealing that her identity is not constricted by fixed identity markers. Besides, the fact that Plum is able to replace her current narrative if she loses weight further stresses the importance of the body as a means to attain a positive social identity. Yet, Plum’s willingness to undergo bypass surgery is based on societal perceptions about how “pretty hurts. But ugly hurts more” (ibid.). Evidently, this phrase, which is uttered by the doctor who injects Plum’s face with Botox and Restylane, supports the validity of the physical attractiveness bias in society. On the contrary, his claim is challenged by Plum’s stylist who questions Plum’s desire to undergo bypass surgery when saying, “what you want is society at large, excuse the pun, to deem you bangable. You want good looks to be considered a valuable commodity” (ibid). This critical statement challenges the fact that Plum is willing to undergo surgery to conform to society’s rendition of the ideal woman, while also indicating that, by having surgery, Plum will affirm the idea that happiness can only be achieved by resembling

society's beauty ideals. Nevertheless, Plum's desire to enhance her PA can be said to be an inflicted condition, since consumerism arguably fosters narcissism and society is ultimately dominated by enhanced appearances as argued by Bordo.

Evidently, Plum is introduced to other women who do not resemble idealized beauty, one of whom is a disfigured woman called Sana, who had acid thrown in her face, wherefore her embodiment connotes the damaged and 'flawed' body. Similar to Plum, Sana's embodiment is shrouded in stigmas and taboos, because her appearance is permanent and often associated with trauma, wherefore it is not directly addressed and policed. Also, since Sana's disfiguration manifests itself in her face, one can argue that it generates another level of discomfort in people that interact with her given that she is unable to hide or pass as a 'proper' female embodiment in social settings. This is also demonstrated when Sana describes her interaction with other people by saying, "the way people react to my face, it's like a truth serum. The essentially decent adjust and those that don't I know to avoid" (S01E06). Additionally, Sana is forced to incorporate her traumatic incident into her self-biography, since her body is on constant display, wherefore her narrative will always be marked by the tragic event. In this relation, Plum asks Sana whether or not it infuriates her when she is rejected as a consequence of her physical appearance, to which she replies, "they have to live with their ugliness. I don't" (ibid.). Interestingly, Sana's statement suggests that ugliness is not only determined based on physical appearance, because it can also describe human behavior. Therefore, her view correlates with the biblical notion regarding how sin affects the overall perception and appearance, which can make a person unattractive and thus undesirable.

Moreover, Julia is another woman in the series who deviates from society's ideal definition of beauty, since it is revealed that she has undergone a double mastectomy. In that regard, Julia asks Plum if she wants to see a magic trick, subsequently followed by Julia removing her wig, fake eyelashes, fake fillers in her bra, and finally showing the scars on her chest. Here, Julia showcases how she is able to pass as an 'appropriate' female embodiment through a vast amount of second skin. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note how many fabricated accessories Julia needs to incorporate into her body performance in order to conform to what is considered an ideal female performance, wherefore this challenges how the idealized female embodiment is traditionally rooted in the naturalness of the human body. Additionally, since idealized embodiments are rooted within masculinity and femininity, it can be argued that there is nothing inherently natural about these embodiments, since gender is arguably a fabricated construction. Similarly, when Julia undresses herself, it serves as a literal metaphor for how her appearance as a woman is fabricated because she

deconstructs the idealized female performance when she removes the body enhancing elements, revealing a flawed yet authentic female body underneath.

Furthermore, another prominent aspect of the series is the way in which it antagonizes men by highlighting various aspects of toxic masculinity, such as misogyny and rape, while simultaneously perpetuating how the traditional characteristics of men are considered attractive. This is highlighted during a conversation between Rubi and the transgender woman, Barbara, where Rubi suggests that Barbara should date men from her own community, causing her to respond, “those guys are too earnest. Look, I need a beast. Somebody who’s gonna break mine in... Someone who’s gonna bark like a dog” (S01E02). Here, the primal and aggressive traits that are traditionally embodied by men are made desirable, which illustrates a dissonance between society that wants to maintain the traditional masculine behavior while also wanting to refuse it. As such, one can argue that the traditional concept of masculinity no longer serves its original purpose due to the changing conditions in contemporary society. Also, the battle between the sexes that results in gender roles losing their hold is addressed when Plum says,

“The die was cast with Adam and Eve. One’s an innie, one’s an outie. The outie acts all outie. It kills things and build fires and stuff. While the innie gathers and communicates effectively. Oh, and makes people. Literally. They both have essential skills. They need each other. I should mention that some people are born outie with innie parts. Or the other way around. Or sometimes no parts. And in a huge range of colors and... It gets complicated. Let’s just say that the outie stands for “they with all the power”. Because like Maslow said, after air, food and water, it’s all about safety. So brute force wins most essential for human survival. And for years, we celebrate the outie. All hail the outie! Until somebody invents machines. Now machines do a lot of what the outie used to do, including killing people. Suddenly, penis power isn’t so essential, so undeniable” (S01E10).

This metaphorical rendition of the historical development of the sexes serves as an interesting overview of how the gendered performances have undergone immense change. Firstly, it addresses how men have traditionally adopted the roles of protector and provider, which are predominantly characterized as masculine behaviors. This may further explain why the idealized representation of the male body is framed as muscular, because it mirrors the qualities of strength and power, which

were essential characteristics necessary to fulfill the traditional gender role. Secondly, it states how men traditionally played a vital function, since they provided the basic needs of safety, however, with industrialization, the necessary role of man became less imperative. As a consequence, men have become somewhat emasculated in society, wherefore masculinity has become a more abstract concept, which can be said to complicate the male identity. Arguably, women are also experiencing a disconnection from their traditional roles as mothers who were expected to occupy the domestic sphere, due to the shift of focalization from the collective to the individual, which entails how one can disregard the formation of a family in favor of their own self-actualization. Yet, it is ironic that individuals still fixate on attaining specific body ideals, which are rooted in patriarchy and based on outdated male and female gender roles. In addition, the statement also acknowledges how the traditional Western gendered performances are rooted in Christianity, which is exemplified when Plum refers to the myth of Adam and Eve. In that relation, the Bible has, as Plum suggests, predominantly featured men as protagonists of various biblical myths, accentuating how men were celebrated and attributed great importance. However, Plum states that men have abused their historical superiority to women when she says, “the innies want more. They start howling about how they want equality and about some of the really bad crap that the outies have been getting away with for years” (ibid). Thus, because women are no longer dependent on men, women have increasingly gained a more equal status. Also, the fact that men have been celebrated and attributed superior importance can further explain why men have felt an entitlement to use their “brute” force to engage in the oppression of women through toxic masculinity. As such, one can also argue that the conventional male traits that are traditionally supposed to protect women have instead been utilized to exploit them. This arguably further explains why there has been an increased focus on the appearance of women throughout history in contrast to men, since women have traditionally been perceived as sexual objects, who were merely supposed to please the male gaze. This idea is criticized by Julia who says, “you’re not a thing. You are a woman. And you should decorate yourself however it pleases you” (S01E01). Likewise, since women have supposedly gained more agency in contemporary society, one can argue that they have altered their position from object to subject, since being an object implies passivity whereas being a subject implies agency. Additionally, women do not, to the same extent, have to adjust their appearance to please the male gaze, however, they are still subjected to the societal gaze, which originates from patriarchy, wherefore it implicitly endorses the male gaze. Finally, Plum’s statement adheres to Strathern’s

claim about how the body exemplifies various metaphors regarding power relations and differences in a more general sense. This is exemplified when Plum reflects on the societal structure, saying,

“Every nation has an OS, just like your computer. And sometimes it needs a serious update. How do you change it? March. Disrupt. Make yourself a thorn in the side of the status quo. But you also have to become the status quo. Run for office. Lobby your representative. Not as sexy as murder. But trust me, laws, that’s what makes the primal beast behave” (S01E10).

Based on this statement, masculinity and femininity can be considered two sets of laws that civilize the primal beast. This also supports Gehlen’s argument regarding how human beings are characterized by their instinctual deprivation, which suggests that humans would be unable to control their instinctual drives without any regulations. Therefore, institutions are arguably important because they provide structures and guidelines that are crucial to follow in order to experience a successful socialization and gain the feeling of *entlastung*. Hence, the idealized body performances maintain the status quo of society, and a world without guidelines would arguably be chaotic.

Furthermore, Kitty Montgomery is a character who stands in clear contrast to Plum and the aforementioned women, since she more closely resembles the idealized female body because of her polished, slim body. Besides, Kitty exudes power and dominance and she often utilizes these qualities against her male peers. For example, she adopts the role of the sexual predator when she makes inappropriate sexual advances towards a man, exemplifying how men are also objectified in contemporary society. Moreover, Kitty’s social value is predominantly related to her appearance, which is revealed when Kitty’s boss refers to her face as “the moneymaker” (S01E04). Contrastingly, the way in which the embodiment of the aging female grotesque decreases the value of women is addressed when her boss’ wife says, “we can’t age or we become invisible. But men, nobody cares what they look like, as long as they have money” (ibid.). This coheres with how older women represent something unfavorable, which further renders their embodiments as being devalued. Kitty also expresses this opinion when she says, “around here, you start looking like somebody’s grandmother, you’re out” (S01E02). In this relation, it is interesting that the aging female body is subjected to great stigmatization, given that the aging male body is somewhat idealized in American society due to its association with power, which is supported by the fact that

throughout history, a presidential candidate has been considered more eligible if he was a middle-aged (or older) white man. Furthermore, it is also interesting how the organization, Jennifer, embraces the aging female grotesque when concealing their faces with masks that portray the stereotypical depiction of a witch. This is due to the fact that the utilization of this ‘unattractive’ stereotype can be considered a way of reclaiming the narrative of this wretched and feared personification. Besides, the imagery of the witch connotes how women have previously been persecuted and demonized, which was especially epitomized through the witch trials during the Middle ages that mostly held female victims. Thus, the series arguably makes a parallel to ancient witch hunts in order to criticize how women are still persecuted by patriarchy in contemporary society.

On another note, the show makes another interesting point regarding how pornography plays a part in the oppression of the female body. This is addressed when ‘Jennifer’ not only executes men, but also eliminates a famous porn star, Stella Cross, who is subsequently lying on a tomb wearing a white dress, a wooden crown, whilst holding a dildo, and a pornographic movie. Ultimately, this set up is lit on fire, wherefore it resembles a sacrificial act where the fire is symbolically supposed to purify Stella from her ‘sins’. Contrastingly, her portrayal also connotes the imagery of a saint, because the white dress symbolizes purity and the crown signifies holiness. Correspondingly, one can argue that ‘Jennifer’ is sacrificing one of their own because she is woman, which metaphorically results in a kind of martyrdom for Stella Cross. Thus, even though Stella Cross’ pornographic career participates in the oppression of women, she is also subjected to this form of oppression by virtue of being a woman and ultimately a victim. Moreover, Plum explains why Stella was sacrificed when she says, “gang-bangs and rape porn were her specialties. She literally broke her vagina from all the abuse it took. It was obvious why Jennifer targeted her. She normalized sexual violence. She was rape culture’s poster girl. Who also sold jeans and makeup in the pages of women’s magazines” (S01E05). Thus, it is indicated that Stella Cross not only supports the patriarchal oppression of women through porn but also when supporting the beauty industry. On a similar note, it is also revealed how Calliope House holds an artistic statement in the form of a room that features a livestream of the 100 most watched videos on the website, Pornhub. In that connection, Sana expresses how she finds comfort in the pornographic content, because she believes that the women in the various movies are examples of idealized female embodiments, despite being overtly submissive and directly oppressed and objectified. Yet, she stresses that neither her nor Plum embody society’s beauty ideals, wherefore they do not face being sexually

harassed or dominated to the same degree as the women in the pornographic movie. In this regard, Plum states that,

“I could work my whole life to be someone’s ideal, to be loveable to someone, and even if I get there, I’m still not safe. Say I lose the weight, I get the surgeries, I fit in with all the perfect sizes twos of the word. All I’ve done is turn myself into better fodder for the predators! All my life, I’ve been trying to turn myself into better prey!” (S01E07).

Due to her statement, it can be argued that her self-identity is eventually robust because she does not fully succumb to the male gaze, in contrast to women who constantly change their narratives by enhancing their PA. This is because she gains the self-realization that she ultimately has to accept her flawed human nature, wherefore she ultimately rejects the beauty myth. Therefore, Dietland criticizes patriarchy and the common belief that an enhanced PA usually benefits the individual, when it is suggested that there are also advantages of not embodying society’s beauty ideals, because they ultimately reduce women to sexualized objects whilst reinforcing the beauty myth.

THE COMPLEXITY OF CONTEMPORARY BEAUTY AND BODY IDEALS

We have conducted an analysis of how body manifestations within the chosen series challenge society’s beauty ideals in a contemporary context. The reason that we have chosen to analyze contemporary beauty ideals is because we have found particular interest in examining the interplay between tradition and renewal that exists within contemporary beauty ideals, as well as how these ideals affect human beings. Besides, this form of interplay is reminiscent of Umberto Eco’s claim that the interaction between tradition and renewal can resemble originality despite the fact that no such thing exists, because new creations are essentially influenced by existing texts, wherefore they are merely copies of each other (Eco 131-133). Yet, the result of this interplay consisting of familiar themes and reinterpretations can be enticing for the viewer, wherefore it presumably serves as an effective way convey a message, which is arguably the case in the chosen TV-series, where there is also an interaction between traditional beauty ideals and representations of alternative body iconographies.

For that reason, we have considered the TV-series as relevant and nuanced representations of contemporary societal struggles with body images and beauty ideals, mimicking the current body positivity and gender activism movements. Thus, based on our analysis of *Tales of the City*, *Insatiable*, and *Dietland*, this section will first examine similarities and differences between the chosen texts, with the purpose of uncovering how they shed light on the clash between alternative body manifestations and contemporary beauty ideals. Subsequently, this will lead to a broader discussion regarding contemporary tendencies in relation to body iconographies and beauty ideals. Notably, the reason for choosing these specific texts stems from the fact that they all tackle the same issue, but it is interesting how they criticize idealized beauty and body ideals in contemporary society by the use of different body iconographies and genre codes. In this regard, *Tales of the City* is a drama series that takes point of reference in social realism through its representation of a queer community, wherefore it creates a parallel to the gender activism in contemporary society that encourages inclusivity of alternative gender and body manifestations, promoting the message of body positivity. Therefore, we have considered the series to be relevant due to the way in which it portrays individuals who deviate from society's traditional beauty and body ideals by actively challenging the constructed and internalized gender norms. Also, besides the serious and realistic nature of the series, it can be argued that the way it tackles the issue regarding alternative body manifestations is implicit, because the struggle to live up to society's ideals is caused by the normative division of traditional masculinity and femininity. Thereby, the series manages to highlight that the struggles to attain societal ideals is not exclusively rooted within issues regarding one's size and physical appearance. Moreover, all three series feature diverse ethnic representations, including Asian, Hispanic, African American, and Caucasian, demonstrating a diversity of body iconographies. However, it is interesting that the primary focus of the three series does not revolve around how racial differences create identity conflicts in relation to body image and beauty ideals, with the exception of a few African-American characters, who are arguably stereotypical depictions, because they represent a minority that has often been portrayed as victims of discrimination when they have historically been considered inferior body manifestations. In this connection, it can be questioned whether or not racial identity conflicts are neglected in the series in terms of overlooking racial minorities and their possible struggles to be socially validated in contemporary society that predominantly favors Western beauty and body ideals. This is due to the fact that despite featuring marginalized ethnic minorities, the point of view is predominantly seen from the perspective of white protagonists, thereby providing limited access to the internal identity

conflicts of the ethnic minorities. On the contrary, all three series primarily focus on body issues regarding size and/or the use of body modifications to reach the ideal self, rather than focusing on specific identity struggles of ethnic minorities. This presumably creates a broader inclusivity by highlighting that human beings are subjected to the same oppressions in relation to beauty ideals regardless of ethnicity, thereby eliminating the distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’. Therefore, the three series evidently mirror current gender and body positive activism in contemporary society where people are actively fighting for broader gender, racial and body representations in the media, encouraging society to recognize that there are more renditions of beauty in contrast to the existing exclusive and fictive ideals.

Furthermore, *Insatiable* is more explicit in its comment on society’s beauty ideals, which is seen in its stereotypical depiction of the ‘ugly duckling’ that transforms into a ‘beautiful swan’, emphasized when the show portrays the mainstream struggle that revolves around the desire to lose weight in order to become more beautiful. In this regard, it also explicitly depicts the pageant world as a way to illustrate society’s reinforcement of patriarchy and the beauty myth. Yet, *Insatiable* also demonstrates how men in contemporary society experience the pressure of having to attain society’s beauty ideals, wherefore it arguably manages to highlight an issue that is traditionally stigmatized for men, because it challenges traditional masculinity. Thus, despite the recurrent narrative of a woman’s struggle with beauty and body image issues, the series arguably distinguishes itself by emphasizing how contemporary beauty ideals not only influence women. Similar to *Insatiable*, *Dietland* also portrays the struggle with being overweight, yet it is focalized from an overweight woman’s perspective, who wants to lose weight in order to gain a positive social identity. In contrast to *Insatiable*, *Dietland* further portrays the struggle of other women who do not embody society’s beauty ideals due to body disfigurement and ethnicity, whilst focusing on an inner transformation rather than a physical metamorphosis.

Besides, *Dietland* encourages body positivity to a larger degree than *Insatiable*, because it ultimately rejects society’s beauty ideals, the attractiveness bias, and the power that PA entails. Moreover, while the use of humor in *Dietland* can make the theme easier to cope with, the fact that it uses dark humor to convey the message of the series arguably strengthens the brutal discourse that is used to criticize patriarchy. In this connection, it can be argued that *Insatiable* and *Dietland* share a mutual point of reference through their utilization of humor. However, the absurdity of the characters in *Insatiable* generates a comic relief, which arguably makes it easier to digest the message in contrast to *Dietland*, because the theme of beauty ideals is depicted in a satirical manner

that ridicules the theme itself. On the contrary, the fact that the theme is conveyed in a humorous manner can ultimately disregard the serious struggle with body images that is depicted in *Insatiable*, since the humor might cause the issue to be minimized. As a result, despite gaining insight into the characters' struggles with body images, the viewer is arguably more likely to lose sympathy with the characters in *Insatiable* when their struggles become the source of entertainment. In contrast, the supposed humor of *Dietland* merely emphasizes the uncomfortable aspects of the theme regarding beauty and body image issues because of how it directly confronts the viewer with personal feelings of hatred and inadequacy that is fueled by society's stigmatization towards the main character. Thus, even though self-hatred is also present within *Insatiable*, the lack of obvious humor in *Dietland* generates discomfort, since the main character is continuously victimized, thereby creating more sympathy with her struggles. Also, the reason that *Insatiable* generates less sympathy is arguably due to the fact that it revolves around a character who ultimately embodies society's beauty ideals and receives validation based on her enhanced PA, yet self-love remains unachieved. However, *Dietland* revolves around a character who does not mirror society's ideals, yet gains validation based on her personal qualities and ultimately achieves self-love. However, both series manage to convey the message of the misconceptions regarding embodying society's beauty and body ideals, seen in *Insatiable* where embodying these ideals supposedly increases the human value, leading to a successful body performance. Although, despite embodying society's beauty ideals, the main character is ultimately portrayed as the villain, thus dissolving the myth that beauty always equals good. In *Dietland*, the message is directly conveyed when the main character is ridiculed by society, which is portrayed as an oppressing force that discriminates overweight people who do not exemplify society's ideals. Moreover, it can be argued that the increased emphasis on transforming the body is caused by the self-reflexive identity process, which is an abstract concept that can be difficult to cope with, wherefore the body presumably serves as more tangible entity, since identity developments can be reflected through the extension of the self. Thus, body alterations can ultimately be perceived as visible edits of the self-narrative, which is also the case on social media sites, such as Instagram, where the body is continuously edited in order to reflect a specific and often favorable narrative.

Interestingly, the issue regarding body image and beauty ideals is arguably rooted within social norms and conditions that dictate 'right' and 'wrong' behavior. In this relation, it can be questioned whether or not the ownership of bodies lies with the individual, or if society can be said to have part of ownership due to its reinforcement of beauty norms that encourage self-policing. As such, by

encouraging feelings of agony and inadequacy with one's own body, society arguably takes ownership by limiting people's own agency when restricting the possibility for diverse body manifestations. Thus, since the body is arguably an extension of the self, it can be questioned whether or not society's disapproval of the 'imperfect' body is internalized as an inner de-evaluating discourse, which ultimately creates feelings of personal meaninglessness. However, social guidelines are reinforced within society's institutions that aid in creating a successful socialization through the use of clear referential markers. Hence, it can be argued that Gehlen's notion regarding how human beings need institutions due to their instinctual deprivation is beneficial for the individual, since the lack of social guidelines would presumably result in a chaos reminiscent of a dystopia. For instance, by conforming to societal norms, one is arguably less likely to be targeted as a victim of ridicule, since assimilation would create no immediate, undesirable distinction, thus emphasizing how victims of stigmatization are often targeted based on their visual deviancy. This possibly explains why the need to physically alter the body to mimic society's ideals serves as a more tangible way to cope with an ambiguous self-identity process. On the contrary, the regulating nature of institutions restricts individual opportunities of self-actualization, due to the fact that they reinforce the limitations that are created by traditional beauty ideals and gender norms. Hence, one can speculate that Foucault's critique of institutional power has more advantages in terms of generating body positivity, since it promotes inclusivity and criticizes that human beings who challenge the norms through alternative body manifestations, are ultimately judged and labeled as deviants. Thus, if there were no strict guidelines, humans would arguably be able to express themselves in alternative ways without being considered 'wrong', which would presumably aid in preventing low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. This is due to the fact that there would be no societal surveillance to regulate people's bodies and behaviors, and thus no need for self-policing, given that lack of guidelines would arguably authorize unlimited diversity.

On a different note, religion has traditionally infused guidelines regarding masculinity and femininity onto people through its gendered archetypes that reinforce these gender norms and emphasize specific beauty ideals. In traditional society, where identity was a given, wherefore it minimized the relevance of a self-reflexive identity process, bodily alterations, apart from gender enhancements, were arguably less prominent due to the fact that the need for altering the body to reflect the self was redundant. Instead, the fixed nature of identity encouraged a focus on the collective rather than individual self-realization, and in contrast to the dominant focus on physical appearance in contemporary society, traditional society focused on correcting the body in relation to

moral behavior rather than regulating physical appearance. In addition, divinity has traditionally been associated with religious archetypes, however, in contemporary society where religion has arguably lost its influence through secularization, the divine has more or less been transferred onto society's beauty ideals. Evidently, the rising focus on the individual rather than the collective has ultimately resulted in a narcissistic epidemic where religion has been substituted by the worship of the unattainable 'perfect' body. Notably, this can be compared to the new religion that emerged within the Edwardian Period where people were also completely devoted to their physical appearance. In this connection, the prominent focus on improving the imperfect body to resemble society's beauty ideals contradicts the Christian notion that human beings are adequate in their very naturalness because they are created in God's image. Notably, since the natural human body is arguably created by God, this entails that human beings are perfect in their own imperfection by virtue of being God's creation. Ultimately, the goal of attaining perfection is also unattainable due to the fact that human beings are naturally flawed, wherefore Jesus sacrificed himself for the sins of mankind, emphasizing that perfection exclusively lies within divinity. Therefore, from a Christian perspective, one can argue that people can never achieve happiness and self-love unless they lose the auto-erotic focus on improving their physical appearance, and realize that perfection is unattainable, rather than succumbing to excessive self-obsession and thus narcissism. Besides, one can also argue that the Christian notion regarding how people should be more selfless would be a possible solution to feelings of inadequacy, since removing the focus away from the self and onto the collective would ultimately stir attention away from the imperfections of body since the focus would be removed from the self, wherefore it would also be a possible remedy for narcissism.

Moreover, it can be questioned that although body positive movements attempt at creating diversity and promote self-love, they presumably reinforce the excessive focus on the body rather than liberating human beings from their body obsessions. Hence, removing the excessive focus on the body might prove itself to be a more beneficial form of activism, due to the fact that one is more likely to be discontent with something that they are constantly confronted with. Therefore, redirecting the focus away from the body and onto positive internal values might encourage more self-love, since the intensified focus on the body, practiced as a religion, may foster a grandiose self-perception that correlates with narcissism. This is arguably the case on social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, where gaining as much social validation as possible has become a normative aspiration, exemplified through the quantitative aspect of likes and followers. Interestingly, this is reminiscent of Jesus Christ and his disciples because the high level of

idolization and worship of ordinary people arguably elevates human beings to a Godlike status, since the contemporary ritual embodiments on social media are idolized similar to the divine embodiment of Christ. Notably, when individuals prioritize quantitative, social connections instead of qualitative, meaningful relationships in favor of reaching the unblemished and socially valued self, the core of human nature, which is being relational, is bound to suffer.

Moreover, when human beings religiously worship the ideal body that indirectly encourages bodily alterations, they arguably challenge *Verbum Dei* by disregarding God's narrative through deconstruction when altering the human biology that is said to be created in God's image. In addition, it can be argued that this is not only the case when people utilize body modifications and have plastic surgery, but also in relation to gender reassignment surgery where nature is ultimately disregarded as an absolute truth. As a result, this challenges the Christian notion that God essentially owns the body through his divine fatherhood, since the self-righteousness of human beings can be perceived as a rejection of religious influences. However, as touched upon in the section regarding beauty and aesthetics, beauty is not solely rooted within the subjective opinions of people, but is also determined by objective factors that stem from biology. Hence, bodily symmetry, which is often associated with PA, has predominantly been a valid indicator in order to select a mate and ensure the existence of humanity. Therefore, despite the fact that beauty ideals can be considered problematic within contemporary society, they cannot be completely ignored, since they suggest that the power of PA also functions as a mechanism that secures human survival rather than merely being an aesthetical benefit for individuals who embody it. Yet, as argued by Kant, when labeling someone as beautiful, people are often influenced by their disinterested judgments, such as sexual interest, which makes them biased, because people tend to judge the beauty of a person based on their personal experiences of them. Therefore, while PA can supposedly ensure the existence of humanity by ensuring that people can attract a possible mate, this would arguably not be rooted within beauty, since it would merely be the result of an internalized bias and thus a manifestation of a disinterested judgment. On the contrary, Santayana argues that an object or a person cannot be considered beautiful unless they provide the spectator with a form of pleasure, wherefore beauty is arguably rooted within the principle of objectified pleasure rather than biology. In this connection, people also tend to label tastes that are different than their own as defective, which suggests that beauty is not fixed, but is rather determined based on phenomenology, since it is judged through the individual bodily filter. Thus, if the majority agreed upon this notion, beauty ideals would arguably be insignificant.

However, it can be argued that the desire for bodily alternations is fueled by the pursuit of self-actualization, which would also entail reaching the socially valued self. Also, rather than being rooted in an individual self-image, these manifestations are presumably ingrained in a desire to gain a positive social identity, thus embodying a self for others instead of embodying a 'self' for one's own sake. In this regard, one can argue if the Christian notion regarding selflessness is indirectly practiced in contemporary society when people sacrifice their genuine selves in order to conform to society's beauty and body ideals, thus 'pleasing' society by exemplifying a generic self for others disguised as an ideal self. Therefore, body modifications within contemporary society can be compared to ancient, religious sacrificial acts of the body, since the self is ultimately renounced in favor of society's idealized body manifestations. As such, these sacrificial acts can be compared to the sacrifice of Christ through his corporeal sufferings, which people arguably also endure when succumbing to the supposed 'greater good' in the pursuit of perfection. However, despite the attempt to achieve the unblemished self, it can be argued that people cannot settle for it due to the desire to constantly exceed its demands. On the contrary, it can also be argued that people are granted perfection by virtue of being created in God's image, rendering their naturalness a form of perfection. Thus, the pursuit of society's constructed perfection is a manifestation of a dissatisfaction with the given perfection, granted that perfection exists, wherefore this arguably results in an endless insatiable aspiration to achieve a fictional myth.

Ultimately, the representations of diverse body manifestations that challenge beauty ideals in contemporary society are not only reflected in the chosen TV-series, but also in other genres of popular culture, such as music videos, reality TV, and contemporary literature. For instance, the reality TV-series, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-), has turned the drag subculture into a mainstream entertainment that challenges traditional gender norms through its body manifestations of men dressing as women, mirroring Butler's theory regarding how gender is a social construction. Another example of how the body functions as a powerful medium of expression in other genres can be seen in relation to the girl band, Little Mix, and their music video *Strip* (2018), which challenges the beauty myth and reflects body positivity by including diverse representations of the female body. Similarly, pop icon, Lady Gaga, became famous for wearing extremely unconventional clothing, whilst actively celebrating gay minorities within her music videos, such as *Alejandro* (2010) and *Born This Way* (2011), by incorporating non-traditional and stigmatized body manifestations, which challenge the traditional concept of masculinity and femininity. Also, her fanbase is referred to as her 'little monsters', which is essentially a celebration of the abnormal,

since it embraces deviancy rather than stigmatizing it. In addition, the popular artist, Billie Eilish, also challenges society's beauty ideals and body images through her gender neutral embodiment, both in her music videos but through her public persona, which is reflected in her new short film, *NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY* (2020), where she criticizes the fact that society feels entitled to judge her body manifestation. Moreover, another popular artist is Sia, who deliberately disguises her face during her public performances in order to remove the focus away from the body and onto her talent as a singer. Yet, this has arguably been counterproductive because it has caused a huge interest in her body, supporting Steele's argument regarding how clothing can arouse curiosity about the body. Consequently, while her purpose was to remove attention away from the body, it ultimately turned it into a main focal point.

Furthermore, the theme of body image and beauty ideals is also represented in contemporary literature that also aims at promoting inclusivity. This can be seen in Lesley Nneka Arimah's authorship that focuses on marginalized black women's intersectional identity conflicts in contemporary America. For instance, her short story, *Skinny* (2018), topicalizes how women of color experience identity conflicts because they are subjected to Western beauty ideals, consequently having to reconcile their own conservative Nigerian culture that consists of traditional gender expectations, with Western society's sexual liberation of the body. Lastly, the feminist writer, Lena Dunham, challenges the beauty myth in her book, *Not That Kind of Girl* (2015), where she criticizes the beauty culture and its oppression of women in contemporary society. Notably, her critique is also reflected in her deliberate choice to act and dress in a provoking manner when she wears revealing clothing, despite the fact that it does not resemble society's beauty ideals. Ultimately, while Steele argues that clothing can arouse curiosity about the body, these examples demonstrate that clothes can also be a successful means of communication because they can create debate and convey specific messages about the body and the self, which is revealed when it is utilized as a second skin with the purpose of challenging beauty ideals and encouraging diversity.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, based on the findings in our analysis, we are able to conclude that the body manifestations within the chosen TV-series challenge the traditional body and beauty ideals due to the fact that the three series criticize them by portraying characters who do not embody these ideals and consequently experience resistance and ridicule from society. This is demonstrated in *Tales of*

the City where the queer environment deconstructs society's traditional norms in relation to conventional gendered behavior and appearance while challenging heteronormativity. This is reflected in the representation of transgender people, who challenge biology by altering their bodies to fit their personal narratives, since the biological sex is perceived as a prison that limits their body manifestations. Yet, despite undergoing a sex change, the analysis has touched upon how this alteration of the body merely transfers the self from one prison to another, since both male and female bodies experience constraints and limitations due to the oppression of beauty and body ideals. Besides, *Tales of the City* encourages a diverse ethnic and gender representation in society through its explicit queer activism, thereby challenging society's traditional ideal body manifestations, echoing Butler's notion that gender is a cultural construction. Additionally, the show further emphasizes how beauty and body ideals are rooted within traditional masculinity and femininity that are reinforced within religious archetypes that have transcended across time and culture, wherefore they are still endorsed and revised beauty ideals in contemporary society. Moreover, the analysis has demonstrated how the characters experience identity conflicts that are rooted within the structure of the self, correlating with Mead's theory regarding the 'I' and the 'me', because of the societal expectations that cause them to aspire to embody an ideal self, wherefore they modify their bodies in order to mimic contemporary beauty ideals and gain a positive socialization. In this connection, this often leads to thorough reflections about the self, consistent with Giddens' theory regarding the self-reflexive identity process and its overwhelming nature, since the characters explicitly contemplate on how to alter the body to reflect their personal self-biographies, thus revealing that the body is essentially an extension of the self. Besides, in relation to the self-reflexive identity process, *Tales of the City* directly addresses how individuals may experience identity conflicts that are rooted within the body, resulting in confusions with their sexuality as well as their gender. Ultimately, the series also demonstrates how the body is constantly on display and even more so through social media, where people strive to portray the ideal self through staged personas that are not accurate representations of the genuine self, wherefore the series criticizes the superficial and fictional nature of contemporary ritual embodiments on social media.

Moreover, the analysis of *Insatiable* has revealed that the beauty pageant world is portrayed as an institutional power that reinforces society's traditional gender norms through its strict guidelines in relation to feminine behavior and physical appearance. As such, the analysis has demonstrated how the pageant institution reinforces the beauty myth, wherefore it symbolizes societal oppression

through its parallel power structures. In this connection, the series exemplifies Foucault's theory regarding governmentality and self-policing because the characters are essentially subjected to the societal gaze, which ultimately results in self-policing in order to correct their bodies and behaviors in order to resemble society's beauty ideals. Furthermore, *Insatiable* also touches upon how men in contemporary society are also subjected to beauty and body image ideals, wherefore they cannot exclusively be considered to cause issues for women. Also, *Insatiable* criticizes society's favored body manifestations, emphasized in its focus on the negative effects of the attractiveness bias when certain characters are receiving preferential treatment due to their enhanced PA, suggesting that people are treated unequally based on physical appearance. Additionally, the stereotypical representations of traditional masculinity and femininity are restrictive forces that limit the character's opportunities to create genuine self-narratives, because they have to alter their bodies and identities in favor of assimilating to heteronormative, mainstream society. Ultimately, the series criticizes society's beauty ideals by featuring a body transformation of the female protagonist that demonstrates that beauty is essentially equated with evil, dissolving the societal myth that becoming beautiful is an improvement of the self.

Furthermore, the analysis of *Dietland* has uncovered how it explicitly depicts the stigmatization of people who do not conform to society's beauty ideals. This can be seen in relation to its primary focus on the discrimination of overweight individuals, and how they are subjected to a dehumanizing discourse within contemporary society. Notably, the series also criticizes society's reinforcement of the beauty myth through its depiction of characters with alternative body manifestations that do not resemble these ideals. However, the series demonstrates how said characters are engaging in self-policing in order to gain validation and a positive social identity, revealing how society contributes to the removal of agency from these individuals, because their bodily alterations are rooted within a desire to assimilate in order to become accepted. In this connection, the series specifically blames patriarchy for continuously removing agency from and reducing women to sexualized objects that are expected to maintain a proper level of PA in order to appeal to the male gaze. In this relation, the show opposes society's ideals as a way to demonstrate that by altering the body to accommodate beauty ideals, one does not reach a positive self-actualization, but merely succumbs to the oppression of women. Ultimately, the show does not demonstrate a bodily transformation but instead portrays a self-reflexive journey that ends in an inner transformation where the main character comes to embrace her unidealized body

manifestation, thus opposing the misconception that a person's value is determined by physical appearance.

Overall, the mutual findings of all three series address the issue regarding how the body is perceived and utilized as a powerful currency within contemporary society, granting certain people favorable treatment in comparison to others. Hence, their representations of alternative body manifestations create awareness in terms of how society divides people into 'right' and 'wrong' categories based on their embodiments, which can lead to identity conflicts and low self-esteem, since the body is an extension of the self, alluding to a co-dependent relationship between the self and the body. Besides, the fact that the three series create sympathy with characters who are perceived to have deviating body manifestations, they essentially participate in a deconstruction of what is legitimized as 'right' or 'wrong'. Moreover, they also criticize consumer and media culture, revealing how they contribute to a narcissistic culture, due to the intensified fixation on the body, where people are encouraged to be dissatisfied with their visible markers of imperfection. This is expressed when the series tackle themes such as the fear of aging, the struggle with being overweight, as well the conflict with having to behave according to 'appropriate' gender norms. Finally, the findings of our analysis have revealed that the excessive obsession with the body in contemporary society arguably results in a narcissistic self-idolization that becomes a substitute for religion, due to the self-righteousness of human beings in relation to how they modify the body to reflect a narrative that correlates with society's body images and beauty ideals. As a result, people's pursuit of perfection can be considered an unattainable endeavor, wherefore the overall message of the series is that society should change the discourse by refraining from encouraging people to alter the body to mimic specific beauty and body ideals, and instead promote inclusivity by featuring alternative body representations within the media. Lastly, the three series suggest that self-love can only be achieved if people accept their imperfections as optimal representations of the self, instead of succumbing to society's gender norms and beauty ideals.

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