Master's Thesis

Materialism & Conspicuous Consumption: A Case Study on Netflix's Reality Series "Bling Empire" From A Global Consumer Culture Perspective

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

1 INTRODUCTION

"I am glad Anna showed up to my Chinese' New Year party. She went to the bank and pulled out her best diamonds to wear. That's a sign of respect, right?" Christine Tiu commented on her co-star Anna Shay in the first episode of Netflix's Bling Empire in Season 1. "In the world of high jewelry not everyone is invited. You have to really earn your way there. Unfortunately for Anna, she needs to realize that she's not the only one in the game anymore," the camera is focused on Christine Tiu while she proudly claims her status in the world of high jewelry. In a fly-on-the-wall scene in the same episode, Ann Shay narrated, "So, I had this idea that I would take Andrew and Kelly to my favorite restaurant for her birthday, and my favorite restaurant is Maison de Caviar in Paris." The camera is then focused on the plane taking off to Paris. These are the kinds of narratives and scenarios that the viewers are being exposed to when they watch "Bling Empire," an original Netflix reality series which premiered in January 2021. The first few scenes of the reality series depict a world of opulence, excess and status (Wu, 2022, par. 2). The prominent display of materialism and conspicuous consumption by the casts right from the outset of the first episode in season one makes the series worth investigating.

The modern society is succumbed to materialism which is becoming a major problem in the world today. Materialistic consumers consume more and even unnecessary things, and overconsumption is one of the major threats to the future of human survival (Malkanthie, 2019, p. 1). Conspicuous consumption on the other hand, indicates wasteful buying practices and leisure activities that aim to label association with a superior social class (Chacko, Prashar & Ramanathan, 2018, p. 114). Though materialism and conspicuous consumption have traditionally been the Western doctrines, these practices are now gaining prevalence in Asian countries (Chacko et al., 2018, p. 144). Television programming is one institution of Western capitalist culture that has been studied in the context of materialism although more recent media innovations such as video streaming services for instance Netflix and Hulu, and online video YouTube have not been studied well in this context (Richins, 2017, p. 285).

This paper posits that Netflix acts as a conduit through which reality shows which promotes materialism and conspicuous consumption, constantly pours to its subscribers via its streaming platform. By utilizing multimodal discourse analysis, this paper will examine ten selected scenes from the reality series 'Bling Empire.'

Netflix's global dominance and its ever-growing production of original films and reality series presents an opportunity to look at how this over-the-top streaming platform's contents can be

examined discursively as a part of a larger conversations. Hence, this paper investigates how materialistic values and conspicuous consumption are being promoted in the reality series under scrutiny. Borrowing the words of Cleveland and Bartsch (2019), "the increasing worldwide exposure to a global landscape, amplified by technological advancements shape global consumption culture that spans across any physical national border (e.g. Netflix and YouTube for video streaming – both commercial and amateur… [ ]… Likewise, marketing activities globalize and as societies embrace the global consumption ethos, consumers are increasingly exposed to multinational marketers who shape consumption preferences," (p. 562).

1.1 About 'Bling Empire'

'Bling Empire' is an American reality television series which premiered on Netflix last January 15, 2021. The reality series is inspired by the American romantic-comedy film entitled 'Crazy Rich Asians' which was released in 2018. It showcases the lavish, frivolous lives of Asian and Asian-American socialites living in Los Angeles, and it also happens to be the first American reality show to feature main cast who are Asian Americans (Lucas, 2022, par. 3). Moore (2021) reported that, "Bling Empire shows an Asian perspective in such a diverse way with cast members from Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese backgrounds," (par 7). Since its debut, the reality series is one of Netflix's most streamed shows, as it has made it into the top 10 (Lucas, 2022, par. 3). 'Bling Empire' is created in part by Jeff Jenkins, who produced the hit reality TV series "Keeping Up With the Kardashians," and Kelli Mi Li, a producer and cast member (Bling Empire, 2022).

In addition, Wu (2021) noted that "*Bling Empire* is more than just an Asian version of 'Keeping Up with the Kardashians' — it is another perspective on the glitz and glam of Los Angeles," (par. 1). One part "Crazy Rich Asians," one part "The Real Housewives," the pre-pandemic filmed show follows very wealthy Asian Americans in Los Angeles living it up and opening up about struggles with traditional family values and expectations, romance, identity, infertility, and drama," (Moore, 2021, par. 4). Although it has no official brand integrations, 'Bling Empire' is label heavy, with flashes of Piaget, Boucheron, Alexander McQueen, Balenciaga, Chanel, Baccarat and many more; private shopping and couture show scenes in Paris, trips to L.A. haunts the Beverly Wilshire Hotel and Koi, and glimpses inside cast members' lavish homes (Moore, 2021, par 11).

The following is an account of the casts and their background in alphabetical order:

Cherie Chan

Cherie, who is known to be the denim heiress, is more laid back than many of the cast members. A She shares two kids with her partner **Jessey Lee**, whom she married after season 1. The couple are not often seen in Season 1 and they quit the show before the outset of season 2. Cherie is seen to have a very close friendship with Kane Lim. She is also seen being vulnerable by sharing her struggles after the loss of her mom. She is a character who is often talked about by her friends being an unwed mother of two children (at the time of shooting in season 1), which is considered to be non-traditional, as far as the Asian culture is concerned. In the last episode of season 1, Cherie surprised everybody once again by breaking another Asian tradition. She proposed to Jessey when the couple hosted an over-the-top celebration for their newborn son's first 100 days. Cherie has 1.2M followers in Instagram.

Christine Chiu

Philanthropist, couture collector, highly successful entrepreneur and co-producer of the show, Christine Chiu, is married to Beverly Hills plastic surgeon husband **Gabriel Chiu**. They have a son who is famously known as 'Baby G,' "whose first birthday party cost a cool $1 million," (Moore, 2021, par. 3). In the first episode of season 1, Christine claims that her husband is 'a direct descendant of the Song Dynasty.' Christine is a remarkable character in Bling Empire. She is highly noted for stretching her influence to shut down Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills for her Chinese New Year charity, chartering a jet for a shopping escapade, as well as her enormous generosity towards Kevin in season 3 episode 8 which is a trip to Paris for fashion week and gifting him a complete couture look for the show. Nevertheless, Chiu, who is originally introduced as a confident, bold socialite, is revealed to be shouldering the pain of not being accepted by her husband's family because of his inability to have children — for which she has taken the blame (Bling Empire, 2021, par. 5). At present, she has 1.4M followers on Instagram.

Kevin Kreider

Kevin reveals in the opening moments of *Bling Empire* that he was born in Korea and adopted into a white family when he was 3 years old (Thompson, 2021, par. 4). He is a newcomer to Los Angeles and finds himself a group of very wealthy Asian and Asian American friends, including heiress Anna Shay. (Thompson, 2021, par 1). Kevin is often described as the charming addition to the cast, and he is often seen in awe or in disbelief when exposed to the lavish lifestyle of his newfound, wealthy friends. In the show, Kevin has shown his vulnerable side by bringing to light his past issue with alcoholism and how he overcomes it. Surprisingly, he is seen promoting his non-alcoholic beverage

not just to celebrate his sobriety and but also to inspire all men and women who struggle with alcoholism. According to his website, he has been modeled for publications like *Men's Health* and *Men's Fitness* magazines, and has also modeled for Peloton, Gillette and more (Thompson, 2021, par. 3). According to Thompson (2021), Kevin has since transitioned into fitness as well as TV and film. In addition to *Bling Empire*, he has appeared in multiple shorts and the TV series *Dating After College.* Kevin was also the subject of the documentary, *The Ugly Model* (Thompson, 2021, par 3). To date, he has 608K followers on Instagram.

Kim Lee

Kim Lee is a very attractive, cheerful, and free-spirited character in the show. She is a famous DJ and music producer. She is recognized to have a sound relationship with her Vietnamese mother whom she describes as '*not the typical Asian mother'* because of her cool and liberal mindset. "A professional model before turning to music, Lee does not appear much in the *Bling Empire* season 1 but is famously described by Kane Lim as the "Calvin Harris of Asia". In the first season, Kevin Kreider helps Kim in her search for her biological father and the two become close in the process," (Gupta, 2022, par. 16). Kim Lee has 1.1M followers on Instagram.

Kane Lim

Kane Lim is a carefree, generous, zestful character in Bling Empire. He is known for his luxurious collection of sneakers displayed in his living room. He is a billionaire and practicing Buddhist. On the show's first season, he was said to be 'owning the shopping malls that you go into in Singapore, Thailand, and all of Southeast Asia (Gupta, 2022, par. 9). He acted as Kevin Kreider's guide to the luxurious world of the crew (Gupta, 2022, par. 9). Kane is also a renowned style icon. In May 2022, he became the South-East Asian brand ambassador for Fenty Beauty (Gupta, 2022, par. 10). This can be seen in Season 3 Episode 3 entitled 'Envy, Intrigues, and Escapes.' To date, he has 964K followers on Instagram.

Kelly Mi Li

Kelly is an elegant, softspoken and an affectionate person. She is seen to be very close to Kane Lim particularly to especially Anna Shay, where the latter took her and her boyfriend Andrew to Paris for her birthday as shown in season 1 episode 1. She migrated to the U.S: with her mother when she was ten years old. She has a very strong relationship with her mom whom she calls a 'superwoman.' In

season 1, Kelly made headlines for her tumultuous relationship with actor Andrew Gray of *Power Rangers* fame (Gupta, 2022. par. 17). At some point in the show, she is being pursued by Kevin Kreider yet the two remain plain friends. Mi Li is a Chinese American entrepreneur, tech investor and film producer. She is also an executive producer of *Bling Empire* (Gupta, 2022, par. 18), as well as the co-creator of the show together with Jeff Jenkins.

Anna Shay

Shay, who is of Japanese and Russian descent, was one of the two 'queen bees' of *Bling Empire* season 1 alongside Christine Chiu (Gupta, 2022, par. 21). It can be argued that she is the nemesis of Christine Chiu. Anna is such as a unique character. Although her aura exudes power and authority, she has a very distinct, soft, whispering voice. Anna is very direct and matter of fact especially when it comes to drama, but at the same time she is extremely generous to her friends. "The daughter of Edward Shay, the founder of Pacific Architects and Engineers and a US defense and government services contractor, Anna Shay was born into wealth along with her brother. Shay made USD 1.2 billion from sale of their shares in their father's business in 2006," (Gupta, 2022, par. 22). As such, her life revolves around fine jewelry and private jets (Gupta, 2022, par. 23). She is reported to be the wealthiest among the cast.

Jamie Xie.

Jamie is a delightful, soft-spoken character in Bling Empire who constantly expresses her love for fashion and how fashion means everything to her. She is the type of character who gets along with everyone although she is more often seen in the company of Kane, Anna, Kim, Kelly, and Kevin. Jamie, who was born and raised in Silicon Valley, is the 22-year-old daughter of the tech billionaire Ken Xie, the Asian American billionaire who built the first firewall and VPN (Davis, 2021, par. 3). Jamie is once an equestrian who spent her high school years entirely online as she travelled the country riding horses (David, 2021, par. 13). She is also reported to have enrolled in Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandizing in Los Angeles, but about a year later she dropped out to focus on influencing full-time (David, 2021, par. 8). Currently, the equestrian turned fashion influencer, claims "that she is making almost $100,000 a year from brand collaborations and partnerships, and she buys her own clothes with her own money and was regularly attending couture weeks in Paris and fashion shows in Milan before the pandemic," (David, 2021, p. 7). In the show, Jamie shares some surprising facts about her life such as: her trust fund covers her 20K a month apartment rent;

the family pressure from quitting college; her horses fly emirates; and the challenge brought about by the rules that her parents had imposed on her with regards to her finances. Jamie is recognized for her versatile, high-fashion look. To date, Jamie has 831K followers on Instagram.

1.2 Problem Statement

The main goal of this thesis is to serve as a starting point and/ or acting as an eye-opener to the burgeoning consumption of reality television series on Netflix which are seen to promote materialism and conspicuous consumption. It is safe to say that the reality series 'Bling Empire,' already in its third season, have captured the viewer's attention. The sister Netflix series of 'Bling Empire' entitled 'Bling Empire New York,' premiered in January 2023. Withal, based on the same concept of Bling Empire, which is the display of wealth and status, several Netflix original series are released such as 'Singapore Social,' 'Dubai Bling,' and 'Young, Famous & African' to name a few.

'How are materialism and conspicuous consumption manifested as part of everyday lives in the casts of 'Bling Empire?'

"What role does Global Consumer Culture play in this phenomenon?

To what extent does global consumer culture (GCC) cultivate materialism?

What particular dimension of Global Consumer Culture have the most effect?

1.3 Significance of the Research

This study aims to provide a different avenue of research on materialism and conspicuous consumption. The extant literature on materialism and conspicuous consumption have been linked to dominantly linked to advertising, television, and social media and reality TV exposure, yet the focus on Netflix and its content, specifically its original reality series "Bling Empire", has not been thoroughly explored. This paper not only demonstrates how materialism and conspicuous consumption are subtly fostered in the reality series "Bling Empire,", but also probes into the pervasiveness of Netflix being most successful over-the-top streaming service in the 21st century. The burgeoning consumption of Netflix films particularly the reality series is indeed an interesting path to

explore. In this paper, Netflix will be framed as part of 'mediascapes', which is one of the dimensions of the global cultural flows in globalization.

1.4 Research Limitations

A criticism sometimes made of multimodality is that it can seem rather impressionistic in its analysis (Jewitt, 2014, p. 29). This means that the researcher has the tendency to become more subjective rather than being objective in his/her observations. In the study of materialism and conspicuous consumption for instance, there could be an instance where the researcher is more drawn on the material instances and are drawn on it solely. "How do you know that this gesture means this, or this image means that? In part this is an issue of the linguistic heritage of multimodality, that is, how do you get from linguistic to all modes," (Jewitt, 2014, p. 29). The fact that semiotic resources can change and are fluid does not make it easy for the researcher to analyze scenes. Lastly, the second group of data which is the interview results from out from the ten participants do not represent the entire population, and therefore the results cannot be generalized.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Materialism

2.1.1 Definition and history

"Happiness is a state that facilitates many positive outcomes, and its pursuit is widespread. Among the strategies commonly assumed to bring happiness is the acquisition of material possessions. This emphasis on possessions is often referred to as materialism, ''the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions'' or ''a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life," (Zhang, Howell & Howell, 2016. p. 298). Materialism has been the subject of debate and discourse throughout recorded history (Richins, 2017, p. 481). Ger & Belk (1996) emphasized that "materialism is a consumption-based orientation to happiness-seeking which has generally been seen as a Western trait that has achieved an elevated place in industrial and post-industrial life. It is a trait with implications for a wide spectrum of consumer behaviors. While high level consumption for the sake of pleasure has existed for a few people in many different cultures throughout history, it has spread to entire populations only within the past century. Like a technological innovation, materialism now seems to have diffused even more of the world's people," (pp. 55-56). On the other hand, Shrum, Wong, Arif, Chugani, Gunz, Lowrey, Nairn, Pandelaere, Ross, Ruvio, Scott and Sundie

(2013) proposed that "materialism is the extent to which individuals attempt to engage in the construction and maintenance of the self through the acquisition and use of products, services, experiences, or relationships that are perceived to provide desirable symbolic value," (p. 1180). The definition has clearly pointed out several important implications namely: acquisition; the use of acquisition; acquisition of not only products and service, but also experiences; and lastly, that materialism refers to the symbolic nature of acquisition, and thus the extend to which the acquisition and use serves a *signal,* whether to the self or to others (Shrum et al., 2013, p. 1180).

It is worth mentioning that the research conducted by Shrum et. al (2013) in '*reconceptualizing materialism as identity goal pursuits,*' have acknowledged that "defining materialism as a collection of what are considered negative personality traits, and ones that are consistently linked to lower well-being, also precludes any investigation into functions of materialism that may not be detrimental," (pp. 1183-1184). Their approach is obviously more neutral, and it will help shed light on the positive effects of materialism. Shru et al. (2013) argued that "some research has shown that the relation between materialism and happiness may depend on the motive for the materialistic behavior, for instance, when the motives for financial success are for things such as security, support of family, or even just pride in oneself, money aspiration and importance not only do not have a negative effect, in some cases they may even be positive," (pp.1181-1182).

2.1.2 Nature of materialism

Richins (2017) claimed that "an important quality of materialism is that it is learned," (p. 482), and the defining feature of highly materialistic people is their positive inclination toward consumer objects that may enhance well-being (Cleveland, Papadopoulos & Laroche, 2021, p. 209). The bulk of the extant materialism literature concurs, describing materialism primarily as an individual-concept level resulting largely from socialization, (Cleveland et al., 20221, p. 209). Although some people do not utilize material things in order to fulfill a psychological need, there is no such thing as 'non-materialist' and Richins (2017) offered a very compelling claim about this view:

> "Materialism is not a dichotomy, and the population cannot be divided into materialists and non-materialists. Instead, materialism is a continuum ranging from low to high, and there may be no such thing as a non-materialist. People recognize that goods have value and can be used to improve quality of life. The difference between those low and high in materialism is a matter of degree, with high materialists viewing

material goods as an important, and often the best, way to achieve goals, whether it be to impress a member of the opposite sex or to have fun on a weekend. Low materialists, on the other hand, rely primarily on other means to meet needs, such as spending time with others, learning new skills, or developing a hobby," (p. 481-482).

"Materialism arises in part from self-protective impulses, that is, the need to reduce the negative psychological tension that occurs when the self is threatened. These include purchasing highly expressive products that serve to reaffirm or enhance their identity and prestige, thus restoring their self-esteem. Possessions therefore constitute an important part of a consumer's extended self, (Cleveland et al., 2021, p. 210). This idea is congruent to what Richins (2017) wrote in her study about "materialism pathways." In her work, she argued that "materialists, because of their strong belief in the transformative powers of goods, are more likely than others to include product acquisition in their coping response to threats. These shopping activities temporarily restore the self and remove the unpleasant psychological state," (p. 490-491). In other words, materialists clearly resort to material things as fillers or as a therapy to say the least, to balance the self.

2.1.3   Measuring Materialism

Segev, Shoham & Gavish (2015) asserted that "materialism is related to the degree of importance consumers attach to possessions, and the centrality of these possessions in their lives, (p. 85). Moreover, materialists often become overly focused on purchases, and direct their energy resources to acquiring possessions with the hope that they will lead to happiness, satisfaction with life and a generalized well-being (Segev et al., 2015, p. 85). In line with this thought, De Mooij (2019) also asserted that "from a consumption orientation, materialism is the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possession," (p. 164). De Mooij (2019) reported that "materialism consists of three belief domains: 1) Acquisition centrality: Materialism brings meaning to life and provides an aim for daily endeavors; 2) Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness: Materialists view their possessions and their acquisitions as essential to their satisfaction and well-being in life; and lastly 3) Possession-defined success: The number and quality of possessions accumulated form a basis for judgment of the materialist's own and other's success," (p. 164).

Podoshen & Andrzejewski (2012) define materialism as "the importance a customer attaches to worldly possessions" and believes that the degree of materialism can be measured by a combination of three
dimensions namely:

1. *Possessiveness*. How high do you value your possessions?

2. *Non-generosity*. How much do you dislike to sharing your possessions?

3. *Envy*. How much envy or jealousy do you feel when others acquire more? (p. 320).

Those who score higher on these three dimensions are believed to find the greatest sources of dissatisfaction and satisfaction in life from possession which is a slightly different approach to qualify materialism is done by Richins and Dawson in 1992. They made a scale of three factors that comprise materialism, success, centrality and happiness," (Podoshen, et al., 2012, p. 320).

2.1.4 Cultural differences

Additionally, De Mooij (2019) also pointed out that "attitudes toward materialism vary across cultures. A study among American, British, German, and Austrian students showed that success played a vital role in attitudes toward materialism, but also differences in associations with materialism were found related to job matters, personal development, health, and happiness. For the Germans and Austrians, for example, happiness was more related to stability and social security than to materialism," (pp. 164-165).

2.2 Conspicuous Consumption

Similar to the concept of materialism, conspicuous consumption is a behavior in which an individual displays wealth through a high degree of luxury expenditures on consumption and services (Podoshen, Li & Zhang, 2011, p. 18). Conspicuous goods are often segmented from general shopping goods in the sense that the primary need that is being satisfied is *prestige,* and the product satisfaction is often derived from the audience's reaction as opposed to the actual product use (Podoshen et al., 2011, p. 18). In other words, the primary goal of a conspicuous consumer is to display luxury things which are designed to impress.

"Ostentation behavior which are also seen among nobility during the pre-capitalist feudal era, was exhibited by the upper class too during the modern capitalist era either for signaling uniqueness or to display social standing. However, in the postmodern age, conspicuousness is no longer a privilege of the upper class but a widespread behavior among the middle class *'masses'* who are driven by self-expression (Chacko, Prashar & Ramanathan., 2018, p. 145). "Various studies in conspicuous consumption have attributed the motive of ostentatious spending as to project one's image in the society. Social status is defined as the stratification into different hierarchical social classes based on the factors such as wealth, power, and prestige. Hence, in societies where status is

prominent, brands are consumed to express a strong message about the consumer and also owning a certain brand may also be figurative of a particular membership. This prestige seeking behavior is driven by two major reasons namely: self-expression and social status," (Chacko et al., 2018, p. 146). Sedikis and Hart (2022) asserted that "narcissists are prone to conspicuous consumption, that is, preference for luxury over mundane products, and this is due to their pre-occupation of the *self*," (p. 1).

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Reality Television

"Reality television (TV) is a term applied to a collection of programs that are concerned with the everyday life of ordinary people. The term is difficult to define owing to the slightly different cultural connotations it has, having been used at various times and in different geographic contexts. A working definition may be taken to be popular factual programs that are concerned in some way with the actions and reactions of real people," (Muir, 2020, p. 2). In line with Muir's thought, Hill (2019) also believed that "defining reality TV is not easy as it is a moving target and there are different definitions of it as fact and entertainment by the industry and critics, scholars and audiences," (p. 1). Hill (2019) asserted that "since the early days of reality TV, cultural critics have consistently attacked the genre for being voyeuristic, cheap, sensational television. There have been accusations that reality TV contributes to the "dumbing down," or the tabloidization, of politics, society, and culture," (p. 1). Hill (2014) stated that reality TV is often shorthand for what people think is wrong with modern culture – time wasting, low-grade, rubbish," (p. 3).

Before we delve more into what has become of reality TV today, it is but fair to be reminded that "if reality TV is now dismissed as cheap and lowbrow, its "first wave" was championed by the prestigious Ford Foundation, highbrow TV critics, and behaviorists researchers, who saw the representation of "real life" in Alan Funt's work *"Candid America"* as both a respectable genre and a boon to liberal democracy," (Ouellette et al., 2009, p. 13). "The film entitled *"Children of the UN"* is one of several 'candid films' made for the 1954-55 season of *Omnibus* which was produced by Allan Funt, creator of the comedic hidden camera program *Candid Camera* (1959-67). The film was shot at an international school in New York and featured interviews with and observational footage of children from around the world," (McCarthy, 2009, p. 23). If hidden camera's view of social life provided Charles Siepmann, one of the in-house critics in *Omnibus*, with an opportunity to articulate a realist ideal of television, it also provides a way of thinking about

cultural value, and social uses, of what might be called "reality television" before its (re)emergence in the 1990's (McCarthy, 2009, p. 24). "It might be tempting to construct a narrative of decline in which this first wave of reality television, understood as unequivocally good, instructive, and socially progressive through its association with social science is replaced by the current wave of voyeuristic, theatrical, and exploitative formats and modes of address," (McCarthy, 2009, p. 26).

It is quite unfortunate to see the sheer difference between the first wave of reality television in the late 1950's up to the 1960's and what it is now today. But "if reality tv raises cultural and ethical questions, it also points to the medium's changing industrial context. In the late 1980s, a shifting regulatory climate, network financial troubles, and labor unrest forced the television industry to reconsider their current programming strategies. Finding cheap formats cheap to produce, easy to sell abroad, and not dependent on the hiring of unionized acting and writing talent, they began to develop more programs like Unsolved Mysteries, Rescue 911, and America's Most Wanted," (Ouellette et al., 2009, pp. 9-10). Hill (2014) also wrote that "the rise of reality TV came at a time when networks were looking for a quick fix solution to economic problems within the cultural industry," (p. 1). Reality TV is the most commercially successful format in the most dominant marketing medium in history… this mutating, low-cost, high ratings, often low brow, train wreck of a genre is everywhere, and everyone has something to say about it (Hill, 2014, p. 3).

When reality tv was just beginning to take form, few scholars had evaluated what some saw as a passing fad in media culture (Murray & Oullette, 2009, p. 1). Apparently, one can argue that it is not the case. Ouellette et al. (2009) reasoned that "the situation has changed in part because few would now contest reality television's reach and longevity. Across the globe, popular reality tv has become more pervasive and diversified, and popular unscripted formats having become increasingly specialized and stylistically sophisticated," (p. 2). Hill (2014) pointed out that "when people say that reality TV is a phenomenon, they are referring to the sheer scale and sweep of shows and formats that are a big part of everyday life," (p. 1). She also claimed that reality TV producers, participants and audiences co-create cultural experiences, events, and trends," (Hill, 2014, p. 1).

"One of the common discourses through which the most popular examples of reality television (typically Big Brother but also The Apprentice, The Bachelor, The Biggest Loser, and so on) are criticized involves asking the question, *"What do these programs say about our society?"* If we are keen to watch rituals of humiliation and embarrassment, if we enjoy seeing classed, racialized, and gendered behaviors perform their inadequacy through formats such as Wife Swap, *what does this say about us?* If young people admire and emulate the behaviors of the extroverted, "up-for-it,"

callow housemates they have watched on Big Brother or Jersey Shore, *will this exercise an influence on what counts for them as acceptable or desirable behavior in the non-television world?*" (Turner, 2013, p. 317). Clearly, these observations suggests that reality TV series must be viewed more critically, and it is imperative to examine why many people patronize or abhor reality TV and why do people always talk about it to say the least.

Ikalyuk & Doronyuk (2015) explained that "there is no one and only classification of reality shows," (p. 73). "However, they have divided reality shows into four major groups. The first group is the reality show based on a competitive structure which means that there is always a participant who wins the game such as 'The Real World' which started the epoch of reality television, and is the longest running reality series in history," (Ikalyuk et al., 2015, p. 73). The second group of reality show would be talent competitions such as X-Factor, American Idol, Master Chef and America's Got Talent (Ikalyuk et al., 2015, p. 73). Withal, it would be relevant to include the newer reality shows in this classification shown in Netflix and they are the following: *100 Physical, Is it Cake?, Glow Up: Next Make-up Star, Pressure Cooker, Next in Fashion, Bake Squad, The Final Table, Drink Masters, Iron Chef (US & Brazil), Metal Shop Masters, Blown Away, The Big Flower Fight,* and the list goes on. The third group is 'relationship shows' which depict the procedure of building relationship in front of cameras. For instance, *The Bachelor, Beauty and the Geek,* and the *Big Date,*" (Ikalyuk et al., 2015, p. 73). To update the list in this category, the following reality shows are currently trending on Netflix: *Indian Matchmaking, Love is Blind* (which expands in Brazil and Japan), *The Ultimatum, Dating Around, Jewish Matchmaking,* and *Are You the One?* to name a few. Lastly, the fourth and the most interesting category as far as this paper is concerned, is the reality show describing and following the day-to-day lives of celebrities or significant figures in Hollywood (also called 'documentary soap operas). such as *Real Housewives, The Hills,* and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (Ikalyuk, 2015, p. 73). To name some popular and trending documentary soap operas on Netflix at present *is Bling Empire, Dubai Bling, Young Famous and African, Singapore Social*, and *Bling Empire New York* which premiered in 2023. The latter is obviously inspired by Bling Empire, the subject under investigation.

Furthermore, Hill (2019) offered another idea classifying reality TV. She outlined that "reality TV can be broadly defined into two distinct spaces that draw on various subvariants of other genres across fact, drama, and entertainment," (p.1). "The two distinct spaces are '*world*' space and '*television'* space. Examples of *world* space of reality TV can be found in early forms of factual entertainment in the 1990's. such as docusoaps, or crime and emergency programming. Today, series

such as *Very British Airline* or *Duck Dynasty* tend to be set in real-world spaces and are often described as "fly on the wall," "docusoap," or "reality soap" to signal the mix observational style documentary and soap opera elements within this style of reality TV," (Hill, 2019, p. 1). It is worth-mentioning that the dominant format as we know it today, a composite of fly-on-the-wall scenes and cast members' one-on-one interviews with producers, selectively edited to create a coherent narrative with clearly defined characters, coalesced in 1992 with MTV's <u>The Real World</u> (Berman, 2022, par. 7). Additionally, Hill (2019) emphasized that "the *television* space of programs set in specially designed studios, house, or locations. Examples of the *television* space of reality TV can be found in competitive reality such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, talent shows such as *Pop Idol* or *Strictly Come Dancing*, and cookery shows like *MasterChef,* (p.1). The aforementioned programs are all formats, and proved to be successful business models in the development of cross-media content. This type of reality TV is usually described *'shiny floor shows,' "talent contests,' 'lifestyle,'* and *'factual entertainment'* to signal the mix of entertainment, talk show or sports competition within these formats, (Hill, 2019, p. 2). "What ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their professional abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, and yet often playful look into what might be called 'entertaining real.' This fixation with *'authentic'* personalities, situations, problems, and narratives is considered to be reality TV's selling point," (Ouellette, 2019, p. 5-6).

A study was conducted by Reiss & Wiltz to determine why people watch reality TV by employing *'sensitivity theory'* or the theory of *'16 basic desires.'* Reiss & Wiltz (2004) asserted that "sensitivity theory holds that people pay attention to stimuli that are relevant to the satisfaction of their most basic motives, and they tend to ignore stimuli that are irrelevant to their basic motives," (363). A person motivated by a strong desire for social contact, for example, often looks for opportunities to socialize, whereas a person with a weak desire for social contact may not even know who is holding a party over the weekend (Reiss et al., 2004, p. 363). The appeal of reality TV was assessed by asking 239 adults to rate themselves on each of the 16 basic motives using the Reiss Profile standardized instrument and to rate how much they watched and enjoyed various reality television shows (Reiss et al., 2004, p. 363). By far, the largest significant effect was for the motive of *status* which means that the more reality TV shows a person like, the more status-oriented was the person (Reiss et al., 2004, p. 373). The second largest significant difference concerned the basic motive of vengeance. People who watched and enjoyed reality television placed a higher value on vengeance than did people who did not watch such shows (Reiss et al., 2004, p. 373). Overall, the

results of the study on reality television supported the theoretical perspective that Reiss's 16 basic desires and values are associated with viewing and enjoying reality television shows (Reiss et al., 2004, p. 373).

It is but fair to say that our society has regressed in terms of our media consumption, what we find informative and entertaining. In the words of Berman (2022), *"Reality series* aren't exactly well respected; critics, social scientists, and even fans never stop unearthing revelations about their crass manipulations and toxic tropes. Yet despite all the antipathy directed at these programs, they've conquered the culture and claimed their prize: our attention (par. 1).

3.1.1   Netflix

"Netflix is an American entertainment company offering subscription-based streaming video-on-demand and DVD-by-mail services. Founded in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph, the company started out as an online competitor to video rental chains such as Blockbuster, offering customers the opportunity to order and rent DVDs over the Internet without charging any late fees," (Baumann, 2018, p. 2). By 2007, the public company began to move away from delivery service and into an online streaming model where users could watch a selection of films on their computers which greatly increased the number of daily and hourly visitors to the site," (Novak, 2016, p. 34). "Netflix has also become a significant provider of television content through its streaming platform, and this provision of television content – ranging from drama series to reality television – has been concomitant with an increase in digital and online viewing," (Arnold, 2016, p. 50). Arnold (2016) emphasized that "Netflix not only distributes content, but it also entered the field of production situating it within the same institutional landscape as television and makes it a competitor with the television industries for television viewers," (p. 50).

What we define as television has changed with the increased possibilities of online streaming and as with any era, it may be difficult or even impossible to locate and exact moment of change (Jenner, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, these changes all take place at different paces with different emphases in varying media systems (Jenner, 2018, p. 2-3). Jenner (2018) reasoned that "it is impossible to pinpoint a specific organization that drove these changes: YouTube, the BBC, Hulu, iTunes, Netflix, as well as others played a part, but none of them is more 'responsible' for shifts in our understanding of television than others," (p. 3). It is worth noting that "Netflix is clearly not a broadcast television considering its mode of delivery via broadband internet and the fact that it is often received via laptops or other devices," (Jenner, 2018, p. 4). The liveness of television has often

been argued to be a central characteristic of the medium, [] and Netflix cannot deliver this largely due to its reliance of autonomous scheduling through viewers (Jenner, 2018, p. 4). Another distinction is that it is not tied to existing channel brands of television such as the BBC or HBO, but instead Netflix has built its own brand (Jenner, 2018, p. 4).

It was difficult to foresee the competition ultimately posed by Netflix when it started producing its own original programming (Jenner, 2018, p. 3). This is not to argue that the over-the-top (OTT) broadcasting industry is the cause for all of television's troubles, but the advent of Netflix and Amazon original programming certainly poses a challenge to existing media conglomerates that hoped to be able to dictate changes (Jenner, 2018, p. 3). It is mind-blowing to see a company become so successful or shall I say, managed to soar high despite taking big shifts by engaging in multiple strategies along the way. "These steady pivots—from by-mail film rental, to domestic, second-window television distributor, to multinational commissioner of original series and films—feed confused perceptions of the company and its consequence for other video distributors," (Lobato & Lotz, 2020, p. 133). Withal, one cannot brush aside the fact that "the first version of Netflix is credited with the bankruptcy of Blockbuster Video and the general demise of video rental in the United States," (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 133). As it is, Netflix, previously an online DVD-rental service and unconnected to the large media conglomerates that dominate the media worldwide, became a powerful player in the reorganization of what television is (Jenner, 2018, p. 3). Stoll (2022) reported that as of the 3rd quarter 2022, Netflix had approximately 223 million paid subscribers worldwide (http://statista.com).

Lobato et al. (2020) believed that "Netflix is a fascinating object of study because it uses a new distribution technology and a previously uncommon business model and is disrupting established norms of international video distribution based on temporal and spatial windowing. The trajectory of Netflix is also a most unusual story," (p.133). "What is Netflix?" This question is quite challenging to address as Netflix is very diverse in terms of its geographic manifestations. This means that "Netflix's catalog, cultural status, brand recognition, and market power also vary enormously from country to country," (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 132). Hence, the answer to the question 'what is Netflix?' clearly depends on where you are (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 133). To make any claim about Netflix requires locating it in a particular place— in a country-specific catalog; in a nation-state with a particular technological infrastructure, competing and complementary services, and regulatory regimes; and in markets characterized by different audience expectations, preferences, and cultural norms (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 132).

To understand the local specificity of Netflix's international expansion, a small group of screen scholars came together in 2016 to form the Global Internet Television Consortium, a research network dedicated to sharing information on Netflix's global rollout (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 134). The initial purpose of the consortium was to bring grounded and specific knowledge to the complicated growth of Netflix in the wake of its global expansion (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 134). The dossiers revealed enormous variation in national responses (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 135). Many countries' media environments have been profoundly transformed by Netflix, while others are far less affected (Lobato et al., 2020, p. 135). Jin (2021) reported that:

> *"Overall, Netflix has become one of the largest and most important OTTs for the Asian cultural industries. It has greatly influenced the entire chain of audio-visual industries in Asia, as elsewhere. Only six years after its launch in Asia, Netflix has already become a formidable force as a global OTT platform to transform Asian cultural and platform sectors. It has controlled the vicious circle of the cultural industries to actualize its status as a global empire, which reshapes local platform and cultural industries, triggering the tremendous shift of cultural consumption,"* (p. 174).

In January 2016, Netflix announced an expansion to 243 countries, accomplishing cross-border distribution through business strategy (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018, p. 419). The expansion raises questions about what Netflix is doing. "Is it a cultural hegemon, distributing US far into 243 countries? Or a facilitator of free trade, making the products of even small countries more available outside their home markets (relative to traditional distribution)?" (Aguiar et al., 2018, p. 419). Furthermore, "Netflix secured the various rights to stream some combinations of the 14,450 movies and 2,200 television shows available in their platform into 243 different countries except China. In other words, Netflix partly accomplished through business strategy an outcome that public policy had not heretofore made possible," (Aguiar et al., 2018, p. 422). The information that Aguiar et al. have reported clearly shows how pervasive Netflix is having penetrated seamlessly to almost all corners of the globe.

Knowing how omnipresent digital media is in our everyday lives, one can imagine the vast information being disseminated and consumed by Netflix's subscribers every second. The affordances of Netflix are simply astonishing in the sense that it allows its users to be self-governing or autonomous which means that they can watch films and series anytime, anywhere using the device of their choice. Most of all, its system is designed to encourage users to engage in binge-watching. "In both the entertainment press and academic writings, Netflix is often used as a prime example to address the changing viewing practices of the digital era. The term binge viewing has been used

increasingly to refer to a mode of media consumption that involves watching multiple episodes of a television series in a row," (Baumann, 2018, p. 2). The autonomy to decide when to watch what, in a chosen language without ad breaks, at a chosen pace and at a convenient time to ensure attention, may be the most crucial aspect of binge-watching. This suggests that binge-watching implies control more than a dictated number of episodes to watch (Jenner, 2018, p. 144).

Back in April 2011 when Game of Thrones premiered on HBO, viewers impatiently wait week after week for the next episode of the series. The 73 episodes in 8 seasons were shown within a span of 6-7 years. But that is not the case for Netflix subscribers as series are released per season and not per episode. Jenner (2018) asserted that, "binge-watching may be the term most closely associated with Netflix, which also developed the term binge model, meaning putting all episodes of a season online at once," (p. 109). Although binge-watching is not exclusive to Netflix, it is argued that Netflix has employed it more centrally than other streaming services (Jenner, 2018, p. 110). Binge-watching remains a strong factor as a way to ensure viewer attention (Jenner, 2018, p. 120). Additionally, one can argue that it is easy to binge-watch when the system allows the next episode to begin playing without the viewer's discretion. This means that as soon as one episode is finished, the next one will begin in just a matter of fifteen seconds which is a subtle way of tempting the viewers to continue watching.

"Embedded in a neoliberal capitalist system, the self-scheduled nature of binge-watching suggests unprecedented levels of control. The control industry maintains, again, indicates the problematic relationship between power and control," (Jenner, 2018, p. 114). "If the addiction metaphor can indicate anything in this context, it is an exploitative relationship between those in charge of 'supply' (*industry*) and 'addicts' (*viewers*)," (Jenner, 2018, p. 114). Perks divides this concept into a two-part flow model (Jenner, 2018, p. 120). Jenner (2018) explained that:

"For Netflix, binge-watching has become a structuring concept. Perks describes this via her model of flow, which describes the two concepts of entrance flow and insulated flow. In her study, the concept links to different binge media, but it is remarkable how much Netflix is configured in accordance with this system. The structure of Netflix and its recommendation algorithm constantly introduces viewers to programs that fit the individual users' taste structure (entrance flow)," (p. 115).

What is known today as the "Netflix Recommender System" is in fact been embraced by Netflix since 2006 when the company was identified as a leader and innovator in online content streaming and digital platforms by journalists (Novak, 2016, p. 34). Netflix has especially utilized

artificial intelligence (AI) supported by algorithms to develop the best recommendation system, which drives the company's global dominance (Jin, 2021, p. 168). Uribe & Hunt (2015) stated that "Netflix's recommender system is not one algorithm, but rather a collection of different algorithms serving different use cases that come together to create the complex Netflix experience," (p. 13:2). Perhaps it is worth mentioning that five out of ten participants that were interviewed in this study claimed that Netflix's recommender system is pretty accurate, and that its recommendations are usually films/series of the same genre and similar story lines as the films they have watched. Yet regardless of how accurate or inaccurate Netflix's recommendations may be, the viewers can still marvel at the cornucopia of films and series under the categories – "new releases," "top searches," "trending now," and the list of themes go on.

Netflix being the most successful over-the-top streaming platform is not free of criticisms from a political and cultural perspectives down to its contents. "The discourses about the 'threat' Netflix poses to American or other national media systems have become less frenzied over the past few years. Yet, the initial social discourses of cultural legitimation via 'quality' TV, though still persistent, have also been countered by moral outrage, even moral panic, over depictions of teen suicide in 13 Reasons Why (2017) or representations of anorexia in 'To the Bone'," (Jenner, 2018, p. 19). Netflix's global dominance and its ever-growing production of original films and series present a unique opportunity to look at how this over-the-top streaming platform's contents can be examined discursively as a part of a larger conversations. In this paper, the narratives in the reality series "Bling Empire" are being critically examined to show that materialism and conspicuous consumption are indeed manifested let alone encouraged by the casts.

4   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1   Research Overview

This paper has employed two methods. Firstly, a multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) was done to examine the 10 selected scenes from the episodes of Bling Empire. The scenes were selected because of its explicit narratives and visuals where materialism and conspicuous consumption are unquestionably displayed as part of the everyday lives of the casts. The episodes of Bling Empire, Seasons 1-3, were assessed and examined closely to spot the scenes which contains the most explicit and obvious manifestations of materialism and conspicuous behavior. The second and last method utilized in this thesis is content analysis of 10 interviews where the participants were picked through convenience sampling. A semi-structured interview was conducted through Messenger application.

Due to time constraints and geographical issues, conducting interviews through the Messenger is the fastest and most convenient way in accomplishing the task.

4.2 Data Collection Method and Tools

The first group of data used in this paper is the selected scenes from Netflix's reality series 'Bling Empire.' Before the data were being collected (screenshots from the scenes of Bling Empire & transcription of the narratives), the following ethical considerations (Bryman, 2016, p. 139) were observed:

1. The information is publicly archived and publicly available. Netflix is readily accessible to all its subscribers.
2. No password is required to access information. In this case, a Netflix subscription was needed to access the reality series under scrutiny.
3. The material is not sensitive in nature.
4. No stated cite policy prohibits the use of the material.

The second group of data used in this paper are the interview results accomplished through a semi-structured interview. An interview guide was prepared with fairly, specific topics on the following: Netflix usage, binge-watching, opinions towards reality TV (in general), and opinion about Bling Empire and its influence on their consumption.

Question 1: Are you a Netflix subscriber?

Question 2: From a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your Netflix subscription?

Question 3: How many hours in a week do you use browsing and eventually watching films on Netflix?

Question 4: Do you binge-watch on Netflix?

Question 5: In general, how specific do you think is Netflix's recommender system?

Question 6: What types of genres do you watch?

Question 7: Do you follow any reality series in particular? What can you say about the reality series on Netflix?

Question 8: Have you watched Bling Empire?

Question 9: Can you describe the reality series in your own words?

Question 10: Do you agree when I say that the casts in Bling Empire are engaging in materialism/conspicuous consumption?

Question 11: Do you follow any casts of reality shows in social media? Why platform and why?

Question 12: Has the show influenced you to buy products/brands which you were not previously interested?

(The detailed form of the actual interviews is presented in the Appendices.)

4.3 Sample Selection

The method of convenience sampling was utilized to establish samples of the research under discussion. A convenience sample, which is a type of 'non-probability' sampling technique, "is a sample that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility," (Bryman, 2016, p. 187). However, it is worth noting that even though the participants are chosen for their accessibility, they are highly educated, and they are very much aware of the current global issues. Their age range is from 30's – 50's. Although the participants have a diversified educational background, the interview results cannot be generalized.

4.4 Research Process

4.5 Data Analysis

4.6 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

In order to examine the scenes in the reality series 'Bling Empire,' this paper adapted a multimodal discourse analysis because reality series is a case of a multimodal discourse where language, images setting, gesture, and sound are woven together in order to create meaning. "*Weaving* implies a '*weaver*' who has a sense of coherence. In multimodal discourse analysis – as in others – the question of who the '*weaver*' is, and what forms of '*coherence*' are shaped by her, him, or them, is significant issue at all times," (Kress, 2012, p. 36). Kress (2012) emphasized that "in a multimodal approach, all modes are framed as one field, as one domain. Jointly they are treated as one connected cultural resource for (representation as) meaning-making by members of a social group at a particular moment," (p. 38). In broad terms, the aim of multimodal discourse analysis is to elaborate tools that can provide insight into the relation of the meanings of a community and its semiotic manifestations (Kress, 2012, p. 37).

"There are four interconnected theoretical assumptions underpinning multimodality as it is broadly conceived. The first assumption underlying multimodality is that language is part of a multimodal ensemble. Although language is widely taken to be the most significant mode of communication, multimodality, however, proceeds on the assumption that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have the potential to contribute equally to meaning," (Jewitt, 2014, p. 15). This steps away from the notion that language always plays the central role in interaction, without denying that it often does," (Jewitt, 2014, p. 15). The second theoretical assumption central to multimodal research is that each mode in a multimodal ensemble is understood as realizing different communicative work (Jewitt, 2014, p. 16). Multimodality assumes that all modes have, like language, been shaped through their cultural, historical and social uses to realize social functions (Jewitt, 2014, p. 16). The choice of mode, then, is a central aspect of the epistemological shaping of knowledge and ideological design (Jewitt, 2014, p. 16). In the analysis, I repeatedly used the term *'mode'* which is a "socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning such as *image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image,* and *soundtrack*," (Kress, 2014, p. 60). The third theoretical assumption in multimodality is that people orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes (Jewitt, 2014, p. 16). Thus, the interaction between modes is significant for meaning-making (Jewitt, 2014, p. 16). Modes offer different potentials for making meaning; these have fundamental effect on choices of mode in specific instances of communication (Kress, 2014, p. 61). Hence, it is crucial for the analysts to figure out - 'what mode is salient and what for purpose does it serve?' In the analysis, the dominant modes were pointed out and interpreted/discussed in terms of its affordance(s). Finally,

"multimodality is built on the assumption that the meanings of signs fashioned from multimodal semiotic resources are, like speech, *social*. That is, they are shaped by the norms and rules operating at the moment of sign-making, influenced by the motivations and interests of sign-maker in a specific social context. That is, sign-makers select, adapt, and refashion meanings through the process of reading/interpretation of the sign. These effect and shape the sign that is made," (Jewitt, 2014, p. 17).

Jewitt (2014) claimed that there are seven core concepts for multimodality, and they are in a state of change and fluidity and are continuously taken up and shaped in different approaches to multimodal research: *modes*, *materiality*, *modal affordance*, *meaning potential*, *genre* and *discourse*," (p. 22).

Modes

Within social semiotics, a mode, its organizing principles and resources, is understood as an outcome of the cultural shaping of a material. The resource come to display regularities through the ways in which people use them. In other words, in a specific context (time and place) modes are shaped by the daily social interaction of people. It is these that multimodal analysts call *modes* (Jewitt, 2014, pp. 22-23).

Materiality

Where a mode 'comes from' its history of cultural work, in provenance, becomes a part of its affordance or meaning potential. It thus follows, that image, in the form of graphic marks on a two-dimensional surface (its *material*) as well as how it has been socially shaped through its use, combine to offer different meaning potentials for the expression, representation of meaning than speech in the form of sounds over time and space (Jewitt, 2014, p. 26).

Modal Affordance

The term 'affordance' is contested and continuously debated within multimodal research. It has particular emphasis and currency in social semiotic approaches to multimodality (Jewitt, 2014, p. 26). p. 26). Gunther Kress describes *modal affordance* to 'refer to what it is possible to express and represent easily with a mode,' (Jewitt, 2014, p. 26). He positions affordance as a complex concept connected to both the material and the cultural, and the social historical use of a mode (Jewitt, 2014, p. 26).

Meaning Potential or Metafunctions

Affordance in Gunther Kress's terms, or the *meaning potential* of a mode for Van Leeuwen, is shaped by how a mode has been used, what it has been repeatedly used to mean and do, and the social convention that inform its use in context (Jewitt, 2014, p. 26). Where a mode 'comes from,' its history of cultural work, its provenance, becomes part of its *affordance* or *meaning potential* (Jewitt, 2014, p. 26). Michael Halliday provides theorization of the social functions of language as realizing three meaning potentials namely: ideational resources, interpersonal resources, and textual resources. The three kinds of meaning potentials are 'held by' the grammar and elements of language (Jewitt, 2014, p. 35). Every act of communication simultaneously constructs three broad types of meaning or metafunctions: 1) *Ideational* or *representational resources* represents patterns of experience (as configurations of processes, participants and circumstances) and the logico-semantic relations between them (Djonov & Zhao, 2018, p. 4); 2) *Interpersonal/interactional* – enacting social interactions, relations, attitudes and values; and 3) *Textual / compositional* – interweaving ideational and interpersonal meanings into cohesive and coherent units for instance, *texts*.

Intersemiotic or Intermodal Relationships

Modal affordance or meaning potential raises the question of what image is 'best' for and what words, and other modes and their arrangement are 'best' for a particular context (Jewitt, 2014, p. 26). Multimodal research attends to the interplay between modes to look at the specific work of each mode and how each mode interacts with and contributes to the others in the multimodal ensemble (Jewitt, 2014, p. 27). Hence, *intermodal relationships* are 'the relationships between modes as they are orchestrated in interactions,' (Jewitt, 2014, p. 27).

Genre

Multimodal genres are, according to John Bateman, 'constituted by collections of rhetorical strategies deploying the semiotic modes provided by the medium within which the communications is being enacted. These strategies may vary in their form or realization over time and (co)operate in order to achieve the genre's socio-communicative goals and in order to support the genre's recognition (Jewitt, 2014, p. 28).

Discourse

It is an important yet contested term rooted in different disciplines and used in a variety of ways. In a narrow sense, *discourse* can be understood as language in use – everyday ways of talking (Jewitt, 2014, p. 27). In a broader sense it can be used to refer to a system of language use and other meaning-making practices that form ways of talking about social reality (Jewitt, 2014, p. 27). Discourse is an important term for *multimodality*, and many working in this area are concerned with understanding the use and effects of discourse through the uses of modes and their arrangement in modal ensembles (Jewitt, 2014, p. 28). The assumption is that all multimodal texts, artefacts, and communicative events are always discursively shaped, and that all modes, in different ways, offer means for the expression of discourses (Jewitt, 2014, p. 28).

5   ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

5.1   ANALYSIS (Part 1)

The ten selected scenes from the reality series under study 'Bling Empire' has employed different modes to convey message(s) / meaning(s) to the viewers. This analysis is mainly focused on the dominant modes employed in the narratives such as language (spoken and written), gestures, sound, images, and settings. By employing a multimodal discourse analysis, the specialized modes will be identified as well as the ideology or the meaning behind such specializations – 'what modes have been specialized and for what purposes?' Withal, the instances where materialism and conspicuous consumption are manifested and/or encouraged will also be pointed out and discussed.

Scene 1 (Season 1, Episode 1 / 18:30 – 21:39)

The scene takes place in four different settings namely: Anna Shay's residence, in the cabin of Air France plane, hotel in Paris, and at a jewelry store in Paris. The modes that are specialized in the scene are: *speech* or *spoken language*, the *settings*, *images*, *sound* and *gesture*. Within the modes, or across the modes, it is made possible to spot the different semiotic resources that offer *affordances* or *potential meaning*. The potential meanings or affordances will aid in the interpretation of the intended message of the scene.

The *images*, as a dominant mode, are as invaluable as the *spoken language*, which can also be categorized as an equally dominant mode. The spoken language is complimented by the

images that go with it, in order to convey various potential meanings such as power and status, affluence, lavish lifestyle let alone the conspicuousness of one's consumption. Right from the outset

Images	Camera's Focus	Sound
	The scene begins by showing the top view of Anna Shay's home and then the camera moves towards the left to focus on it more closely.	The background music is a mellow tune produced by an electric guitar.
	This image of the grand piano is shown after the images above appears on screen.	
	The two huge, elongated crystal lamps appear conspicuous on the mid-right part of the screen.	

(Frame 1-4. The images are shown as per their order in the scene.)

of the scene, the camera showcases Anna Shay's home from the outside view towards the inside where the images of two, huge, elongated crystal lamps and the grand piano are conspicuously seen. The affordance of showcasing Anna's home and expensive material belongings, which only the affluent can acquire, is to show Anna's status being *wealthy*. It also affords as a substitution for words such that Andrew's utterance *'I've never been to Anna's house'* is addressed through the images that are shown on screen. It is important to note that the mellow, instrumental background music aids in making the scene appear warm and homey.

Another significant mode in the scene is *gesture,* particularly Anna's gesture. In her

(Frame 5-7)

narrative (as shown in frames 5-7), Anna's body language shows that she is calm and composed, as if there is nothing extraordinary with her idea of taking Andrew and Kelly to her favorite restaurant in Paris. She maintained a low voice tone. She gazes down very often as if avoiding eye contact, and she shows almost no signs of excitement in her body movements as opposed to Kelly being elated to the fact that she and her boyfriend are going to Paris with her. Anna's gesture being calm and composed can be understood through Kelly's utterance – '*I think Anna goes to Paris four times a year than she goes to Silver Lake.'* It goes to say that travelling to Paris is a routine for her in fact, she thinks of Paris as her home as evidenced by her utterance inside the car in Paris – *We're home.'* Florent also emphasized the word 'home' when he welcomed Anna, Kelly and Andrew to their hotel room and uttered – '*Welcome home!'* This goes to show that Anna lives a completely different lifestyle than Kelly and Andrew. For Kelly and Andrew, going to Paris is an adventure, but for Anna it is simply an act of '*going home*.'

Images	Iconic Symbols	Music
	Eiffel Tower	The French song entitled *'Je M'en Fous'*(I don't care) serves as the background music while the images are shown.
	Pont Alexandre III	

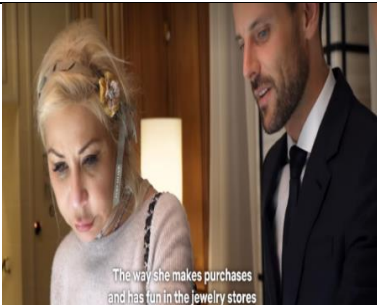|	The Paris Opera (Academie Nationale de Musique)	

(Frame 8-10)

Furthermore, the images of the symbolic places in Paris such as the Eiffel tower, Pont Alexandre III and Paris Opera, are used to achieve coherence with Anna's narrative - taking Andrew and Kelly to her favorite restaurant Maison du Caviar in Paris. It is also worth noting that background music entitled 'Je M'en Fous,' which in English means 'I don't care,' is an orchestrating mode that is employed to produce a thrilling effect to match the adventure in Paris. The funky beat of the background music as well as its lyrics are matched with the movements of the images that are being captured on screen which makes the scene so appealing to watch because the whole ensemble evokes excitement and happiness.

Furthermore, during Kelly's narrative particularly when she utters the phrase - 'So, we get this <u>bad ass hotel</u>, and her luggage is coming in. I think it was like <u>ten bags</u>, and she says, '<u>you can</u> <u>wear this, you can wear that</u>,' and all these <u>couture</u>, <u>fur</u>, and just <u>BEAUTIFUL</u> things… and then we go shopping,' it can be observed that her emphasis on the words '*ten bags*, *couture*, *fur*, and *beautiful things'* were also matched by the exact images shown on screen: Anna's luggage, an image of herself wearing couture, and Anna's wardrobe spread all over the room particularly on the huge bed. The interplay between the spoken language and the images accompanied by the background sound that is modern and upbeat make the scene appear so vibrant and appealing to watch. It is also important to note that when Anna and Kelly are shopping, the images that are shown on screen are label heavy – Chanel, Giorgio Armani, Piaget, Jean Paul Gaultier. While these flashes of expensive brands are shown, it is being complimented by a modern background sound adding thus adding vibe to Anna and Kelly's shopping adventure in Paris.

Withal, it is worth mentioning that Florent, as seen in his narrative, describes Anna's way shopping as comparable to a child in a candy store. There is an evident humor in his words, nevertheless, the images that are shown on screen as shown in frames 11-14 supported his claim.

SPEECH	IMAGE	ACTION

31

(Florent's narrative) The way she makes purchases and has fun in jewelry stores is like a child in a candy store.		Florent helping Anna try the necklace.
		Florent and Anna are looking at the jewelries.

(Frame 11-14)

The images of high-end, colorful jewelries as shown in frames 15-20 resemble the colorful candies that are displayed in candy stores. However, to equate shopping high end jewelries with shopping candies can be argued as an instance of '*humor*.'
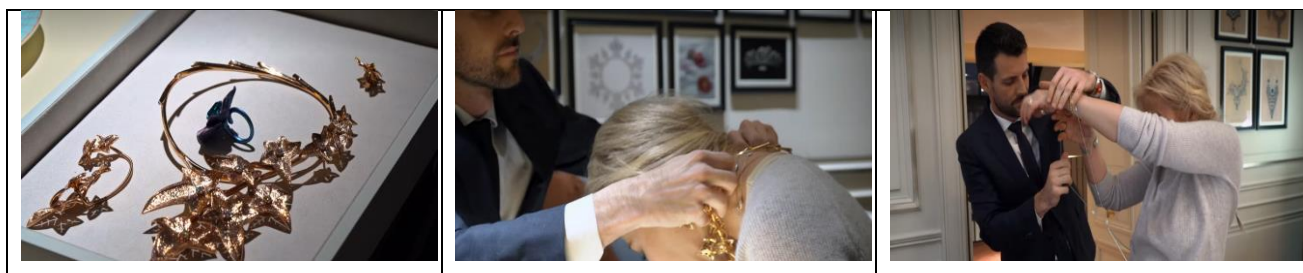
(Frame 15-20)

Throughout the scene, the images as well as the spoken language reveal a conspicuous message – 'that Anna is by no means an ordinary person.' The presence of bodyguards, her capacity to surprise Kelly with a luxurious trip to Paris and gifting her with an expensive ring, her power to portray as a flight attendant at Air France, the flashes of images of her luxurious acquisition of property, clothes and jewelries, her power to make the stores exclusive for her as uttered by Kelly, the images of her at the jewelry store where Florent describes her as *'like a child in a candy store,'* and most of all, Florent's utterance – *'prices don't exist in Anna's world,'* speak about Anna's status and power. The latter phrase clearly means that Anna's resources are limitless. *Power* comes from the privileged access to social resources such as education, knowledge, and wealth. Access to these resources provides authority, status, and influence, which is an enabling mechanism for the domination, coercion, and control of subordinate groups (Simpson &Mayr, 2010, p. 2). In this instance, Anna's power is derived from her wealth which she utilizes not only to live luxuriously, but also to be able to do some things that are certainly not possible for ordinary people to accomplish such as gifting/surprising a friend with a trip to Paris, shopping limitlessly and making the stores exclusive for her, and being able to try to portray the role of a flight attendant during their trip to Paris. At the scene, the viewers can see how happy and accommodating Air France's flight attendants were towards her. There is a tangible thrill that radiates from Anna's face when a flight attendant assisted her in wearing her tie to complete her flight attendant look. This image of her is supported by her utterance – *'My father really, really never wanted me to have a job, but sometimes I think about what I'd like to do. I love Air France. So, I would like to be a flight attendant today!'* To be able to do unimaginable things means and the ability to spend limitlessly without the need to work clearly imply that Anna is a person who is truly wealthy and influential.


Scene 2 (S1, E3 / 23:53 – 25:58)

The scene takes place in Cherie and Jessey Lee's home, and the main characters in the scene are Cherie and Christine Chiu. The opening scene began by showing Cherie welcoming a group of people into her home who are assumed to be the crew who will carry out the newborn photoshoot for Jevon, Cherie's son. The crew carried different props such as miniature air balloon, a Chinese lantern, a unicorn balloon, a tiny crib, huge round pillow, and a big luggage presumed to contain more props. Like most modern moms, Cherie is obviously engaging in new trends such as photoshoot for newborns. Withal, in her narrative, she admits that she loves dressing up her son with Dolce, Gucci, and Fendi. The *spoken language* and the *images* of Cherie looking so chic with her long, white dress; Jevon being photographed; the presence of a nanny for Jevon, and Cherie's elegant, modern home, work together to communicate that Cherie is a modern mom who gives all the best things for her children. The spoken language as a mode also reveals about Cherie's status being affluent. The brands of clothing she buys for her son such as Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci and Fendi are all high-end global brands that only the wealthy can afford to buy, let alone the fact that it is for a newborn simply means extravagance. The huge diamond ring on her finger also signals her status.

In the reality series, Cherie and Jessey Lee are the only unwed couple with two children. In the show, Cherie is shown in various occasions where she asks her partner when he will propose. Therefore, Cherie's huge diamond ring sparked a conversation between her and Christine. In the Asian culture, commitments are made without necessarily involving money. Luxurious proposal stems from the Western culture where the expectations of an engagement ring is a common practice. Christine, having seen the huge diamond ring on Cherie's finger, asks Cherie is she is engaged. Yet, the ring is simply a promise ring, not an engaging ring.

In Christine's narrative shown in frames 21-22, she is very upfront in expressing her opinion on having children prior to marriage. She disagrees with it, but at the same time she acknowledged that it exists, and she also acknowledged that the Asian culture is very critical based on her experience. When examining her gesture, it can be observed that she is having an intense feeling about the topic. The way she thrusts both her hands down repeatedly accompanied by the heaviness of her voice tone, and the way she articulates her words when she utters – '*It's a huge disgrace in the Asian culture to have a child (0.02) without having been married first. I don't agree with it, but I know that it exists. I also know that the Asian culture is extremely critical because I've experienced it myself,*' tells us that she truly means what she says. Moreover, the modes of speech, facial expression and gestures work together to communicate that such value is still so embedded

within her. Though Christine is seen to have adopted the Western culture, judging from her manner of dressing and the way she speaks the English language fluently, it is still evident that she has not
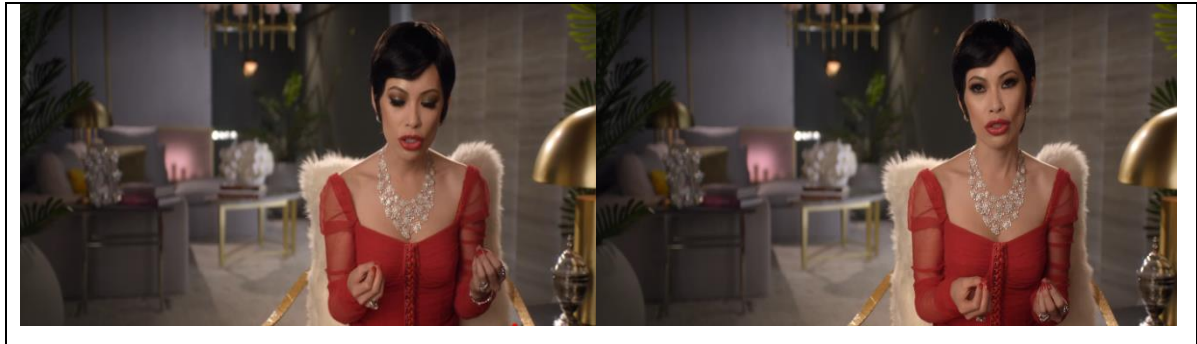
(Frame 21-22)

fully embraced the Western culture. For instance, in the West, it is acceptable to have children before marriage, yet Christine bluntly admits that she disagrees with it. When Christine utters - *'If I went to my mom and said I was pregnant without being married, like my parents would look at me like some kind of slut,'* Cherie's facial expression shifted from being happy to being concerned. The way she nodded her head in affirmation gives the audience the impression that she is somehow affected by Christine's words. Clearly, the term *slut* as a description of an unwed pregnant woman is quite harsh. Lastly, Christine is also seen barefooted walking around Cherie's home. In most Asian countries, removing shoes in the home, school, and particularly sacred places is a tradition.

Scene 3 (S1, E1 / 12:34 – 13:34)

In a fine restaurant at Rodeo Drive, Kane, Kelly, Kevin and Jamie are seen together having a conversation while dining in what seems to look like a fine restaurant. The modes that are specialized in this scene are the *spoken language, facial expression, images* and *sound*.

The scene commenced by showing the road sign of the famous intersection, *'Via Rodeo* and *Dayton Way,"* heart of Beverly Hills. While the road sign is focused, a danceable, hip hop background music is being played. The song is part of the exclusive soundtrack of Bling Empire entitled *'A Beauty Beyond Humanity.'* The sound affords a vibrant, positive mood, and its rhythm is in harmony with the flashes of images of the busy kitchen in a restaurant. The delectable food tossed in the pan is being focused and its movement is also in harmony with the background sound. A distinct line from the background song can be heard – *"We go live the dream! We go live the dream."* The affordance of the music woven together with the images is to bring up a positive vibe to the

35

scene. Moreover, the hip hop beat and how the lyrics was articulated in the song describes the characters in the scene who truly are living their dreams.

During Kane's narrative, he shares invaluable information about Jamie's life in a humorous way. The interplay between his speech and the images that are shown on screen reveals how Jamie is living a good life. The white text in frame 23 reveals about Jamie's father whom Kane describes as a *'billionaire.'* However, the image in frame 23 provides a more detailed information about Jamie's father – 'Ken Xie, Chairman of the Board, Founder and CEO, Fortinet.' The *text*

Images	Speech	Action
	Kane: 'Jamie's money come from Silicon Valley and her dad is a wealthy billionaire.'	Fly-on-the-wall scenes are shown on screen along with the lines uttered by Kane.
	'Jamie's spending money…	
	living her life….	
	running horses…	
	taking pictures…	

	JACKPOT!	

(Frame 23-28)

in frame 23 has a similar function as the text in a print ad which is "designed to catch the reader's attention" (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 36). The text is also able to provide succinct information for the viewers to read. Frames 24- 28 are the visualizations of Kane's narrative. He portrays Jamie as a wealthy daughter who does nothing but fun. Frame 28 shows how Kane lifted his right arm with clenched fist and then said 'JACKPOT!' The images of Jamie in frame 24-27 show how she indulges in luxury wearing expensive clothes and engaging in an elite sport. Equestrian sports are largely considered as elitist by those who are not within the industry. The affordance of the spoken language and the images is to communicate a message about how Jamie is living the good life being the daughter of a billionaire.

Moreover, the conversation of the actors in the scene gives the viewers' a glimpse of the actors' lives and it clearly shows that like any other human beings, they have some challenges too. Yet what is notable during their conversation is how Kevin is confronted with facts that he

Images	Speech	Gaze
		Kevin gazes at Jamie and listens to her attentively.
	Kevin reacted to Jamie by saying: 'YOU HAVE TO FLY PONIES?'	
		Kevin gazes at Jamie in disbelief.

		Kevin is speechless.

(Frame 29-32)

never heard before. Among the cast, Kevin is the only member who is not born into wealth. Thus, his reaction is genuinely raw and spontaneous which makes him a funny character in the scene. Frame 30 captures Kevin's reaction in disbelief when he heard Jamie said – '*My horses fly Emirates.*' Spoken words such as '*200,000 a pony,*' '*my horses fly Emirates,*' '*they offered me another building,*' '*Fuck college,*' and '*we were so close in buying a barn, but then I didn't buy it. Eve jobs ended up buying it,*' signal a status parallel with Eve Jobs, the daughter of the late found of Apple. The spoken language and images as dominant modes convey the message of how extraordinary the lives of the privileged. However, there are certain things that the young viewers of the show must be reminded of for instance 'quitting college,' is not a good idea. Acquiring education is invaluable, even more so when you are privileged. The manner in which Kane and Jamie are shown doing 'high five' while agreeing with quitting college and the way Jamie's life is portrayed in the scene can also be misleading to others. These instances are just few of the reasons why reality shows need to be examined.

Scene 4 (Season 1, Episode 4 / 00:00 – 4:30)

The scene showcases the life of the wealthy casts who are seen indulging in an extravagant service/leisure activity which is – 'fortune telling in a very expensive venue.' Right from the outset of the scene, fly-on-the-scenes are used to give the audience a hint where the setting happens – 'The Blvd Restaurant' in Beverly Wilshire as shown in frames 33-34. The magnificent, luxurious building

(Frame 33-34)

of Beverly Wilshire Hotel is shown from a distant view and then it shifted focus to the patio facing the busy street of Wilshire boulevard. The next image that appears on the screen are Christine and

Kane. The actors look exceptionally well-dressed, and the camera's focus on them captures their raw interaction with the environment. The two appears happy and in a vibrant mood based on their facial expressions and gestures. As the two enters The Blvd, a huge, extravagant, crystal chandelier cannot

(Frame 35-36)

be overlooked as it fills the high ceiling of the building (frames 35-56). The place is no doubt first-class. Kane and Christine are the joined by Kelly and her mom which are focused on camera while they enter the foyer of The Blvd. It is very significant to note that during Kelly's narrative, she uses English, however, as soon as she starts speaking with her friends, she speaks in Chinese. Shortly after she spoke, the fortune teller is focused on the camera. The fortune teller is an old man dressed in a blue suit and he wears a brown hat. It is also crucial to note how Kelly and Kane greeted the fortune teller. They both bow with their waist, not their necks as show in frames 37-38. Bowing is typically used in Asian cultures as way of greeting elders or showing respect and sincerity. What is remarkable to see is how the fortune teller bows his head to greet his clients as well. This means that both parties

(Frame 37-38)

are showing respect toward each other. The meeting can be described as warm and welcoming, and it is so tangible through the tone of actors' voice, facial expressions, and their gestures. As the fortune teller begins to work, their conversation is purely in Chinese. In this case, the viewers can already assume that the fortune teller either feels more comfortable working using the Chinese language or perhaps he does not speak English at all. No one can know. Nevertheless, it can be argued that in this instance, the Chinese language as a mode of communication is very necessary for the social actor, the fortune teller, to perform his work. Taking into account the whole scene, the mode that is absolutely necessary for the social actor to perform the action is the usage of the Chinese language. On the other

hand, the mode that is not necessary, but are still used in a particular way is the 'luxurious venue.' Therefore, it can be argued that this is a case of conspicuous consumption.

(Frame 39-42)

Moreover, it is important to mention how the camera focuses on Kane's left wrist during his reading which is embellished with diamond bangle bracelets (frame 39-42). Right from the outset of the scene, it is very evident that the camera often focuses on images of material things that signal wealth. The materialistic images are either focused on the setting or the actors bearing lavish outfits (both in their narratives and during the actual scene) and their expensive accessories such as diamond jewelries and Louis Vuitton bag as shown in frames 43-44. Lastly, the scene gives the viewers the   impression that the actors, despite having lived in the United States for a long time,

 (Frame 43-44)

have not alienated themselves from their home culture. For instance, Kane and particularly Kelly, are attentive and submissive to the fortune teller. Kelly's reaction to the rituals done by the fortune teller shows that she submits to him. In contrast, Christine is quite half-hearted towards the fortune teller, and this is maybe due to her Christian background where fortune telling is not an acceptable practice. Her facial expression and her gesture in her narratives show it all. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the actors' privileged status has something to do with the degree of their acculturation to the Western

culture. At the same time, their privileged status also enables them to have the power or the ability to resist or refuse to uphold the traditions in the Chinese culture. For instance, Kane, being the eldest son should take responsibility of his family. Apparently, he clearly migrated to L.A. to escape from such burden as evidenced by his utterance – *'Well, let's not put it like, DON'T GIVE ME THAT BURDEN! That's why I came to L.A.'* This clearly shows how money can be used as an instrument to live with less or no constraints.

Scene 5 (Season 2, Episode 6 / 15:15 – 18:46)

This scene is especially unique because its *setting* is very intimate (inside Anna Shay's car). The characters, Anna and Kevin, are focused having a conversation with very minimal disruption all throughout the scene. The modes that are specialized in meaning making are the *spoken language* and *gesture*. The *sound* as contributory mode is also worth mentioning.

The scene commenced with an upbeat, modern track entitled "Want It" as the background music while showcasing Anna Shay's luxurious, new estate in Beverly Hills. The architectural features of Anna Shay's house resemble those that are featured in magazines. It is picture perfect and very extravagant. The background music and the images shown on screen showcasing Anna's mansion work in harmony in transmitting a positive vibe. Nevertheless, the sole affordance of showcasing Anna's house is to signal her status being wealthy. It is worth noting that whilst showcasing Anna Shay's New Estate, the *text, 'Anna Shay's New Estate'* is visible the entire time the camera features the different angles of her mansion. Written in yellow, big, easy-to read font, the audience are informed who owns the house. The usage of *text* in this context has a similar function as a print ad's headline which according to Simpson et al. (2010) "is designed to catch the reader's or viewer's attention," (p. 36). Withal, repetition as a technique is also employed "to intensify meaning," (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 93).
(Frame 45-46)

The conversation between Anna and Kevin at the scene is clearly an instance of an *"asymmetrical talk"* where the status of the two speakers is not equal. Anna is obviously the dominant speaker. She takes full control of the conversation as much as she takes full control of the situation being in charge of the steering wheel. Kevin as her guest inside her car is clearly subjected to an unnecessary discomfort because of her reckless driving, and her blatant disregard for Kevin's opinion as well as for the traffic rules.

41

Frame 45 shows how Kevin pointed out to the traffic lights while he utters – *'Wo:::oh, THERE'S A STOP SIGN!'* Frame 46 shows Kevin's gesture when he says – *'Why didn't you look through it?'* Kevin looks disturbed by Anna's disregard for the stop sign, but what is interesting is how Anna remains so calm and unstirred which is very evident in her facial expression. Anna's domineering behavior is being manifested by her calm demeanor and her unapologetic reply – *'because it doesn't serve a purpose.'* The audience will notice Kevin's resistance to Anna's illogical response as he utters '*Yeah. It's not a suggestion!*' Overall, it can be observed that Kevin attempted to show some form of resistance to Anna's disregard for the traffic signs but as their conversation

progressed, it becomes apparent that Kevin eventually submits to Anna. The audience can see him laugh over Anna's mischievous behavior and this fuels Anna to misbehave even more. Foucault argues that *power* is more a form of action or relation between people which is negotiated and contested in interaction and is never fixed or stable (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 3). The scene clearly gives us a glimpse of how power can be an "enabling mechanism for domination, coercion and control over the subordinate groups," (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 2).

One of the highlights in the scene is when Anna got a message through a voicemail where she is invited to be the model for a photoshoot (lines 42-46). Most people would be delighted to hear such an offer but on the contrary, Anna seems to appear hesitant to do it. Her facial expression suddenly changed from having a very happy face to somebody who's disappointed, unhappy, and 'stressed' as verbalized Anna. Moreover, it is quite strange to hear Anna claiming

(Frame 47-48)

that she is shy – *'No! I don't like to be in front of the camera. I'm very shy.'* In her in narrative, she utters – '*I really didn't have that desire to jump in front of the camera and say 'hi, it's me!' UNLIKE SOME PEOPLE who seem to* jump in front of the camera all the time.' These claims are problematic in the sense that participants in reality shows are always subjected to surveillance cameras.

At 17:57, Anna's car is focused on camera as seen in frames 47-48. The lower front part of the car bearing the logo is focused, The Mercedes Benz's logo is always positioned at the center of the screen, and it becomes more visible as the car appears closer to the camera. The potential meaning of this specialization is done either to give a face to Anna's pace car whom she named '*Sofia,'* or to signal luxury. It is perhaps not a coincidence that when frames 47-48 are shown on the screen, Anna can be heard from background mentioning Gucci – *'I'm shopping at GUCCI.'* For Anna, the voicemail she got was very stressful and therefore she feels the need to shop – *'I'm shopping at GUCCI. This is very stressful I have to buy something.'* This instance can be paralleled to what Richins (2017) wrote in her article about materialism - *"shopping activities temporarily restore the self and remove the unpleasant psychological state,"* (p. 490-491).

As previously mentioned, the scene is an instance where the characters are engaged in an *'asymmetrical talk'.* Just like in institutional discourse, power can also be constantly negotiated in ordinary conversation. In this instance, Anna is the dominant speaker and Kevin is the less powerful participant. Simpson et al (2010) emphasized that "every time people interact, they enact, reproduce and sometimes resist power relationship through language," (p. 11). Kevin has shown some resistance in the beginning, but he is not strong enough to make himself heard. Lastly, it is imperative to note that in the scenario, Anna Shay is not being a good role model to the viewers. She gives us a picture of a wealthy, powerful woman who can do anything to anyone as she pleases. She also has a bad habit of cursing – 'fuck off.' Anna has displayed some seriously negative behavior that should not be ignored let alone followed. The irony of all this is that the more mature person in the scene (Anna) is the one misbehaving, and she gets away with it. This kind of scene is one of the reasons why reality shows are often described as low-brow and nonsense because it fails to offer anything substantial and meaningful to the viewers.

Scene 6 (Season 1, Episode 1 / 9:01- 12:32)

The scene takes place at Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills which has been shut down for the Chinese New Year party hosted by the Chiu's. The scene depicts an over-the-top version of the Chinese New Year one can imagine. Rodeo Drive is totally transformed to resemble China Town. Yet flashes of

images of Piaget and Chanel boutiques were shown. In this instance, the *setting* is used as a dominant mode to convey different messages all at the same time such as – Chinese culture, celebration, extravagance, opulence, prestige, fashion, glamour, but most of all, conspicuous consumption.
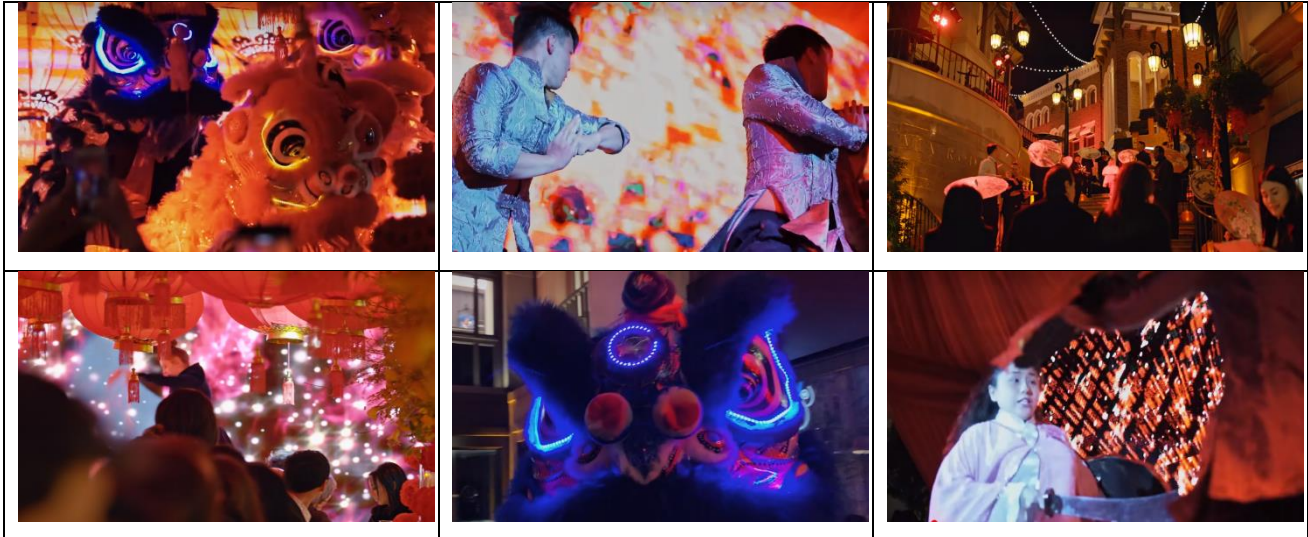
(Frames 48-54). '*Setting*' as a mode is clearly employed to convey meaning which is 'to bring China Town to Beverly Hills.

Sound is another mode being utilized in the scene. The upbeat, modern song in the background affords a cozy, intimate ambience, and it also gives life to the different performances being shown through fly-on-the-wall scenes. It is important to note that in this occasion, most of the cast of Bling Empire are featured through fly-on-the-wall scenes, and they all looked glamourous to match the grandness of the occasion.

In addition, text as a mode is also utilized in many instances and as mentioned previously its purpose is to catch the viewer's attention. Frame 50 shows how *text* is employed to signal opulence. The *text* 'Rodeo Drive' which is displayed in bold letters appears at 9:01. The luxurious, black Bentley car is shown as the background of the text. The Bentley logo is focused and can be interpreted as a symbol for luxury, prestige as well as beauty. Moreover, the *texts* – 'Chinese New Year,' 'Year of the Pig,' 'Chinatown 90210, and 'Chiu' were shown on screen respectively to convey information such as the name of the event as well as who is hosting it. The *texts* function as 'headlines' such as in newspapers where the readers are given a gist of what the article is all about, and it also serves as an "attention-getting device" (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 36). It is important to note how the logo of Beverly Hills is altered (frame 59) where the name Beverly Hills is replaced by the word 'Chinatown.' The semiotic effect of the alteration of the logo is 'cohesion.' Since Beverly

Hills is transformed to resemble Chinatown, it goes without saying that Beverly Hills logo must also be changed yet retaining the iconic figure '90210' which is the sole signifier of the iconic logo.

Image	Text as a 'mode'	Camera's Focus
	The repetitive use of the *text* is evident throughout the scene.	
		The camera is focused on the Chinese symbol in white font while the text 'CHIU' is situated at the middle, right part of the screen.
	The iconic sign of 'Beverly Hills 90210' is clearly altered in this instance. The word Beverly Hills is replaced by the word 'Chinatown.'	

(Frames 55-60. *'Text'* **as a mode is repetitively employed through fly-on-the-wall scenes in scene 1.)**

One of the highlights in the scene is Kevin's narrative. His speech as well as gesture and facial expression is compelling. Being an adoptive child from Asia, Kevin has not experienced what it is like to celebrate Chinese New Year. When the dragons were focused on camera, Kevin is heard from the background saying – *'And I'm blown away… by the lions dancing, performances, food. It's just the biggest thing I've ever been to in my life.'* Kevin calls the dragons as 'lions,' which shows that he did not grow up in Asia. Kane's narrative on the other hand, is also as interesting as Kevin's. He narrated the difference between a White New Year and Chinese New Year where in the latter, you wake up with money. This kind of narratives highlights the cultural differences in celebrating traditions. The Chinese New Year is distinctively symbolic – dragons, red envelopes, red lanterns, fireworks, and performances such as fencing and dancing. In the White New Year there is food, wine, New Year props, and the use of fireworks.

At 10:22 the camera is focused on Anna Shay and Christine Chiu walking away from the crowd, Anna wrapped both her arms around Christine's right arm while they were having a conversation. At first glance, it gives the viewers the impression that Anna and Christine are very close friends. Based in Anna's voice tone and her sincerity in expressing gratitude towards Christine for inviting her. Christine on the other hand, appears excited that Anna showed up at her party judging from the tone of her voice and her body language. At the scene, both characters look genuinely happy to see each other. Yet how the two characters appear happy seeing each other is juxtaposed by their respective narratives and this scenario is commonly seen in reality shows. The first narrative featured Christine where she utters– *"I feel that there's a very small circle of affluent Asians in Los Angeles and we all know each other one way or another. I actually met Anna in LOB premiere on an Air France flight where we were in pj's and having caviar."* Christine explicitly claims that she is affluent, and she deliberately placed herself at the same level or status as Anna. The word 'caviar' has always been used as a metaphor for 'affluence' as the majority would claim that it

46

is a dish of the wealthy. Affluence, class, prestige, and to a great extent, power, are the messages that are being conveyed to the viewers based on Christine's narrative.
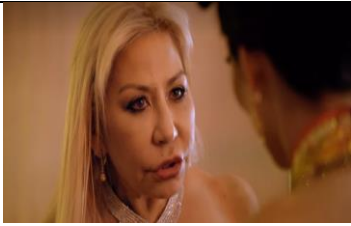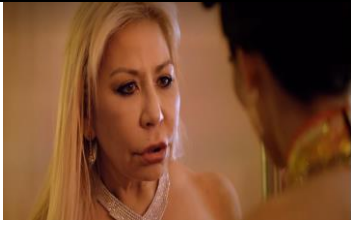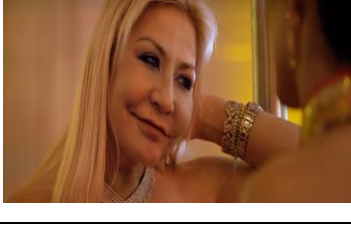
The second narrative which still features Christine can be argued as very provocative – *'I'm glad Anna showed up to my Chinese New Year party. She went to the bank and pulled out her best diamonds to wear. That's a sign of respect, right?'* The word 'respect' in this context clearly offers a different meaning. The affordance of speech, gaze and gesture is to convey that there is a

Images	Speech	Gesture
	Christine spoke: 'I am glad that Anna showed up to my Chinese New Year party.'	Christine lifts her arms up, mid-waist.
	'She went to the bank and pulled out her best diamonds to wear.'	
	'THAT'S A SIGN OF RESPECT, RIGHT?' ↑	

(Frame 61-64)

tangible competition between Anna and Christine. Frame 61-64 show Christine's facial expression and gestures.

Images	Speech	Gaze

	'You do? How come I never see you?'	Anna looks surprised and she asked Christine a question while looking at her in the eyes.
	'You do? Me, too.'	Anna looks confused.
	'So…'	Anna smiles at Christine while touches her hair with her left hand and gazed down and smiled.
	'Yeah.'	Anna appears as if she does not care about what Christine says.

(Frame 65-68)

Frames 65-68 show Anna's facial expressions and hand gestures. The shift in her facial expression. that is from being serious to matter-of-fact or perhaps uninterested, gives the audience an impression that she is not taking Christine's words seriously. This can be affirmed in her utterance – '*When I met Christine, the person I met was down-to-earth. She was fun and she had a lot to talk about, it wasn't about superficial things… and over the years I started noticing a different Christine. She felt like she had to namedrop, but she has nothing to prove to me.*' The scenario is a case of conspicuous consumption where the desire for status and prestige are manifested through name-dropping and talking about oneself in a proud way – *'I always have the presidential suite.'*

Scene 7 (Season 1, Episode 1 / 3:38 – 5:21)

The scene takes place at the Chiu's residence in Bel-Air where one of the main cast, Christine Chiu, is being interviewed by David Nash, a journalist from Town & County magazine. Christine, who is clad in a red, floral, silky, Chinese-like robe, is adorned with diamond-studded jewelries. While being

48

interviewed, it is evident that Christine is a woman who is wealthy. It takes a highly influential person to make Beverly Hills agree that Rodeo Drive be shut down for an event. This explicitly affirms the elite status of the Chiu's. Withal, the act of donation to sponsor one orphan per guest in China as articulated by Christine during the interview, highlights the elite status of the Chiu's once again. It is important to note that there is obviously a *juxtaposition* going on such that 'the extravagance in hosting the event is juxtaposed by a philanthropic act.'

Moreover, it is very significant to emphasize how *text* as a mode in meaning-making has been utilized to signal affluence as shown in the picture below (frame 69). A perfect example where the **text** is utilized to signal 'affluence' can be observed right at the outset of the first act in scene 1. The well-structured, modern gate at the Chiu's residence is used as a background of the text. The word "Bel-Air" speaks for itself as it is "one of the most expensive neighborhoods on L.A.'s westside, and has become synonymous with extravagance," (Elliott, 2022, par. 2). The Chiu's elite status is highlighted once more by signaling the viewers where they live. The use of huge, bold letters and the simplicity of the font chosen make the *text* more visible to the viewers, not to mention easy to read and comprehend.

(Frame 69)

Another significant observation occurred right from the outset of the scene. The viewers can hear a male voice in the background, presumably the voice of the interviewer, yet what is shown on screen is the picture shown in frame, and then the camera shifted its focus to Christine's left hand bearing a wide, diamond-studded bangle and a huge diamond ring on her finger as shown below (frame 69). This lasted for a few seconds. It is fair to say that figure 1 serves a purpose by giving the viewers information as to where the scene has transpired. But the affordance of frame 70 is solely to

signal affluence. Material possessions, in this case, luxurious diamond jewelries, is another mode used to convey meaning. It is fair to say that the luxurious diamond jewelries signal ostentatious spending, and therefore can be classified as conspicuous consumption.

(Frame 70)

Lastly, it can be observed that there few more instances where both materialism and conspicuous consumption are being manifested namely: 1) the utilization of the term 'wardrobe' which indicates that Baby G, despite his young age, already lives in luxury and in abundance; and 2) when the camera is focused on Christine's jewelries while Gabe asked, *'you're going all Chanel tonight, huh?'* The messages being conveyed are opulence and status and it is achieved through

name-dropping as well as the obvious display of jewelries. It is perhaps useful to note that figure 2 is once again shown when the scene commenced. In discourse, the function of *repetition* and *reiteration* is to intensify meaning, with repetition having the strongest cohesive force (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p, 112). It is also important to note that when figure 2 was shown, Christine's voice is heard in the background saying – *'No. I think more is more when it comes to jewelry.'* There is a tangible humor behind the phrase *'more is more when it comes to jewelry'* as it contradicts with the minimalists' point of view which is *'less is more.'*

Scene 8 (Season 3, Episode 9)

Scene 8 is very brief, and it is marked by an interesting encounter between the two characters of Bling Empire, Kane Lim and Jamie Xie. The dominant modes that are specialized in the scene are the *spoken language, setting*, *gesture* and *sound*. The scene commenced by showing the busy streets of

Beverly Hills, then followed by the logo of 'alo yoga' being repeatedly shown on camera through fly-on-the-wall scenes. The usage of fly-on-the-wall scenes allows the film makers to provide multiple information in a very short span of time usually in a matter of seconds. It could be argued that fly-on-the-wall scenes are pre-determined according to the needs of the story. The emphasis on the name has potential meanings: to inform the viewers where the scene occurred and perhaps to advertise. Alo Yoga is a luxury activewear brand and the semiotic function of emphasizing its logo in several instances is to signal 'luxury.

(Frame 71-74)
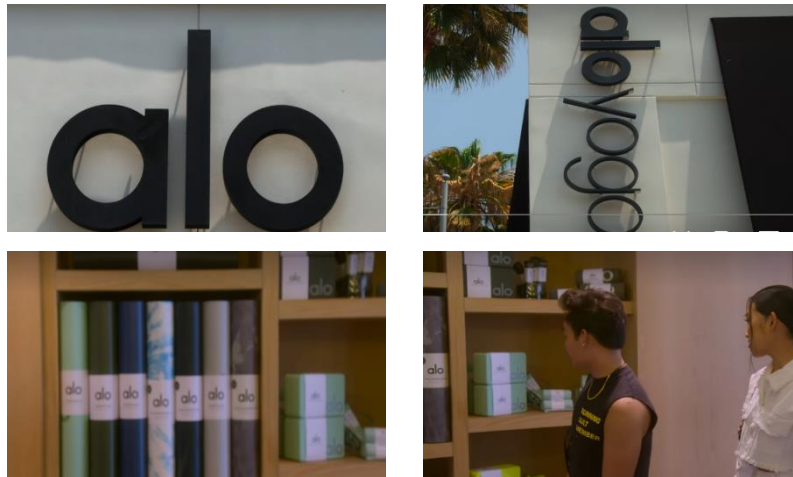
The background music in the scene is very distinct. The beat of the electric drums matches Jamie's gait as she enters the yoga shop. The music is vibrant, modern and it can evoke an audience response. Perhaps it is safe to argue at this point that show's exclusive soundtrack contributes to its appeal particularly the young viewers.

At first glance, the viewers would probably expect the casts to shop in enthusiasm and without restraint, but apparently it is not the case. Jamie and Kane's meeting at the yoga shop is more on talking rather than shopping. It is compelling see conversations that are represented by elite participants because there is a huge discrepancy between their perceived reality and the reality of the average individual. For instance, Jamie's usage of the term 'struggle' is quite problematic because in truth, she is just struggling with how to budget her finances to cover her expensive lifestyle. People who really struggle cannot afford to pay a twenty-thousand apartment every month, or travel to Paris for fashion week as in Jamie's case. Another instance is when Kane asks Jamie – 'What's a month for you, six figures?' Such type of question obviously raises the viewer's eyebrow because what appears to be an ordinary conversation between two social actors can be overwhelming for the viewers.

In addition, it is quite interesting to point out what Kane has brought up the term *'unboxing'* in line 23 – 'Yeah, you hit six figures before! I saw your *unboxing* video!' By definition, "*unboxing* is a phenomenon where a person takes a consumer product out of its box or original packaging while filming the process," (Unboxing, n. d., par 1). It makes a certain amount of sense to film the unboxing of a new smart phone or video game console, because others can see, for example, how the product is packaged, what types of cords and cables come with it, and what the console or device itself looks like (Unboxing, n. d., par. 1). However, unboxing has become a social media trend not for its informative purpose but as an act of displaying 'acquisition.' Clearly, it can be argued that 'unboxing' is a form of conspicuous consumption.

Furthermore, the affordance of the spoken language in the scene plays a huge role in conveying status, lavish lifestyle, and one's family's cultural upbringing shape one's behavior. In the Asian culture, it is normal for some parents to support their children even if they are adults. In Jamie's case, her parents have imposed on her that she should cover her shopping and living expenses. Kane, on the other hand, indirectly admits that he is spending his inheritance. The scene provides an instance of two contrasting personalities. Although both Kane and Jamie have affluent parents, their life perspective vary. As Kane utters - *'You know what my parents said? We're skiing! SKI, right? Spending kids' inheritance. I'm like, I'm like oh, my god!'* Jamie adamantly replied – *'Yes, you're skiing.'* Her gesture and facial expression says that she does not agree with Kane.

5.2 ANALYSIS (Part 2)

Table 1.0 (Interview Results)

Netflix Subscription, Usage & Satisfaction	Genre Preferences	Opinion towards Reality TV
Only **1 out of 10** participants has her own Netflix subscription.	**Comedy / romance comedy** is the dominant genre of choice preferred by 6 out of 10 participants.	**Participant 1** dislikes reality shows that have the same concept as "Keeping up with the Kardashians" because she does not learn anything from it except for how rich and extravagant they are.

The rest of the 9 participants access Netflix through **"password sharing."**	**Documentary** is the second most preferred genre (P1, P3, P5 & P10).	**Participant 2** is fond of watching "Bling Empire". He thinks that the casts of the series live a life that is mostly a fantasy to ordinary people like himself.
7 out of 10 participants are **"binge-watching"** on Netflix.

Participant 4 "binge-watch" for 10-12 hours, once a month or once in 2 months.

Participant 2 can finish 1 season in a day.

Participant 3 uses the term "binge-watch" synonymous to "movie marathon."

Participant 5 binge-watch for 9 hours, 7 days straight when working night shifts.

Participant 6 never engaged in "binge-watching."

Participant 9 does not "binge-watch" simply because she has no time.

Participant 1 "binge-watch" from time to time.

The average viewing hours per week is between **3-10 hours.** | **Reality series** is the third most preferred genre (P1, P2 and P8).

Participant 1 has watched "Love is Blind" but admits that she prefers to watch cooking/baking reality shows.

Participant 3 is not into reality series but claims to have watched Bling Empire & Dubai Bling.

Participant 4 prefers to watch reality series with somebody for instance her mom.

The following genres are also mentioned:
talk shows, drama, action, adventure, true crime/crime fiction, history, sci-fi, Christmas, American series, Korean series, international films, feel good movies, horror, and thriller. | **Participant 3** claims that she enjoys watching "Bling Empire" because she admires one of the casts whom she finds classy and very gorgeous. She does not like too much drama though.

Participant 4 thinks that reality series can be a good entertainment, but they are very staged and obviously encourage drama.

Participant 5 claims that she does not like reality shows that much because there is no real point except for entertainment and people liking being on camera. A reality show should have a different dimension or purpose to it such as a social experiment like Big Brother which she happens to watch and liked.

Participant 6 claims that reality tv is not his thing. He describes the show as annoying and energy-consuming. He thinks that the casts are very ignorant and immature people |

		with a need to fill a void on something. **Participant 7** describes Dubai Bling as "lust of the flesh" – glamorous, expensive cars, houses & clothes. **Participant 8** watched Dubai Bling and thinks that it is inspired by the Kardashians who started the era of glamorizing richness and materialism. **Participant 9** thinks that it can be both good and bad in a way depending on the viewer's perspective. **Participant 10** totally abhors reality shows and does not patronize them. Instead, she expressed her concerns with environmental issues and recommended that people should watch films about global warming.
2 out of 10 participants rate Netflix 10 out of 10. **5 participants** rate Netflix 8 out of 10. **2 participants** rate Netflix 7-8 out of 10. **1 participant** rates Netflix 7 out of 10.		

Netflix Recommender System	Influence/Effect of Netflix Usage	Participants who follow the casts on social media
5 out of 5 participants claim that Netflix's recommender system is pretty accurate.	2 out of 10 participants claim that watching Netflix shows have **direct influence on them.** **Participant 5** admits that she made a bold purchase, a smart watch, which is exactly like the one she saw on a film in Netflix. She admits that she never spent much money on such items before. **Participant 7** admits that she tried to cook the same dish as the one she saw from a cooking reality show "Chef's Table".	**Participant 3** follows one cast from Bling Empire on Instagram due to admiration and for inspiration. **Participant 7** follows Viola Davis on Instagram. **Participant 8** follows Chris Fade on Instagram (reality star from Dubai Bling) because she wants to know what he does in his private life.
Participant 1 only watches films recommended by family/friends.	4 out of 10 participants claim that watching Netflix films have **indirect** influence on them. It made them want to purchase or do something. **Participant 1** admits that by watching movies on Netflix as well as other streaming service have definitely made her want certain items or brand she never had before. **Participant 4** has not made a direct purchase as a result of watching Netflix films but admits that something is	

	brewing within her subconsciously. **Participant 8** claims that watching Dubai Bling reminds her of wanting to purchase a procedure – "teeth whitening." She adds that a random woman on the street carrying a CHANEL bag can also be as a reminder as well. **Participant 9** admits that watching Dubai Bling partly makes her want to have her fats removed by all means.	
Participant 7 thinks that Netflix's recommender system is not so accurate but has good recommendations.	4 out of 10 participants claim that watching Netflix films **do not have a direct influence** on them. They have not made any purchase nor have the desire to buy or want something as a result of watching Netflix films/shows. **Participant 6** is adamant that he is not easily influenced by anything and that marketing tricks don't work with him.	
Participant 9 claims that Netflix's recommender system is not applicable to her.		

Participant 10 says that Netflix's recommender system is okay although sometimes it's too much.		

9 out of 10 participants **(See table 1.0)** gain access in Netflix through password sharing with either family or friends. In other words, the participants have access to Netflix for free or for a cheaper price such as the case of participant 1.

Discussion

6 CONCLUSION

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