

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: AMERICA’S SWEETHEARTS? A FEMINIST DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *DALLAS COWBOYS CHEERLEADERS: MAKING THE TEAM*

Lauren R. Nowosatka, Master of Arts, 2022

Thesis Directed By: Dr. Shannon Jette, Department of Kinesiology

The “often imitated, never equaled” Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders (DCCs) are self-proclaimed as “the premier cheerleading squad in the world,” universally setting the stage (field) for professional cheerleading. In 2006, “America’s Sweethearts” launched a hit reality television (TV) show, *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team (DCCs: MTT)*, where the squad director positions the organization as empowering women in the opening the series’ 13th season. Taking this seemingly contradictory statement—made during the #MeToo moment of 2018—as a department point, this thesis examines the constructions of femininity and empowerment on offer in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*. A textual analysis adopted from Johnson et al.’s (2004) reading for dominance methodology, with a theoretical foundation in feminist discourse analysis and intersectionality, was used to examine season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, answering the following questions:

1. What versions of femininity are on offer to viewers of *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team*? How do they intersect with race, sexuality, class, ability, etc.?
2. How is empowerment constructed through *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team*?

Findings suggest that performances of femininity are aligned with emphasized femininity and ambassadorship, offering a homogenous image to viewers that idealizes and reinforces hegemonic beauty standards, the thin-ideal, and the objectification of women, paired with displays of emotional expressions, “intelligence,” and poise that subjectively position the cheerleaders within the larger patriarchal, late-capitalist Dallas Cowboys and NFL structures. Supposedly empowering to the cheerleaders, the discursive practices, enforced performativities, and productional strategies displayed on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, frames the institution as faux-empowering, endorsing empowerment as the product of making “correct” individual choices. Consequently, cheerleaders and viewers who do not make these decisions are rendered disempowered and made to feel shameful, contradicting the spirited nature of the sport. This thesis seeks to fill the gap created by the lack of critical, sociological discussions of professional cheerleading as a spectacle of late-capitalist, uber sport, permeated through popular culture and which analyzes professional cheerleading through the site of reality TV.

AMERICA'S SWEETHEARTS? A FEMINIST DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF
DALLAS COWBOYS CHEERLEADERS: MAKING THE TEAM

by

Lauren R. Nowosatka

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
2022

Advisory Committee:
Dr. Shannon Jette, Chair
Dr. David Andrews
Dr. Ronald Mower

© Copyright by
Lauren R. Nowosatka
2022

Dedication

For my fellow reality TV fiends.

Acknowledgements

I wish to show my appreciation for, first and foremost, my advisor, Dr. Shannon Jette, for her unconditional encouragement, guidance, and patience in helping me design, implement, conduct, and write this thesis. Taking what I originally thought was a “silly” site of investigation, Shannon has repeatedly assured me of the rigor of this project, instilling confidence as a researcher and writer. I would also like to express my gratitude for my other committee members, Dr. David Andrews and Dr. Ronald Mower, for their feedback and direction throughout various points of this project. Finally, I want to extend a special thanks to my peers in University of Maryland’s Physical Cultural Studies department for their overwhelming support.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Dedication..... | ii |
| Acknowledgements | Error! Bookmark not defined. |
| Table of Contents..... | iv |
| List of Abbreviations..... | Error! Bookmark not defined. |
| Chapter 1: Introduction..... | 1 |
| Thesis Focus and Research Questions | 6 |
| Significance..... | 7 |
| Outline for Remainder of Thesis..... | 9 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review | 11 |
| From Cheer Leader to Cheerleader..... | 11 |
| Be Objectified! B-E Objectified! B-E O-B-J-E-C-T-I-F-I-E-D! | 15 |
| The Commodified Cheer (Dance) Body..... | 17 |
| The Reality of Reality TV..... | 19 |
| Summary and Gaps..... | 25 |
| Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework..... | 27 |
| Overview..... | 27 |
| Feminist Discourse Theory..... | 28 |
| Neoliberal Feminism and Faux-Empowerment..... | 31 |
| Intersectionality..... | 33 |
| Defining Intersectionality | 33 |
| Origins of Intersectionality | 34 |
| Theoretical Insights..... | 35 |
| Chapter 4: Methodology..... | 37 |
| Season 13 of Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team..... | 37 |
| Reading for Dominance | 37 |
| The Confessional Tale | 39 |
| Chapter 5: Empirical Findings..... | 42 |
| Overview..... | 42 |
| Performing Emphasized Femininity | 44 |
| Who is “America’s Sweetheart”? | 44 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is Beautiful | 46 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is Thin | 49 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is Sexually Objectified..... | 56 |
| Performing “America’s Sweetheart” | 58 |
| Performing Ambassadorship..... | 59 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is Emotional | 59 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is “Intelligent” | 67 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is Poised and Obedient..... | 72 |
| Performing “Empowerment” | 74 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is “Empowered” | 74 |
| “America’s Sweetheart” is Disempowered..... | 77 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| “America’s Sweetheart” is Faux-Empowered | 83 |
| Chapter 6: Discussion | 87 |
| Performances of Femininity..... | 87 |
| Intersectionality..... | 91 |
| Shame and Empowerment | 95 |
| Chapter 7: Conclusion | 99 |
| Summary | 99 |
| Limitations and Future Directions | 100 |
| Bibliography..... | 102 |

List of Abbreviations

- I. Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader (DCC)
- II. *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team* (DCCs: MTT)
- III. Television (TV)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Not everyone has what it takes to be one of “America’s Sweethearts.” Earning the title of Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader (DCC), bearing the Smithsonian archived uniform, and professionally cheering for “America’s Team” requires a gruesome audition process. Starting in 2006, auditions and post-audition training camp have been filmed for public consumption, airing as *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team (DCC: MTT)*, a hit Country Music Television (CMT) reality television (TV) show (Schrielberg et al., 2006). Each year, hundreds of women venture to AT&T Stadium in the hopes of cheering for the Dallas Cowboys in the coming season. A panel of judges, ranging from the Cheerleaders’ Director, Kelli McGonagill Finglass, and squad choreographer, Judy Trammel, both of whom are retired DCCs, alongside Dallas Cowboys’ executive personnel, technical dance instructors, professional dancers and choreographers, trainers, stylists, photographers, and oftentimes guest judges, rate them according to dance technique, enthusiasm, poise, showmanship, personal appearance, figure, personality, energy, high kicks, and splits (FAQ, n.d.). The judging panel scrutinizes and carefully deliberates over each candidate, narrowing the initial pool of 600-700 to roughly 60 dancers over the course of two days. Those who qualify for the final round are invited back to compete against returning DCC veterans, performing self-prepared solo dances and DCC choreography. They also undergo a panel interview where judges assess personality, Dallas Cowboys’ knowledge, football comprehension, and political intelligence. About 45 dancers are then invited into the “grueling” (Schrielberg et al., 2006, ep. 1) training camp process.

Throughout training camp, dancers endure a strict 10-week training protocol, dancing for five hours a day, attending anywhere from two to five mandatory sessions each week, learning

upwards of 50 dances, with the additional expectation that candidates practice on their own outside of mandatory sessions and attend technical dance training sessions. Candidates are also ruthlessly assessed for bodily composition, heavily monitored if their body does not live up to the DCC standard, undergo army-inspired workouts, and are given a full-body makeover in order to align their appearance and physique with the “DCC look.” Outside of the studio, dancers are mandated to attend etiquette training and teased with the idea of officially becoming a DCC if they make it far enough into training camp to be fitted for a uniform and take cameo photographs. Some candidates are pushed far enough outside of their comfort zones to skydive (Schrielberg et al., 2007, ep. 7) or fall 16 stories from a mid-air suspension into two nets (Schrielberg, et al., 2009, ep. 5). Despite dancing for “the premier cheerleading squad in the world” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1), cheerleader compensation does not match the prestigious title, resulting in many cheerleaders working a full-time job on top of cheering. If the training candidates, both veteran and rookie candidates alike, cannot keep up, they can say goodbye to their chances of “*making the team.*”

Being “the premier cheerleading squad in the world” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1), the DCCs have and continue to set the foundation for professional cheerleading squads among sporting leagues across the globe. The first DCC team took the field during the 1972-1973 football season, after Cowboys’ general manager, Tex Schramm, came to view professional football as more entertainment than sport. Cognizant that professional football fans and spectators were likely to also be fans of Barbie-esque women salaciously dancing in cropped fringe vests and shorts the size of underwear, the DCCs were born and debuted “an innovative and exciting new form of gameday action” (DCC History, 2018). After capturing the hearts and gaze of crowds both in the stadium and watching through their TVs during a performance at

Super Bowl X in January of 1976, the squad then began appearing on TV network specials, commercial features, experiencing movie stardom, participating in TV game shows, appearing on late night TV talk shows, and performing on stage with popular country music stars. While nationally recognized, the Cheerleaders have also received international recognition, prompting tours in China, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and Peru. The squad's impact on popular culture is universally prevalent, with high rated, self-titled movies, themed Mattel Barbie dolls, a pair of DCC uniforms archived in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, and a hit TV series now in its 16th season (DCC History, 2018). Fostering extreme standards of the "ideal" cheerleader and relentlessly sexualizing young women, the DCCs may be an icon of popular culture, but their values as an institution, particularly their commitment to "empowering women" or providing a safe environment to grow, are questionable (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1).

Despite being "the premier cheerleading squad in the word" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1), the DCCs hardly resemble the historical legacy of cheerleading. Cheerleading was initially a sideline staple exclusive to males in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, intended to increase entertainment value in American football at the collegiate level (Hanson, 1995). Originally perceived as a hegemonically masculine activity that required athleticism and leadership from its participants, cheerleading was not welcome to females until the late 1920s. By the 1940s, however, those who cheered for American high schools and colleges were predominantly female, prompted by the absence of young men during World War II (Hanson, 1995). As young men returned from the war, they reclaimed their positions on their squads, but a cultural transformation occurred throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Hanson (1995) and Adams and Bettis (2003) note that this transformation, or rather feminization, was confirmed by the high

prevalence of girls participating in cheerleading and the ideologies then associated with cheerleading. In the decades following WWII, the act of cheerleading was articulated with polite manners, cheerfulness, and sweet disposition. Additionally, uniforms became more revealing, accessories such as pom-poms and bright smiles were incorporated, and performances adopted movements and gestures such as dainty chants and cartwheels, all of which were, and still are, considered to be feminine qualities (Adams & Bettis, 2003). As ideal femininity was questioned with the development of Title IX in 1972, cheerleading institutions embraced the changing attitudes toward female athleticism, emphasizing acrobatics that required agility and strength. These attitudes were further reflected through the introduction of competitive cheerleading in 1981, which proliferated throughout the 1990s, partaken by males and females alike (Adams & Bettis, 2003). Despite these discursive practices that changed the shape of cheerleading, however, emphasized femininity – or the subordination to masculinity – remained in its core (Connell, 1987).

The essence of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987) is on display in professional cheerleading: the act of “cheering,” the unforgiving uniforms, and the sidelined position of the cheerleaders. Moreover, issues of sexism, gender hegemony, and gender performativity are captured in the contrast between the large, strong, and aggressive professional male athletes who take action on the field and the supportive, youthful, perfectly slender, and breathtakingly beautiful female cheerleaders who keep to the sidelines (Connell, 1987; Roth, 2004; Butler, 1988; Caudwell, 2008). Per the “progressive” NFL eligibility requirements, players are not discriminated by gender, as of 2012 that is; however, no females have taken the field. Likewise, NFL cheerleading teams, according to their eligibility requirements, do not discriminate against gender, which eventually led two males to cheer professionally for the Los Angeles Rams

(Garcia-Navarro, 2019), but this is both a rare and recent example. As tradition would have it, tossing the pigskin is reserved for men while shaking pom-poms is a coveted position for women. This gendered construction is not unique to the professional level; it is present at the youth, high school, and collegiate levels as well, with very few exceptions, and embodies conventional and performative gender regimes. As noted by Adams & Bettis (2003), cheerleading is “an activity that remains firmly entrenched in feminine discourse,” where girls, “do not have to veil their masculinity nor worry, like other athletes, about being stigmatized as too masculine or as lesbians,” despite the ‘male’ origins of cheerleading (Adams & Bettis, 2003, pp. 12).

Gender performativity and hegemony, in the case of professional, competitive, or recreational cheerleading, and particularly the DCCs, is evidently an issue associated with the gendered roles designated to cheerleaders and athletes alike, but is further problematized through the normalized cheerleading uniform. In the case of the DCCs, the legendary, iconic, and revealing uniform does not “leave much to the imagination” (Schrielberg et al., 2006, ep. 3). In fact, not having the “right” appearance for the DCC uniform is reason enough, according to Kelli (DCC Director), to release a candidate from training camp, even if their dance abilities are up to par. The skimpy uniform is not unique to the DCCs; all NFL cheerleading squads, and majority of cheerleading squads at all levels, adorn tight, revealing uniforms that cover almost the same amount of skin a swimsuit would. It has long been discussed that females in sport are continually sexualized and objectified (Frisby, 2017), but the DCCs embrace that sexualization and objectification through their uniform, in addition to sexualized dance choreography and sidelined position on the football field, willingly contributing to the articulation between emphasized femininity and cheerleading.

Thesis Focus and Research Questions

DCCs: MTT offers an in-depth lens into the DCCs, far beyond performances on the field. Dallas Cowboys and DCCs fans, reality TV fiends, and cheerleading and dancing aficionados are given an insider look into the lives of potential DCCs, what it takes to earn a place on the “often imitated, never equaled” squad, as well as institutional and league values. On screen since 2006, *DCCs:MTT* is CMT’s longest running and most popular non-music series, showcasing the three-day audition and seven-week training camp, including but not limited to: rookie candidate makeovers; uniform fittings; army influenced conditioning workouts; on-field practices; etiquette training; the veteran swimsuit calendar photoshoot; auditions for the DCCs traveling “Show Group;” rehearsals with former DCCs and dance industry legends; and cuts made to candidates along the way. However, despite this long list of arguably sexist and misogynistic hoops that candidates must high-kick their way through, in the opening of the series’ thirteenth season, Kelli declares: “It’s more than just about performing. It’s making lifelong friends, empowering women, and growing in a safe environment” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Taking as its departure point the sexist history of the DCCs as an institution alongside (and in contrast to) the DCCs Director’s statement about empowering women, this study examines constructions of femininity and empowerment on offer in *DCCs: MTT*. A textual analysis adopted from Johnson et al.’s (2004) reading for dominance methodology, with a theoretical foundation in feminist discourse analysis and intersectionality, is used to examine season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, in order to answer the following questions:

1. What versions of femininity are on offer to viewers of Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team? How do they intersect with race, sexuality, class, ability, etc.?

2. How is empowerment constructed through *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team*?

Significance

Though a site of physical culture – and despite its masculine roots – cheerleading holds a precarious and marginalized position as the “feminine auxiliary to sport” (Grinstaff & West, 2006, pp. 500). Cheerleading, including scholastic, competitive, and professional levels, has received some critical attention (primarily among scholars of gender and cultural studies) regarding its history, sporting gender standards, sporting legitimacy, and sexualization (Hanson, 1995; Adams & Bettis, 2003; Grinstaff & West, 2006; Bettis & Adams, 2006; Tom, 2010). However, professional cheerleading has earned only a fraction of the attention, despite the professional site being emblematic of popular culture and a spectacle of late-capitalist, uber-sport, indicative of elite and/or professional physically competitive phenomena that are characterized by processes of corporatization, commercialization, spectacularization, and celebrityization (Andrews, 2019). Existing academic literature as it regards professional cheerleading is merely a summary of the number of wage theft, unsafe work conditions, sexual harassment, and discrimination lawsuits charged by former cheerleaders to their respective teams and leagues. Thus, this study serves to fill the gap that has previously ignored professional cheerleading’s position and status within late-capitalist, uber sport, investigating presentations of femininity and empowerment, as associated with professional cheerleading, in the reality TV site. The DCCs, regardless of their title as “the premier cheerleading squad in the world” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1), are only passively addressed in the broader cheerleading literature; furthermore, *DCCs: MTT* has yet to receive any critical attention. An investigation of

professional cheerleading as it is institutionally represented through reality TV, and informed by critical insights from feminist discourse analysis, will therefore contribute to the discussion of professional cheerleading, with particular concern to constructions of femininity and empowerment.

Although reality TV is a relatively contemporary genre of TV programming, critics declare that its power has remade television culture, in that it has single handedly altered programming schedules, branded satellite and digital channels, and invented yet another network of celebrities (Ouellette & Murray, 2004). Existing reality TV literature addresses the range of social issues saturated throughout the genre, namely, sexism, racism, weight shaming, classism, and homophobia (Press, 2011; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Marwick, 2010; Waggoner, 2004; Deery, 2004; Silk et al., 2009; Bell-Jordan, 2008). However, these issues are typically addressed in a singular manner; that is, no intersection(s) of social issues (i.e. sexism and racism or sexism and classism) are discussed. This study serves to inform how femininity is constructed and on offer to viewers, without ignoring how particular version(s) of femininity intersect with other identities. Additionally, this study contributes to the discussion of reality TV as it reflects general neoliberal principles, as well as that of neoliberal feminism: regulating behavior, competitive individualism, and faux-empowerment (Silk & Andrews, 2012; Rottenberg, 2014).

While this study highlights a number of social issues present within the spectacle of professional cheerleading as depicted via the site of reality TV, the goal of this study is not to attack the DCCs institution as a whole, but to suggest ways in which professional cheerleading could be used to express “a commitment to progressive social change” (Miller, 2001, pp. 1). By adopting a reading for dominance methodology, this study serves to explore how the legacy of

subordination to patriarchal modes of power exist and are reproduced within the institution of professional cheerleading. Thus, this study contributes to the Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) project, while also expanding the discussion of professional cheerleading, the commodified dance body, and the growing body of mediated physical culture.

Finally, this project posits a methodological contribution, by adopting the reflexive analytical process of the confessional tale. Johnson et al.'s (2004) reading for dominance methodology centralizes the researcher's position in relation to the text, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and partiality that results in a particular reading of the text (Markula & Silk, 2011). I reflexively approach the empirical chapter by writing in the confessional tale style, providing personal confessional asides that arose during the reading and writing process, which are then paired with transcribed narrative segments of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* relevant to the research questions. Confessional tales are used predominantly in qualitative research, serving to benefit both the researcher and reader alike; offering the researcher a platform to reflect on their influence of and by the research and the reader an opportunity to understand more about the research process and insight to how the researcher came to their conclusions (Hopper et al., 2008). Writing in the confessional tale style, I offer a unique perspective in reading season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, as a former high-level gymnast, subject to and therefore sensitive to similar discourses displayed, and an intersectional feminist, critical of enforced performativities and subjectivities on offer.

Outline for Remainder of Thesis

The remainder of this manuscript is divided into six chapters; literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, empirical findings, discussion, and conclusion,

respectively. Chapter Two provides a literature review, discussing existing literature on the history and objectifying nature of cheerleading, the commodified dance body, and reality TV. Chapter Three follows with the theoretical foundations grounding the analysis, sharing insights from feminist discourse theory, neoliberal feminism, and intersectionality. Chapter Four outlines the reading for dominance methodology and confessional tale style, the methodological approaches used to analyze season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*. Chapter Five is composed of the empirical findings, divided into three sections: Performing Emphasized Femininity, Performing Ambassadorship, and Performing “Empowerment.” Chapter Six further discusses the empirical findings, with particular focus to the version(s) of femininity on offer to viewers, the homogenous positioning of “America’s Sweetheart,” and the construction of empowerment. Chapter Seven closes with a summary of the thesis and discussion of limitations and future directions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

From Cheer Leader to Cheerleader

According to Hanson (1995), cheerleading was originally a sideline staple exclusive to males in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with its roots stemming from “the elite confines” of collegiate life (pp. 9). The few who attended college in the late 1800s, White males of British descent, developed recreational sporting activities to reclaim their independence. Collegiate athletics quickly grew in popularity, with spectators of fellow male students attending to promote institutional identity and loyalty. Students in attendance would cheer intermittently and casually, but early cheer “leaders” were noted to get in front of the crowd and motivate their fellow students to yell. Cheering followed suit with the increasing structure of athletic competition, with cheers becoming more organized and universities formally assigning “cheer leaders,” also known as “rooter kings,” “yell leaders,” “yell kings,” “yell masters,” and “yell marshals” (Hanson, 1995). By the early 1900s, cheer leaders were respected to the same degree as football quarterbacks, serving as a symbol of leadership that was associated with professional success in their postgraduate careers, according to Hanson (1995).

It was not until the 1920s that female cheerleaders joined the scene, around the time in which female display became a phenomenon in entertainment (Hanson, 1995). Mimicking collegiate athletics, sporting competitions in American high schools were paired with cheering sections led by a male cheer leader. Like the collegiate level, the high school cheer leader position was highly coveted and respected. During the 1940s, however, collegiate cheering endured the leave of young men due to World War II, prompting more cheering opportunities for women. When men returned from the war, they reclaimed their positions on their squads, but

cheerleading, both collegiate and scholastic, started to undergo a gradual feminization, during which cheerleading dispersed through junior high and elementary schools (Hanson, 1995). Though cheerleading at the collegiate level remained primarily coed, at elementary and secondary level schools, athletic programs favored boys as participants, while girls were to support the boys in their respective sports as cheerleaders, solidifying cheer's reputable feminine culture. Cheerleading then became associated with polite manners, cheerfulness, and sweet disposition, while uniforms became more revealing, accessories like pom-poms and bright smiles were incorporated, and performances adopted movements and gestures such as dainty chants and cartwheels (Adams & Bettis, 2003).

Professional football teams did not utilize cheerleading as a "supportive" and/or promotional tool until the 1950s (Hanson, 1995). High school cheerleaders volunteered for the Baltimore Colts and Washington Redskins between the 1950s and 1960s, marching alongside band members and performing pom-pom routines. The development of the National Football League (NFL) in 1960 provided more cheerleading opportunities – but still only for high school or college cheerleaders – to cheer on squads like the UCLA Song Girls, Kilgore College Rangerettes, and Tyler Junior College Apache Belles; however, these squads were modeled after dance and drill teams more than their traditional cheering counterparts. Finding their place in TV, professional football teams immediately recognized the broadcast exposure gained solely from their drill groups' performances. Young women were then hired for 21 of the 26 teams in the NFL by 1973, for promotional and public relations purposes. For example, the San Francisco 49ers created a prototypical professional cheerleading squad in 1970, the "Nuggets," whose sole purpose was as an ambassador in order to "sell the San Francisco 49ers" and "look sexy," and did not engage in any sort of performance until 1974 (Hanson, 1995, pp. 51). Though the DCCs

sprung onto the scene in 1972, they were not imitated until 1976, after capturing a national audience on TV during Super Bowl X. “Go-go dancers on the sidelines” then became an NFL phenomenon, with NFL cheerleading squads replacing their high school cheerleaders with “slightly older, sexier and scantily-dressed women,” as seen today (Hanson, 1995, pp. 43).

By the start of the twenty-first century, cheerleading was reported to have 3.8 million, predominantly female, participants at the scholastic, collegiate, and professional levels, both competitively and leisurely, in the United States alone (Bettis & Adams, 2006). That being said, cheerleaders struggle to earn respect as athletes from their fellow athletic peers and the American culture at large. Traditional, organized achievement sport (Eichberg, 1998) provides an avenue for male-identifying individuals to exercise hegemonically masculine qualities; power, strength, aggressiveness, and authority (Connell, 1995). Cheerleading, however, does not fit the mold of traditional achievement sport, as it encourages its participants to exercise features of emphasized femininity, such as beauty, thinness, and subjecting oneself to the male gaze (Connell, 1987). In a league of its own, cheerleading is not appointed a sport by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and half of American high schools (Grindstaff & West, 2006; Johnson & Sailors, 2013; DeBenedette, 2016), but the sport label is not necessarily what cheerleaders, coaches, and industry representatives seek, according to fieldwork conducted by Grindstaff and West (2006). Rather, what cheerleaders desire is the respect associated with the high status of sports, and not a model whereby cheerleading, the “feminine auxiliary to sport,” is seen as second class (Grinstaff & West, 2006, pp. 500). In fact, many cheerleaders and industry personnel support the decree not to classify cheerleading as a sport, fearing that the sporting classification may eliminate the non-competitive element of cheerleading altogether. Thus, what

cheerleaders and their allies desire is respect and legitimacy from their individual schools, organizations and the culture at large (Grindstaff & West, 2006).

Since “female-led cheerleading [has] bec[o]me a fixture of American sports” (Ryan, 2005, pp. 85), cheerleading is thus rooted in American nationalism and welcoming of such critiques. The American sporting “holy trinity” is made up of football, basketball, and baseball, where mere association with these three sports serves as a vehicle for expressing American identity and constituting *communitas*, or sense of belonging to the nation (Hobsbawm, 1983). Though football is synonymous with American national identity (King, 2008), arguably just as patriotic as football, is a group of young, attractive women provocatively dancing on a football field’s sidelines in excessively padded bras, underwear-sized shorts, and cowgirl boots for the male gaze. The DCCs are self-proclaimed “American icon[s],” (DCC, 2018), so much so, that the National Museum of American History’s sports collection now features two DCC uniforms, including boots and pom-poms, three DCC dressed Barbie dolls, and an NFL-licensed Abbey Bear (National, 2018). Bearing stars on their sparkling white and royal blue uniforms, the DCCs routinely perform excessive American pride. After all, their nickname, “America’s Sweethearts,” insinuates that they are national representatives, embodying the ideal American woman caricature. “America’s Sweethearts,” even if they were to exist in isolation from the Dallas Cowboys and/or NFL, perform nationalism in many ways, such as their American flag resembling uniforms and performances on United Service Organization (USO) tours. Because of the DCCs affiliation with an exceptionally nationalist institution like the NFL, in addition to the only team within the league nicknamed “America’s Team,” though, they are further rooted in American nationalism (McMillen & McMillen, 2011).

Be Objectified! B-E Objectified! B-E O-B-J-E-C-T-I-F-I-E-D!

The validation of cheerleading has certainly been promoted in recent years, but, arguably, this physical cultural practice continues to be discredited because of its provocative nature.

Kurman (1986) identifies the fantasied, fictitious, and corporeal cheerleader as a “disturbing erotic icon” (pp. 58). Cheerleading’s “all-star” transformation in the 1990s shifted away from what Kurman (1986) describes as the “male-voyeuristic fantasy” (pp. 58), to a more competitive, athletic, and respected sport (Grindstaff & West, 2006). However, several squads, predominantly at the professional level, continue to willingly uphold and accentuate the embedded sexual and erotic pressures (Bettis & Adams, 2006). First to highlight cheerleading’s sexual component was none other than the DCCs, providing professional football with an additional element of entertainment similar to “Las Vegas showgirls” (Bettis & Adams, 2006, pp. 123). Three former DCCs reflect on their paradoxing experience, embodying both “the sexy, wholesome girl, [and] the girl you’d like to take home to mother but make love to on the way over there” (Scholz et al., 1991, pp. 143). Nevertheless, many cheerleaders find agency in the inherent sexualized subjectivity of cheering, endorsing Lorde’s (1984) call to use the erotic as power.

Cheerleading, especially for school-aged girls, provides an avenue to break modest dress codes and behavioral expectations, which was appealing for many of the cheerleaders interviewed by Adams and Bettis (2003); for example, one cheerleader admitted that she was “in it for the short skirts, the guys, [and] getting in front of everybody” (pp. 86). Furthermore, the undivided attention granted to cheerleaders provides them with an overwhelming sense of confidence, power, and pleasure, influencing crowds and players, contrary to the subjective codes of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987). This begs the question: If cheerleaders are willing to subject themselves to such an objectified activity and gain confidence and agency

while doing so, why are they consistently degraded by greater society? If attention is turned toward both historical and contemporary archives of cheerleaders and cheerleading as an institution, the contradiction between cheerleader agency and societal objectivity is articulated (Cvetkovich, 2003; Mills, 2004).

Recreational, competitive, and professional cheerleading – as portrayed on and off the field or competition floor – is arguably one of the most highly commodified, mass mediated, and sexually fetishized spectacles in physical culture. Tom (2010) analyzes the cheerleader as a character in pornography, pop culture, and the media alike, claiming “this rhetoric commonly frames cheerleaders as any combination of frivolous, talentless, inane, vain, trashy, promiscuous, exhibitionist, overly commodified agents of Americanisation and disruptive to key feminist, sporting and religious ideals” (pp. 53). Common examples that illustrate this rhetoric is Reed’s (2000) *Bring It On* franchise, *Debbie Does Dallas* (Buckley, 1978; Jane, 2017), appearances in *Playboy* (Hanson, 1995, pp. 54), and the highly sought-after professional sport teams’ cheerleader swimsuit calendars (Hosty, 2020; McGee, 2016; Alexander & Grow, 2015). Though cheerleaders may not self-identify as or associate with the traditional, archived cheerleader, popular culture’s reproduction of the cheerleader through hegemonic discursive practices has resulted in cheerleaders being judged as egocentric, unchaste, and superficial.

Further reflecting the marginalized position of cheerleading is the discrimination experienced at the professional level. Despite grossing over one million dollars annually for their respective teams (Forbes, 2003), professional cheerleaders have been subject to severe discrimination, significant wage disparities, and restrictive contracts, resulting in numerous complaints filed under the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and in violation of state minimum wage laws and the Fair Labor Standards Act (Eichhorn, 2020; McGee, 2016). Ten of

the 26 National Football League (NFL) teams with cheerleading squads, Dallas Cowboys included, have been sued by former cheerleaders for wage theft, unsafe work conditions, sexual harassment, and discrimination (McGee, 2016; Gu 2021). Summarizing their grievances as it regards compensation, professional cheerleaders have compared their employment to that of a fast-food restaurant employee. A handful of the teams sued by former cheerleaders for wage theft have since settled and agreed to compensate their former cheerleaders for back pay, while marginally increasing cheerleader wages, and others have discretely increased their cheerleader wages (McGee, 2016).

The Commodified Cheer (Dance) Body

Dance skill and technicality are central to cheerleading, so much so that cheerleading and dancing are sometimes used interchangeably, at the professional level (Hanson, 1995). Dance, as seen on *Dance Moms* and other reality TV programs such as *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, has been the subject of critical analysis by dance, pedagogy, gender studies, media studies, and PCS scholars. Markula (2018) articulates dance's coattail position in relation to sport (similar to cheerleading) and how such a position increases the dance industry's status in the corporate world. The competitive dance circuit, paired with televised dance shows and the ability to share films of performances during competitions and rehearsals on social media, has created the consumer dance body, commercially viable for the television (TV), film, music, and theater industries (Harrington, 2020). Commercial dance constructs the dancing body as a young, heteronormative, and gendered product, to be purchased and consumed as entertainment (Schupp, 2019). Competitive dance and commercial dance are not mutually exclusive; the two have a symbiotic relationship as made apparent through Western dance forms

practiced, appropriation of other cultural forms with little to no awareness, gender performativity, music complementation, judging and choreography personnel, performance venues, and product selling models (Schupp, 2019). The financial gain of competitive dance, and thus commercial dance, has influenced dance pedagogy, privileging the neoliberal principle of competitive individualism (Foster, 2017).

Whether dance is performed competitively or not, competition is fostered among dancers through the approach of authoritarian teaching behaviors, where instructors encourage dancers to compete against themselves as well as against other dancers in the same room or company. Lakes (2005) outlines the authoritarian techniques utilized and appropriated by dance instructors: insistent repetition without applying new corrections; various forms of bullying; disrespectful sarcasm; demeaning dancers if they ask a question; infantilization; shaming dancers for their body weight or type; the “silent treatment,” ignoring dancers; storming out of the room in frustration; and exercising physical aggression. These pedagogical practices abuse the asymmetrical power relationship between instructor and dancer, ensuring obedience and silence among dancers, and are consistently justified solely due to their “effectiveness” (Risner, 2008; Stinson, 2005; Lakes, 2005).

Scholars argue that shame is a critical method employed in dance pedagogy, used to ensure mistake-free, technically precise performances (Lakes, 2005; Cardinal, 2013). As seen on *Dance Moms*, shame, exerted through verbal, emotional, and sometimes physical aggression, can encourage dancers to rise to the occasion or crack under the pressure, in which they are vulnerable to facing more shame (Collins et al., 2011). Shame, a negative primary affect according to Sedgwick et al. (1995), is an auxiliary response to the repression of the two positive primary affects, interest and enjoyment (Tomkins, 1963). In other words, “shame is the affect of

indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation” (Tomkins, 1963, pp. 118), marked by a lack of worth or sense of humiliation and embarrassment. Though a negative affect, shame illustrates the subject’s love and commitment to the “ideal.” Moreover, the fear of experiencing shame can serve as a motivator, in order to prevent the subject from failing to meet or betraying the “ideal” (Ahmed, 2004).

The infliction of shame is a universal, neoliberal narrative on reality programs of all subgenres (Palmer, 2006; Silk et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2010; Hirdman, 2015; Barton & Davis, 2018; Lee, 2020), with the intention of shaming the actions, behaviors, and lifestyles of the individuals on these programs. By doing so, shame is also instilled in audience members if they encourage or participate in the same “shameful” actions, behaviors, and lifestyles portrayed on these programs. According to Skeggs and Wood (2012), the precipitated shame produced on reality programs is far superior to stylistic components (i.e. music, camera angles, narration, etc.), probing past, present, and future behaviors as well as encouraging individuals to engage in ethical discourse.

The Reality of Reality TV

Reality TV is just one of many avenues that displays the commodified dance body for consumption, and the dance body is just one of the many commodified bodies up for consumption. Reality TV observes “real” people doing “real” activities, which, in turn, highlights and often exacerbates a range of social issues, including but not limited to sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and fatphobia in addition to the abuse of power. Indeed, scholars (Press, 2011; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Marwick, 2010) have argued that female-centric shows such as *America’s Next Top Model*, and *The Swan*, among a host of others,

reproduce social themes of emphasized femininity, female objectification and subordination (Connell, 1987), and heteronormativity (Warner, 1991). Moreover, supposedly gender-neutral shows such as *Survivor*, *Extreme Makeover*, and *The Biggest Loser* also reproduce these ideas (Waggoner, 2004; Deery, 2004; Silk et al., 2009). In *America's Next Top Model*, what could be considered both a competition and professional advancement reality show, a host of “average” girls compete on a weekly basis for the best photo in a series of themed photoshoot challenges, judged by a panel of high-profile photographers, models, and series host and former supermodel, Tyra Banks (Press, 2011). While *America's Next Top Model* may abide by third-wave feminism diversity standards, it voluntarily disregards second-wave feminism’s commitment to eradicate female objectification. As Press (2011) states, the show “in effect teach[es] objectification as a ‘science’ to be learned” (pp. 122). *The Swan* takes this idea further by transforming “ugly ducklings,” most of whom are working-class women, into “beautiful swans,” with a team of plastic surgeons, dentists, therapists, fitness experts, and life coaches (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Marwick, 2010). The show’s intense focus on the material form of women’s bodies results in the production of an over exaggerated, unflattering pre-makeover figure, which is then revolutionized, through liposuction, dental veneers, tummy tucks, and breast augmentation, into the idealized version of the “perfect” woman (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Marwick, 2010).

As previously noted, reality programs whose intent is to promote competitive survival instincts, overall well-being, or health, regardless of gender, are not exempt from similar sexist critiques. For example, females’ success in *Survivor* is ultimately linked to their ability to commodify their bodies according to their male tribe-mates (Waggoner, 2004). On *Extreme Makeover*, females are persuaded to emulate media images and eventually transformed into an

object to be perceived by the heterosexual male gaze (Deery, 2004). *The Biggest Loser* reproduces both hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity; both male and female contestants are told to “workout like a man,” males are feminized if they cry in response to trainers judgment, and females are encouraged to reconcile with narrow conceptions of female attractiveness (Silk et al., 2009).

Not only does reality TV convey and favor strict gender binaries, it is also critiqued for being yet another media platform that exposes individuals to the “thin-ideal,” shaming those who do not possess the will to live a thin, “healthy” life. Karsay and Schmuck (2019) conducted a study exposing adolescents to weight loss reality TV, discovering that weight loss reality TV shows reproduce the neoliberal idea that weight is a matter of personal responsibility, resulting in viewers adopting a negative attitude toward obese individuals. Karsay and Schmuck’s (2019) results support Domoff et al.’s (2012) findings: individuals exposed to *The Biggest Loser* were more likely to dislike those who are overweight and believe that weight control is an individual matter of skill and will. Weight loss reality TV shows evidently instill negative stereotypes of overweight individuals through the shows’ inherent stigmatization of weight, and it can be assumed that this is not exclusive to weight loss shows.

Although existing literature relating weight bias and reality TV are primarily focused on weight loss reality programs, additional studies assessing this concept have been conducted on self-improvement reality TV shows as well as popular sitcoms. Interviewees from a study conducted by Sender and Sullivan (2008) revealed that they viewed obese individuals on *What Not To Wear* as having a lack of self-esteem, so significant that it prevents them from thriving professionally and socially. Bissell and Zhou (2004) analyzed the degree to which college women were exposed to thin-ideal TV programs, such as *Friends*, *Dawson’s Creek*, and *Will &*

Grace, and their potential for disordered eating, reporting that those who watched thin-ideal programs placed high on eating-disorder subscales. It can therefore be inferred that exposure to thin-ideal TV shows, whether a reality program or not, capitalizes off of the stigmatization of overweight bodies and instills a similar attitude in its viewers.

Racism is also prevalent on reality TV, as is sexism and weight stigma. Reality TV frames the construct of race as a textual device, as noted by Bell-Jordan (2008), in order to “position race as a point of contention among the casts and dramatize scenarios that reinforce racial stereotypes and myths” (pp. 353). Through an extensive critique of *Black.White.*, *Survivor: Cook Islands*, and *The Real World: Denver*, Bell-Jordan (2008) provides a narrative challenging the ways that racial issues are thought and how the meanings of race can be negotiated through five avenues of how race is traditionally mediated in media: dramatizing race and racial issues by juxtaposing conflicting perspectives, promoting inter- and intraracial conflict, perpetuating hegemonic racial representations of violence and anger, personalizing racism by applying individual problem solutions to complex social issues, and by avoiding conflict resolution. Additionally, through an analysis of 10 common reality programs, including *The Apprentice*, *Paradise Hotel*, *College Hill*, and others, Tyree (2011) found that each show analyzed included one stereotyped African American individual as well as the majority of African American individuals aligning with a stereotyped trait. Tyree (2011) concludes that reality TV underpins derogatory African American stereotypes. Following Tyree’s (2011) analysis, Glascock and Preston-Schrek (2018) examined 42 reality TV shows for their exposure of verbal aggression. African Americans disproportionately displayed verbal aggression, while Asian Americans and Hispanics were notably underrepresented and Native Americans were not represented at all

(Glascock & Preston-Schrek, 2018). Both analyses discussed correlate with Bell-Jordan's (2008) initial claim in which reality TV voluntarily reinforces racial stereotypes.

As discussed, reality TV is not exempt from sexism, fatphobia, or racism, nor the aggression and/or harassment associated with these social issues. Similar to the normalization of gender, weight, and racial stigmatization in reality programming, physical and verbal aggression is also normalized. Scharrer and Blackburn's (2018) investigated the articulation between exposure to docusoap reality programs, those that present common, day-to-day experiences of work, family, and relationships, and attitudes toward aggression. Using a cross-sectional survey study, Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) found that exposure to docusoap reality TV shows is significantly correlated to approving female-perpetrated verbal aggression and negatively associated with approving male-perpetrated physical aggression. Likewise, Glascock and Preston-Schrek's (2018) analysis of verbal aggression on reality TV resulted in most acts of verbal aggression being justified. Both of these studies build upon Liebler et al.'s (2016) study of domestic violence as entertainment. Through an analysis of focus group questionnaires and discussion following exposure to *Jersey Shore*, *Teen Mom*, and *The Real World*, participants concluded that: verbal aggression is less problematic than physical aggression; male participants considered aggression more acceptable than females; all participants rated minimal domestic violence as acceptable; and some participants were more inclined to blame victims. These findings are not only reflective of the normalization of aggression and harassment in greater society, but also contribute to this issue. By filming and producing behaviors such as yelling or hitting, in order to create a more "entertaining" show, reality TV reproduces the idea that aggression is acceptable and should be tolerated.

In addition to addressing aggression on adult-casted reality programs, scholars have also discussed aggression as a prevalent issue on youth-casted programs, such as *Dance Moms* (Collins et al., 2011). *Dance Moms*, a series showcasing “Mothers [who] urge their daughters to perform in the world of competitive dance” (Lifetime, n.d.), is deemed “unconscionable” by Cardinal (2013). In a category of its own, the behavior of the dance teacher, Abby Lee Miller, the founder of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania’s Abby Lee Dance Company and infamous dance instructor, as well as some of the dancers’ mothers displayed on the show is malevolent, callous, and outright egregious. The stars of the famed reality program are typically seven to twelve year old dancers who experience relentless criticism from “Miss Abby,” often in the form of emotional abuse and verbal aggression, being yelled at, called names, given negative feedback in the form of thunderous screams, to the point where the dancers are brought to tears, in which they are yelled at more, and ranked in “pyramid” fashion on a weekly basis, publicly shamed and degraded based on Miller’s judgment of their most recent competition performance (Cardinal, 2013). Furthermore, the dancers undergo physical abuse, dancing for an excessive amount of time on a daily basis in order to prepare for weekly competitions, performing movements and tricks that are beyond the skill level for dancers their age, and occasionally dancing while injured, despite warnings from medical professionals (Collins et al., 2011). The aggression on the show does not stop there, however. On the most eventful episodes, arguments between mothers or between mother(s) and Miller will sometimes escalate to screaming matches and may or may not follow with a physical altercation (Collins et al., 2014). According to Cardinal (2013), worse than everything previously stated is the decision of the dancers’ parents to continually expose their children to such an abusive environment, while repeatedly expressing their disapproval for Miller’s behavior.

Although *Dance Moms* has been heavily criticized by fans for its likelihood of being scripted to dramatize the show, the abusive nature in the dance studio is not unique to what is portrayed in the program. As noted by Lakes (2005), abusive dance pedagogy is how “the concert dance world survives” (pp. 3), so as to respect dance world elders. Authoritarian dance pedagogy, most of which contemporary dance pedagogy is adopted, instills shame, fear, anxiety, and sometimes injury among dancers. If dancers are unable to cope with the environment, then they are unlikely to succeed (Lakes, 2005).

Summary and Gaps

Cheerleading, as it is recognized today, is far from its hegemonically masculine roots, though its supportive, spirited core remains (Hanson, 1995; Grindstaff & West, 2010). The influx of all-star cheerleading has resisted the objectifying nature of the sport, but the professional level thrives on and accentuates its erotic nature, commodifying the professional cheer body (Bettis & Adams, 2006). The commercially viable dance (cheer) body has been taken up and reproduced in the media, working to construct the dancing body as a young, heteronormative, and gendered product, while also shaming dancers for not living up to the ideal (Markula, 2018; Lakes, 2005). Reality TV is just one mediated avenue which commodifies the dance body, in addition to framing cast members along, and offering viewers, sexist, thin-ideal, and racist narratives (Press, 2011; Silk et al., 2009; Bell-Jordan, 2008). The current literature, however, discusses professional cheerleading at the aggregate level, overlooking its status in American popular culture. Furthermore, “America’s Sweethearts,” along with their “hit” reality TV show, are seldom addressed. This thesis seeks to fill the gap that has previously disregarded professional

cheerleading, analyzing it through the reality TV site, contributing to the discussion of reproductions of emphasized femininity and constructions of empowerment.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Overview

This study is informed by feminist discourse theory, with a primary focus on confessional discourse as well as the discourse of neoliberal feminism, within which the concept of faux-empowerment will be addressed. A feminist discourse theoretical framework will provide an understanding of how the cheerleader, specifically the professional cheerleader, is constructed through various discursive practices. In addition, feminist discourse theory will aid in “reading” (Johnson et al., 2004) the presented discourses accepted or resisted by cast members and how those discourses frame performances of femininity, as they intersect with other identities. Particular attention will be paid to the discourse of neoliberal feminism, and how/if it operates in relation to overt productional strategies seen on a variety of reality programs, i.e. competitive individualism, body shaming, and overcoming obstacles and emerging triumphant. As explained by Weedon (1997), “Realist film...is not a reflection of ‘real’ life. It is constructed as a result of conscious and unconscious choices about what is to be represented as normal or deviant...” (pp. 99). The concept of faux-empowerment, as it relates to (neoliberal) feminist discourse(s), will be used to analyze if and/or how the DCCs embody their standard of “empowering women” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Finally, an intersectional framework is also used in order to analyze displayed femininity’s intersections with race, class, sexuality, ability, etc., avoiding an essentialist reading that equates displayed subordination to sexism alone.

Feminist Discourse Theory

Feminist discourse theory draws from a poststructuralist understanding, which assumes that discourse constructs meaning. Discourse is a broadly defined, fluid “currency” (Mills, 2004, pp. 1) used to analyze literary and non-literary texts. Foucault (1972) offers three meanings to discourse, “the general domain of all statements...an individualizable group of statements...a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (pp. 80). These nuanced interpretations are then broken down by Mills (2004), who asserts that discourse is inclusive of all meaningful texts that cause an effect in constructing reality. A particular discourse, or specific group of discursive practices, encompasses regulated, coherent texts, such as that of femininity or imperialism. Foucault’s (1972) third and most theoretical interpretation (stated above) of discourse is concerned with the governing rules and structures that serve as producer of certain texts; operational power constitutes social formations, constructing discursive and behavioral practices (Mills, 2004). Discourse as a site of study has been extremely valuable to scholars of cultural theory, linguistics, literary theory, critical theory, and social psychology, in that fluctuations in discursive structures point to relations in social structures (Smith, 1990). Discourse, therefore, cannot be taken at face value. Moreover, when dissected, discourse and discursive practices reveal the underlying organization of social relations and the distribution of power.

Mills (2004) identifies two types of discourse that have been critically examined by feminist scholars, that of the confessional and the discourse of femininity. Feminist insight about confessional discourse is informed by Foucault’s (1979) argument that power in modern society is operated by regulatory regimes whereby individuals engage in self-disciplinary behavior, one of which is the act of confessing. Foucault (1980) first traces the act of confession to the

sixteenth century Church, requiring an annual confession, affirming one's sins to become "cured," or, for ecclesiastical personnel, proper training and purification. This practice was directed from the "top downwards" (Foucault, 1980, pp. 200), as "directed" individuals would provide a discursive overview of their daily lives, consisting of "self-examination, confession, direction of conscience and regulation of relationship" between themselves and authority figures (Foucault, 1980, pp. 200). Normalized by Christianity in the sixteenth century, this practice has been "inject[ed] into society as a whole" (Foucault, 1980, pp. 200), having since permeated throughout social institutions, such as the educational system and the home, so as to "efface everything" (Foucault, 1979, pp. 84). Subjects are thus encouraged to internalize their problem(s) and verbalize their difficulties (Mills, 2004). Foucault (1998) indicates that verbalization is a centralized mechanism by which individuals make themselves visible internally and externally, with an underlying goal of further improving the self (Fejes, 2015). However, biopedagogies are not only about improving the self through individual, disciplinary practices; rather, they are connected (sometimes subtly, sometimes overly) to broader population level objectives in neoliberal society such as reducing the cost of unhealthy bodies, whereby unhealthy is equated with being expensive to the health care system (Fejes, 2015).

The confessional is particularly useful for the purpose of this study not only for the reason that confessionals are a staple production strategy used in reality TV, encouraging cast members to verbally "confess" their inner dialogues, but the confessional also most clearly displays power operations, as well (Mills, 2004). In the reality TV format, confessionals are used in order to allow castmates to give detailed commentary on their experience (Aslama & Pantti, 2006; Skeggs & Wood, 2012), contributing to a normalization of verbalizing about the self. Fejes (2015) highlights that this practice is made most visible in the media, particularly reality TV, in

programs such as *Big Brother* or *Supernanny*. Rail and LaFrance (2009) take this concept beyond that of a mere classification, though, suggesting that the use of the confessional in reality TV show, *Nip/Tuck*, is representative of disciplining biopedagogies, by which power is borne onto bodies “for the sake of rescuing, rehabilitating, and saving them” (pp. 78), again, serving to improve the self (Fejes, 2015).

In addition to the confessional, Mills (2004) also highlights the discourse of femininity, which counteracts the viewpoint that ‘femininity’ as a social construct is homogenous, imposing an equivalent subjectivity onto all women. Contemporary feminist theorizing opposes this view of uniformity, stressing that there is no clear reason for women to accept this homogenous discursive structure, arguing in favor of women’s resistance to these ideologies (Mills, 2004). Smith (1990) highlights that it is because of women’s resistance to preceding social structures and relations that changes in discourse occur, emphasizing that simply engaging with discourses of femininity constitutes interactional relation of power. In this view, women can challenge imposed discourses and/or construct positions for themselves, in the course of their daily lives, rather than unquestionably taking up subject positions and dominant discourses on offer (Smith, 1990; Mills, 2004). However, as Weedon (1997) argues, an individual can take up multiple – and at times contradictory – subject positions, illustrating the complexity of human subjectivity, an insight that feminist scholars find helpful in explaining the ongoing negotiation of ‘femininity’ in women’s lives (Mills, 2004). This study examines *DCCs: MTT* to gain insight into how the institution of professional cheerleading engages with discourses of femininity and how cheerleaders on the show take up, negotiate, and even challenge particular subject positions.

Neoliberal Feminism and Faux-Empowerment

Neoliberalism is a socially, politically, and economically hegemonic ideology that infiltrates the modern way of life. Manifested via four main domains – an economic doctrine, a political project, a cultural perspective, and a guide for organizing social relationships (Coakley, 2011) – neoliberalism reflects the capitalist nature of society, supporting the liberty of the market, whose forces are controlled and ensured by the government (Silk & Andrews, 2012). Neoliberalism is not limited to the economic sphere, though, and more broadly “produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social” (Brown, 2005, pp. 37). Neoliberal feminism, as its etymology suggests, is a new form of liberal feminism, where feminists’ commitments transformed from collective social justice to social justice in the form of incessant, individualized self-regulation or self-monitoring in order to foster the “revolutionary” energy needed to reach the pinnacle or “point” of the power pyramid (Rottenberg, 2014; Schrielberg et al., 2018).

Neoliberal feminism, as a discursive practice, manifests in professional cheerleading through two main avenues: selling the body and achieving both professional success and personal fulfillment. Thorpe et al. (2017) understand neoliberal feminism as a new form of mainstream feminism, in which women are encouraged to be “entrepreneurial agents in control of their own destinies via careful economic, and very much individualized, strategizing” (pp. 24). In the age of social media, women gain control of their own destinies and become entrepreneurial agents primarily through the act of selling their body. Professional cheerleaders, for instance, arguably subscribe to this ideology by wearing uniforms that do not “leave much to the imagination” (Schrielberg et al., 2006, ep. 3), performing seductively choreographed routines, and posing in itsy-bitsy-teenie-weenie bikinis to be plastered on DCC sponsored

calendars. Professional success and personal fulfillment (Rottenberg, 2014), in professional cheerleading, are encapsulated by earning a coveted spot on a professional squad. Green (2014) claims that the position of professional cheerleader is a job that “a million girls would kill to have.” Though professional success may not translate to monetary success in professional cheerleading, Finglass, DCC Director, repeatedly enforces the professional “opportunities,” exclusive to those who make the squad (Schrielberg et al., 2018). Paired with the “professional success” of *making the team* is the personal fulfillment associated with achieving what is a lifelong dream for the majority of the cheerleaders: “Being in Texas...every little girl, I feel like, wants to be a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader;” “I have been preparing for this, literally, since I was four years old;” and “I’ve known since I’ve been out of the womb that I wanted to be a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1).

Eisenstein (2017) emphasizes the articulation between neoliberal feminism and mainstream feminism, arguing that this modern interpretation calls for supporting individual achievement, while utterly dismissing the collective goals of the Women’s Liberation Movement – what it is to be a woman, how femininity and sexuality are defined, and how femininity and sexuality can be redefined (Weedon, 1997) – where social justice is translated to “empowering” individual women. Eisenstein (2017) breaks down the meaning of “empowerment” in this instantiation, defining it as no more significant than “the incorporation of women into the structures of capitalist power, whether as entrepreneurs or low-wage workers” (pp. 45). This faulty sense of empowerment, or faux-empowerment, exploits women for capitalist reproduction, imposing a forfeit to feminist social and political commitments (Eisenstein, 2017; Hemmings, 2011). It is vital to distinguish between empowerment and faux-empowerment for the purposes

of this study, with a primary research question aiming to investigate the standard of “empowering women” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1), put forth by the DCCs in *DCCs: MTT*.

Intersectionality

Defining Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989) first coined intersectionality as a means by which to identify how categories of identity (e.g., race and gender) simultaneously interact and impose multidimensional experiences. Intersectional analyses, therefore, understand and perceive individuals’ identities as they exist on multiple axes, an “interlocking nature of oppressions that are structured on multiple levels...which are part of a larger matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990, pp. 559). Crenshaw (1991) uses an intersectional theoretical framework in order to convey the experiences of women of color that cannot be wholly ascribed to racism or sexism alone, but represent the concurrent marginalizations of both racism and sexism. Examining legal policies in response to violence experienced by women, Crenshaw (1991) highlights the “mutually exclusive terrains” (pp. 1242) that exist between the politicization of women and the politicization of people of color, resulting in “the concerns of minority women fall[ing] into the void between concerns about women’s issues and concerns about racism” (pp. 1282). Intersectionality is thus anchored in Black feminist thought, central to Black feminism’s agenda of understanding social injustices and subsequent experiences, remediating white feminists’ ignorance to their position as both oppressor and oppressed (Collins, 2019; Collins, 1990; Carasthesis, 2016).

An analysis is not intersectional, though, by merely claiming its use of an intersectional framework. Moreover, authentic intersectional analyses adopt “intersectional way[s] of thinking

about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power” (Cho et al., 2013, pp. 795). Intersectionality, accordingly, is processual, as the matrix of oppressed categories is representative of fluid power dynamics. Intersectionality’s analytical process also highlights its metaphorical process, welcoming its universal applicability to other systems of oppression, such as age, sexuality, class, religion, ability, and ethnicity (Collins, 1990), countering the “deeply ingrained cognitive habit” of essentialism, particularly to race and gender (Harris, 1990, pp. 588).

Origins of Intersectionality

Despite Crenshaw’s (1989) official coining of intersectionality, the concept was established in the 19th century, as early trailblazers of intersectionality have long confronted the question that is a part gender, part racial issue (Carasthesis, 2016). Black women, namely, Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Elise Johnson McDougald, Ida B. Wells, and Sadie Tanner Mosell Alexander, initiated an activist resistance, challenging racism and sexism “not only as separate categories impacting identity and oppression, but also as systems of oppression that work together [and] mutually reinforce each other” (Gines, 2014, pp. 24, as cited in Carasthesis, 2016, pp. 16). According to Nash (2008), Crenshaw (1989; 1991) recycles intersectionality’s concept from what was once Frances Beal’s “double jeopardy,” then the Third World Women’s Alliance “triple jeopardy,” Deborah King’s “multiple jeopardy,” and Patricia Hill Collins’ “interlocking oppressions,” (Carasthesis, 2016, pp. 17). However, intersectionality’s predecessors are predominantly additive, rather than multidimensional; whereas “double jeopardy” (Beal, 1970), for example, implies that race and gender compound one another, resulting in a double, amplified discrimination, intersectionality reflects the axial, simultaneous interaction of various discriminations (Nash, 2014).

Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) seemingly incidental coining of intersectionality, utilizing the vernacular merely as a metaphor, proliferated its now widespread use. Hall (1996), for example, asserts how socially transforming metaphors are quickly adopted, allowing "us to imagine what it would be like when prevailing cultural values are challenged and transformed," as well as "provid[ing] ways of thinking about the relation between the social and symbolic domains" amidst the social transformation process (pp. 287). Crenshaw's (1989) four-way traffic intersection metaphor was both familiar and tangible, invoking reflections about individuals' own spatial intersections, and though initially applied to racism and sexism, was not confined to these systems of oppression alone (Collins, 2019). The open-ended metaphor, turned theoretical and methodological framework, provided a groundwork for understanding the imbrications of what appeared to be separate, yet intersected, power relations, such as racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity, ableism, etc.

Theoretical Insights

This study examines *DCCs: MTT* to gain insight into how the institution of professional cheerleading discursively constructs version(s) of femininity, engaging with confessional discourse and the discourse of femininity to analyze how women on the show take up, negotiate, and even challenge particular subject positions. Keen to confessional discourse, the confessional site is analyzed to examine how women on the show make themselves visible and embody self-surveilling mechanisms. The discourse of neoliberal feminism and, subsequently, faux-empowerment are used as a framework for understanding the *DCCs* institutional construction of empowerment. An intersectional framework also aids in reading the construction of femininity, understanding how feminine subjectivities intersect with other power relations. Feminist

discourse theory, neoliberal feminism, and intersectionality are thus used as theoretical frameworks grounding the investigation of following the research questions:

1. What versions of femininity are on offer to viewers of Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team? How do they intersect with race, sexuality, class, ability, etc.?
2. How is empowerment constructed through *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team*?

In order to answer these questions, I use the methodological approaches of reading for dominance (Johnson et al., 2004; Markula & Silk, 2011) and the confessional tale (Hopper et al., 2008), outlined in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Season 13 of Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team

Though 16 seasons and counting, only the 13th season of *DCCs: MTT* were analyzed for this proposed study. Season 13 has been chosen for analysis due to it being the only season of *DCCs: MTT* in which a DCC affiliated member claims that the squad has a feminist-oriented mission. In the season's first episode, Kelli claims, "Now, the DCCs are known as the premier cheerleading squad in the world...It's more than just about performing; it's making lifelong friends, empowering women, and growing in a safe environment" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Season 13 remains the only season of *DCCs: MTT* in which such a claim was made, and no similar mission statement is supported on the DCCs official website or social media accounts. Furthermore, season 13 was filmed and aired in the outbreak of Tarana Burke's "Me Too" movement, attending to an "explicitly political moment of power" (Johnson et al., 2004, pp. 171). Season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* was accessed through my personal Paramount+ account. The season was filmed in May, June, July, and August of 2018 and aired on Country Music Television (CMT) in August, September, and October of 2018. It is divided into 13 episodes that are approximately 41 minutes long.

Reading for Dominance

A textual analysis was performed to examine the 13th season of *DCCs: MTT*. The text was closely "read" using Johnson et al.'s (2004) approach to reading texts for dominance, assessing prominent power relations, articulating the exhibited dominance to broader social forces, and "'pulling out' the underlying meanings embedded" within the series (Markula & Silk,

2011, pp. 125). The narrative segments believed to be important, valuable, and in relation to the research questions were transcribed, along with additional notes taken that recorded multimodal production elements such as style, sequence, and emphasized narratives (Markula & Silk, 2011). Per Johnson et al.'s (2004) reading texts for dominance, the focal narrative, or the underlying deep structure, was identified, as well as the organization of meaning. The focal narrative(s) was identified through close readings of the discursive practices that the training camp candidates engage in, as well as those imposed on the training camp candidates by DCC executives and *DCCs: MTT* producers (i.e. triumph versus defeat, overcoming hardship, or a comeback story). The organization of meaning of the text will then locate the focal narrative(s) within ideological dimensions (Markula & Silk, 2011). The relationship between the television series and other texts were questioned, in addition to addressing the series' point of view, illustrating intertextuality and authority from which dominant meanings could be extrapolated. Other texts of primary concern are those that engage in discourse with the conventional, archived cheerleader, such as the *Bring It On* franchise, and reality TV programs that engage physical culture and/or social issues of sexism, body shaming, and neoliberal governmentality, like *The Biggest Loser*. Finally, the textual formations are traced to cultural formations, locating the text politically, economically, and historically, answering Johnson et al.'s (2004) methodological grounding question, "Why this text now?" (Markula & Silk, 2011). Analyses are accompanied by a wide reading of the series at large. By doing so, I can further understand, then illustrate power relations in professional cheerleading, as presented in *DCCs: MTT*, as well as articulating the identified dominance to that of larger social forces.

The Confessional Tale

Johnson et al.'s (2004) approach to textual analysis is largely attentive to the researcher's role. By adopting this methodology, self-reflexivity is key, in order to acknowledge my own personal biases and experiences that inform my reading of the text, explicitly positioning myself within the analysis. Reflexivity was performed while tracking personal accounts of thoughts, feelings, and ambiguities during the analytical process, which are then presented in confessional tale style in the empirical chapter. The confessional tale is an alternative writing strategy within academic research, particularly qualitative research that requires the researcher to be reflexive throughout the research process (Hopper et al., 2008). In the act of confessing their personal account while choosing a topic of study, methodological approach(es), gathering data, interpreting results, and writing findings, the researcher is forced to address how "knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined" (Kluge, 2001, pp. 329). Confessional tales provide the researcher with an opportunity to expose struggles encountered throughout their study, whether they be ethical or methodological, benefitting both the researcher and the reader; offering the researcher a platform to reflect on their influence of and by the research and the reader an opportunity to understand more about the research process and insight to how the researcher came to their conclusions (Hopper et al., 2008). Where academic writing traditionally limits the researcher to be a neutral narrator, "reporting only where things went right" (Boman & Jevne, 2000, pp. 547), this alternative form forces the researcher to be honest about errors, confusions, and trials that arose throughout the research process.

The confessional tale not only provides an avenue for freedom beyond the confines of academic writing in and of itself, but the researcher is free to confess however it best presents itself within their particular work(s); as a standalone chapter, a pre- or postscript, or as asides

presented throughout the entirety of the work (Hopper et al., 2008). For example, Fortune and Mair (2011) offer confessionals in the form of field notes gathered from ethnographic observations to accompany their analysis and interpretations. Young (2000), on the other hand, engages in shorter confessional asides throughout the majority of the work. However confessionals are presented, they operate to provide the researcher's audience with a better understanding of the researcher's internal dialogue(s) while conducting, writing, and reflecting upon their research, employed similarly beyond academia. While the confessional tale as an analytical tool has not been associated with a Foucauldian understanding of the confessional presented in other mediums (Hopper et al, 2008; Kluge, 2001; Foucault, 1980), its strategy is similarly employed in writing and reality TV production; researchers offer personal asides, detailing the research through internal dialogues of struggles and influence, as do reality TV cast members when confessing their personal thoughts and feelings, detailing their experiences how they wish to be heard.

According to Aslama and Pantti (2006), reality TV illustrates “contemporary confessional culture” (pp. 168), attracting audiences by display of “true” emotion. Arguably the most prominent productional strategy, the confessional, or monologue, counters critiques of the reality platform being inauthentic (Mast, 2016) with what appears to be *real* or *true* authenticity, where cast members reveal, in solitude, their inner dialogue(s) to the audience (Aslama & Pantti, 2006). Offering cast members an opportunity to release pent up emotions or frustrations, revealing their “true self,” and intensifying its subjective, emotional power, confessionals distinguish the reality genre from other formats. Both Skeggs and Wood (2012) and Aslama and Pantti (2006) attribute the power of the confessional to Foucault's (1979) declaration of the confession as a central mode of development, so as to “efface everything” (pp. 84),

simultaneously purifying and liberating the self (Foucault, 1981). Confessionals provide cast members with a sense of agency, allowing them to detail their experiences how they wish to be heard (Aslama & Pantti, 2006; Skeggs & Wood, 2012).

Like Aslama and Pantti (2006) and Skeggs and Wood (2012), Mills (2004) adopts a Foucauldian understanding of the confessional for the purposes and concerns of feminist discourse theory. Feminist insight about the confessional as a discursive practice is informed by Foucault's (1979) argument that power in modern society is bound to regulatory regimes whereby individuals engage in self-disciplinary behavior through the act of confessing. Confessionals were normalized by Christianity, and have since permeated throughout social institutions, such as the educational system and the home, allowing subjects to internalize their problem(s) and verbalize their difficulties (Foucault, 1979; Mills, 2004). It is therefore understood that confessionals most clearly display power operations. In the case of reality TV, subjects reveal their understandings of power relations as they affect their performance(s), thoughts, and feelings.

Chapter 5: Empirical Findings

Overview

This analytical chapter investigates the performance of femininity on display in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* and, furthermore, how or if the performances of femininity are aligned with the “empowering” mission of the DCCs. Femininity was found to be performed, predominantly, through the three components of emphasized femininity: beauty, thinness, and sexual objectification (Connell, 1987). However, performing femininity was not restricted to these three elements alone. In addition to appearing beautiful and thin, and enduring consistent sexualization from authorities, DCC candidates also performed femininity by displaying ambassadorship, articulated through emotional expressiveness, “intelligence,” poise, and obedience. As I explain further in what follows, these performances of femininity frame the potential DCC as ‘agentive’ in the confessional site (e.g., having the ability to exercise control in their environment), but simultaneously lacking agency elsewhere. These discursive practices upheld by DCC candidates and executives contradict Mills’ (2004) discourse of femininity, which encourages women to resist homogenous discursive structures imposed onto women. The DCCs oppose Mills’ (2004) discourse of femininity by advocating for a uniform display of femininity, abiding by and contributing to, rather than resisting, oppressive subjectivities enforced onto women.

Opening season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, the DCC director claims the squad’s “empowering” mission, “It’s more than just about performing. It’s making lifelong friends, empowering women, and growing in a safe environment” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). To date, this is the only season of *DCCs: MTT*, out of 16, where a squad affiliated member expresses their alignment with a mission of the feminist movement, i.e., “empowering women.” However, this reading of performances of femininity on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* alone, suggests that the practices and

displays of “empowerment” are that of neoliberal feminism’s faux-empowerment. Additionally, a reading of DCCs: MTT at large and a consideration of exposés of not-so-empowering practices of professional cheerleading organizations (Belson, 2018; Gu, 2021; Cooky, 2022), reinforces the squad’s adherence to faux-empowerment.

This chapter is written in confessional tale style as a means by which to present the following analysis. Transcriptions that were important, valuable, and in relation to performances of femininity and displays of empowerment, as presented in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, are paired in conjunction with personal, reflexive confessional asides in italics, which provide reflections and uncertainties that arose throughout the analytical process. The confessionals asides are derived from my journal entries that were recorded during readings of the show, while others reflect inner dialogues that emerged during the writing process.

I write this reflection as I am about to begin my analysis. I worry that having watched this series in full, about one year prior, I will not be critically engaged to the fullest extent, as my relationship with this show, up until this point, was mere entertainment. Of course, in watching for leisure, I was critical of what was presented to me, but not in the same regard that is required for the purposes of this study. As a scholar, I intend to watch informed by feminist discourse theory and intersectionality, curious to see the discursive practices adopted by and social awareness of potential professional cheerleaders. However, as a female and former gymnast who grew up in a similar environment, subject to authority, I cannot help but watch with sensitivity, a sense of understanding, and reasoning with particular discourses upheld.

Performing Emphasized Femininity

Who is “America’s Sweetheart”?

For some, being a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader is a lifelong dream. As Victoria, a rookie candidate and daughter of a former DCC, exclaims, “I’ve known since I’ve been out of the womb that I wanted to be a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Like Victoria, another rookie candidate, Brennan, shares that she feels a particular calling to be a DCC, and will stop at nothing to achieve that dream:

This will be my fourth time auditioning and last year, after getting cut from training camp for a second time, you do re-evaluate, you know, is this my path? If you have a dream, you have a dream, and until Kelli and Judy tell me to not come back, I feel like it’s something that I have to keep pursuing because I truly believe that it’s something that I’m meant to do (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1).

While some may have known of their calling to be a DCC since in the womb, others are drawn to the highly exclusive and sought after world-class squad, because “...It’s more than just about performing. It’s making lifelong friends, empowering women, and growing in a safe environment” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1), according to squad director and former DCC, Kelli McGonagill Finglass. The empowering, sisterhood-like environment serves as inspirations to other candidates, like Daphne, a rookie candidate, who says:

Sisterhood is so important to me. In the current atmosphere, women are really starting to stand up for themselves and it makes me want to stand up for myself. I think the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders embody all that I want to be. To be strong and confident in who I am, I really hope that I get to be a part of that sisterhood as well (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1).

Similarly, the sorority style “sisterhood” motivated rookie candidate Meredith to audition as well, “I’ve always been inspired by the sisterhood the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders had to offer. They are passionate, intelligent, driven women, and those are the kind of women I like to surround myself with” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1).

I say sorority style here as that is a personal association with the word “sisterhood.” I recognize that this association may be ignorant and/or premature, however, as Cohen et al. (2017) found, “sisterhood” was defined by sorority members as a sense of social belonging, encouragement and support, and a shared common purpose. Maybe the real sweethearts are the friends made along the way. If, as their director claims, the DCCs are about making friends, “empowering” women, and sharing among a collective “safe” environment, this begs the question, are professional cheerleading squads professional sporting sororities?

The confident, passionate, intelligent, and driven women, otherwise known as “America’s Sweethearts,” are emblematic of popular culture, with high rated, self-titled movies, themed Mattel Barbie dolls, a pair of DCC uniforms archived in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, and a hit TV series now in its 16th season (DCC History, 2018). One concern of this study is how the persona of “America’s Sweetheart” is displayed. To no surprise, in an initial reading of the series, “America’s Sweetheart,” or the potential sweetheart, was presented in alignment with that of emphasized femininity; beauty, thinness, and sexually objectified so as to accommodate male interest (Connell, 1987).

I was disappointed, to say the least, that a full analysis of 13 episodes did not result in a necessarily “groundbreaking” discovery. This anticipated display of femininity inspired a second reading of the series, with particular concern to how emphasized femininity is performed (Butler, 1988; Caudwell, 2006).

Performativity is hereon used to analyze displays of femininity, taking Butler's (1988) theory that gender identity is an unstable, "stylized repetition of acts" (pp. 519). Bodily stylizations through body language, expressions, movements, and displays, reproduced from broader political and cultural structures, are read as actions that frame the body, and here specifically, the female body on offer to viewers of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*. Butler (1988) makes it clear to articulate that these acts are not individualized, but rather rehearsed and normalized prior to the point of the individual who performs them, where these acts are repetitions that are "a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (pp. 526). Feminine performativity was found to be displayed through the reenactment of gender hegemony, specifically actions that endorse the elements of emphasized femininity, emotional expression, competence, and gender etiquette rituals.

"America's Sweetheart" is Beautiful

Near unachievable beauty is routinely performed throughout the entirety of the season, as candidates are almost always filmed in "full glam," in other words, a full face of bold, sparkly makeup, complemented with pink lipstick and curly, voluminous hair that bounces with ease while dancing. In the first three rounds of auditions, candidates are observed in the "fluff and puff" room as they "continue to apply makeup and hairspray," hoping to give off an appearance that wows the judges (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). As one candidate curls her hair, she emphasizes the importance of how candidates' hair appears, "DCC is all about the hair" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). This sentiment is later confirmed by Kelli: "Beauty is a part of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders' image and a lot of times that is in the form of a good [hair]cut or the right color" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

Not long into the eight-week training camp, rookie candidates undergo DCC-style makeovers. The official squad stylist tells, “Makeover day is a really huge, huge day for these girls,” reason being that “If someone doesn’t have the right look, it could affect whether or not they make the team,” according to Kelli (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). Jalyn, a rookie candidate first appearing at auditions with violet hair, was of utmost concern to the squad stylist and director, who says her hair is “too severe for this kind of bouquet we call the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). After stripping the violet from her hair and toning it to a more “appropriate” red color, Jalyn’s hair remains an issue up until the twelfth episode (out of thirteen) of the season, as her hair appears “too vibrant” on the AT&T Stadium big screen during a field rehearsal, requiring an emergency appointment with the squad stylist. Other rookies, who come into makeover day with a less severe starting point receive a haircut and color that “enhance[s] [their] presence in a room” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

Despite already donning the title of “America’s Sweethearts,” veteran candidates are not exempt from hair related scrutiny, like their rookie counterparts. Miranda, a first year veteran, is ridiculed for her hair appearing “stuck-in-the-70s Grandma Moses” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8), simply for lacking layers. Similarly, Tara, also a first year veteran, receives the dreaded call into Kelli’s office, where Kelli tells her that she is “not being noticed like [she] should be,” due to her hair, going on to tell Tara that she needs a haircut and a stylist to look at her “muddy” base (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8). Scrutinizing the texture, length, volume, and color of a candidate’s hair may appear seemingly innocuous to the uncritical eye, however, the fact that these miniscule judgments are criteria for “making those tough decisions,” i.e., “whether or not they *make the team*” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5), reveals questionable ethics upheld by the institution, especially regarding how these acts are supposedly “empowering.” These

appearance-related prejudices held by the DCCs reveal a broader ignorance to personal and political consequences, restricting self-expression and discouraging equal opportunity, reinforcing gender-, race-, class-, and sexuality-based discrimination and disadvantages (Rhode, 2010).

Because “Beauty is a part of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders’ image” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5), rookie and veteran candidates are only filmed twice, throughout the season’s 13 episodes, not already in “full glam.” The first time viewers get to see “America’s Sweethearts” au naturale is during the coveted veteran swimsuit calendar photoshoot in Bimini, Bahamas. Veterans are filmed as they get their hair and makeup professionally done at 4:30 in the morning in order to catch a breathtaking sunrise photograph. Candidates are then seen “bare faced” for the second time during their second famed photoshoot, “cameo day” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11), prior to receiving professional glamor. Filming, attending rehearsals, and making appearances in “full glam” aligns with Dion et al.’s (1972) and Langlois et al.’s (2000) finding that “beautiful” individuals are more intelligent, trustworthy, likable, and desirable. These conventional associations with appearance then resulted in a wave of female targeted beauty practices widely accepted as standard, encouraging women to conform to beauty ideals such as wearing makeup when leaving the house, styling their hair, and removing body hair (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011), as seen reproduced by the DCCs. Neoliberal discourse as well as the mass media have moved these standards from “pressures” to ideals promoted by the self for the purposes of self-worth, obtaining status, and instilling confidence (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). For candidates to be predominantly filmed with fully styled hair and makeup reveals a DCC institutional value to uphold these beauty ideals, promoting the ideology that beauty, that is beauty achieved through physical glamor, is synonymous with success and admiration.

I assume here that fully styled hair and makeup is a presupposed practice for the candidates. It is not made clear on the series, though, whether being filmed in “full glam” is mandated. However, reasoning with the squad director’s quick declaration of beauty being a central aspect of the DCC image (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5), among external discussions addressing required guidelines for professional cheerleaders (Belson, 2018), it seems likely that candidates are required to comply with the “DCC look” when on camera, if not at all times.

I want to assure that I am not critiquing candidates for styling their hair and makeup. As a gymnast, I would rarely go to practice, let alone a competition, without styled hair and makeup. I spent my gymnastics career under the superstition that if I looked “good,” I felt good, which would therefore translate to my performance. Did glittery eyeshadow and a perfectly round bun help me stick my landings? No. Well, not every time, that is. Despite now being out of the sport for almost ten years, as a female in twenty-first century society, I continue to feel the burden, both internally and externally, to appear in ways that conform to beauty ideals – ensuring my dark circles are concealed and my hair does not look like I just rolled out of bed.

I pose this critique to the DCC beauty standards not because I find it inappropriate that candidates wear makeup and curl their hair, but this finding is significant due to its mandated nature. In order to even be considered to be one of “America’s Sweethearts,” one must abide by these alienating standards and perform, not only in the studio and on the field, but in ways that portray the “DCC look.”

“America’s Sweetheart” is Thin

Beauty, encompassing both hair and makeup, is only one element of appearance that is required to become one of the 36 proud sweethearts. Further confirming notions of emphasized

femininity, a DCC must have a physique that aligns with the thin-ideal, a constructed ideology where females, predominantly, internalize that the ideal, attractive body is thin, yet curvy (Ahern et al., 2011). The need to fulfill the thin-ideal is prevalent, like beauty, throughout the entirety of the season, as Kelli repeatedly declares, “If someone doesn’t look right in the uniform, it could be a contributing factor to a final decision if they make this team” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). It is inferred from the reading that the “right look” Kelli refers to is curvy enough to fill the royal blue blouse and white boyshorts, but not overtly so, a long and lean torso, and a size zero waist. In the season-opening episode, legacy candidate, Victoria, explains her cognizance of the thin-ideal, “My mom struggled with her weight when she was a cheerleader, so that is something I’m more conscious of. I work out as much as I can” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Despite later qualifying to training camp, Victoria’s weight becomes a concern later in the season, as Kelli warns her in an office visit:

You’re 11 pounds up since auditions. It shows. It was mentioned at auditions. We’ve avoided the conversation. Probably shouldn’t have. I’m not here to hand out pacifiers at this point. Now we have to start making these decisions. We can’t have 11 pounds creep up on you (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8).

Later in the season, Kelli expresses additional concerns about Victoria’s figure during “cameo day.” While Victoria is posing in front of the camera, Kelli notes, “Her legs are beautiful. She carries her weight in her mid-section,” and in her confessional outside of the studio, shares, “I’m not sure if today is helping or not with Victoria. In one sense, she is not at her trimmest state...” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11). Weight was not only a concern for Victoria throughout training camp. Veteran candidate, Tara, was warned about authority’s concern for her weight increase, “Your face almost looked kind of a little swollen, so then I went

back and I was like, ‘Okay, that’s weird. She’s actually 10 pounds heavier than she was last year,’” causing Tara to not look “like the fresh, feisty one in the room” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8).

I want to note here, that when producers pair this conversation with footage from Tara performing on the field, in uniform, the year prior, her figure does not look much different. If anything, it appears as though the 10 extra pounds gained in the last year may have been a healthy increase. These attitudes expressed by Kelli and Judy are concerning, that 10 pounds could “weigh a dancer down” and/or prevent a dancer from performing “fresh and feisty,” for the reason that this is supposedly empowering to candidates, DCC fans, and DCCs: MTT viewers.

Though Victoria and Tara’s weight were concerns that were not expressed until training camp, not all candidates had that same luxury. For example, veteran candidate Selina’s weight was an immediate red flag that judges noted in the final audition round. Watching Selina perform on the field during auditions, Melissa Rycroft, DCC showmanship coach and former DCC, questions, “What’s her weight doing? Is it staying the same or going up?,” then reacts in disappointment after hearing that her weight had increased (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). During the judges’ deliberation after auditions have been completed, Kelli notes, “She’s 14 pounds heavier than last year’s audition,” ultimately leading to Selina being one of two veteran candidates cut prior to training camp, a rare occurrence (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). In addition to the number on the scale, a candidate’s shape is just as much a concern, as revealed when judges discuss rookie candidate, Briana, who did not receive a final “yes” vote from the squad trainer, because he saw “a little tummy at the bottom” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Likewise, another judge offers his vote against Meredith, reason being, “It’s the body for me.

She's a rectangle. She doesn't have very good shape and I can't get past it" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3).

DCC executives counter these harsh weight and shape related remarks by emphasizing the exclusive amenities available to candidates and featuring sessions with the squad trainer in order to stay in shape. In "First Meeting," prior to the start of training camp, Kelli tells candidates, "You guys will learn throughout training camp, we've got different resources for you. One of them is our fitness club to keep everybody in top shape" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). Two veteran candidates, Alexis and Lexie, are seen visiting the exclusive fitness club, Cowboys Fit, seeking out a trainer for nutritional and training advice in preparation for the veteran swimsuit calendar photoshoot (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4).

This scene was arguably the most unnatural throughout the entire season. It appeared rather staged and scripted, assumed to be due to DCC executives wanting to highlight the various exclusive "opportunities" available to DCCs. This faux-empowering practice is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

All candidates are then seen during "Power Squad" training, hosted by DCC trainer and army veteran, Jay Johnson. Jay leads the candidates through an army-inspired physical fitness test and nutritional guidance counseling. Candidates are scored as they run one mile as fast as they can, do as many sit-ups and pushups as they can do in two minutes, and are prompted with the gravity of doing so by Jay:

Okay, I've got something to say, you guys. I've been around here for like 18 years, and if you're laughing and joking, and coming up, you'll probably be the one that goes home. You should be busting it, man! The girls that didn't make this team, who do you think is putting them out of here? I go back and tell...Take this serious...Remember, you're here

(gestures his hand above his head). You're here. You're not average (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6).

This militarized training ranks candidates according to their physical abilities, rewarding those with the highest physical aptitude by earning a place in the "Power Squad," which serves to physically motivate those who do not earn a spot. Rookie candidate, Dayton, for example, shares, "Being last is kind of a wake up call, but I am- I think I can get there if I keep pushing" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6).

While instilling competition between candidates about their physical abilities is least appropriate, it aligns with, and may perhaps be less harsh than, measures shown on previous seasons of DCCs: MTT. For instance, in the show's first season, candidates' body fat percentage is measured and read aloud, where everyone, regardless of starting weight or body fat percentage, is told that they "could stand to lose three percent" of body fat (Schrielberg et al., 2006, ep. 2); in the third season, candidates are seen being measured for fat percentage and lean body mass via a hydrostatic weighing tank, where those with undesirable fat percentages are told "You don't want to put that body into that little, tiny uniform" (Schrielberg et al., 2008, ep. 3); and in season 10, Kelli calls out a couple of rookie candidates for their noticeable weight gain, resulting in a squad-wide weigh-in (Schrielberg et al., 2015, ep. 2). A broad reading of DCCs: MTT assumes that these measures are still routinely practiced, however, do not make it on air in order to emit institutional "empowerment."

Finally, reinforcement of the thin-ideal is performed throughout the season, as DCC executives persistently compliment the figures of candidates who have the "right" look. Dayton, a rookie candidate and legacy, for example, receives mixed reviews regarding her dancing performance throughout auditions and while in training camp. After seeing Dayton in the official

squad uniform, though, Kelli puts the dancing concerns aside, “Now that Dayton has put the uniform on, her figure was one of the best figures in our uniform today. This is going to help her,” going on to tell Dayton that “[her] body is kind of made for this uniform” (Schrielberg et al., 2015, ep. 6). Kelli finds a similar sense of relief while seeing other candidates performing outside of their typical training studio. During the intersquad “Show Group” auditions, Kelli comments on rookie candidate, Lindsay’s, figure, “Lindsay’s frame looks a little better on stage,” and Melissa adds, “I would kill for any of their abs” (Schrielberg et al., 2015, ep. 7). These blatant, publicized apprehensions, and sometimes praises, about candidates’ weight, shape, and physical ability further confirms the squad’s entrenchment within emphasized femininity, cultivating additional interrogation with how these practices align with empowerment.

My experience with the thin ideal in a sport entrenched within emphasized femininity is incomparable to what is presented here. That said, the thin ideal is not entirely absent in gymnastics. In my 14 years as a gymnast, I was never met with explicit concerns about my weight nor figure, however, I consistently received microaggressions about eating “too much.” Though inappropriate to tease a young girl, who spent almost five hours a day flipping and conditioning, about eating “too much,” these microaggressions are unparalleled to other regulated practices of the thin ideal in the sport, i.e. instilling eating disorders by constantly critiquing gymnasts weight and figure.

While my gymnastics career was never plagued by disordered eating, I cannot say the same about my life, post-gymnastics. Ever since I stopped flipping and twisting in the gym for hours at a time, I have not been happy with my figure. I would count calories, skip meals, “body check” any time I passed a mirror, and stay active by engaging in other high intensity sports. I

am proud to say I have since rectified these issues by working with a counselor, but these struggles are never completely negated. I share this for the purposes of this reading because it needs to be known how inappropriate and uncomfortable these presentations of the thin ideal on DCCs: MTT are, not just to the critical eye, but to that of a wide audience. Taking pride in these weight and physique standards, so much so to air it on television and capitalize on its presentation, is the least bit “empowering” to both the candidates who undergo these treatments and series viewers.

Mishra’s (2014) notion of disempowerment, opposite to that of Kabeer’s (1999) empowerment, informs the DCCs’ thin-ideal discourse. Where empowerment is the ability to exercise choice and control in an environment, disempowerment is lacking the ability to exercise choice or control (Kabeer, 1999; Mishra, 2014). When candidates were met with concerns about weight and physique, such as Victoria and Tara, it was understood as disempowering. For example, Victoria is called into the office again, after her initial weight gain warning, and criticized for not utilizing the weight loss resources given to her, from help of DCC alumni, Jinelle. Kelli warns Victoria, “Our collective concern is are you using the resources that we’ve gone out of our way to provide you?” (Schrielberg et al., 2015, ep. 10). Victoria responds, in tears and discomfort:

I just know you’ve [Jinelle] never really had a weight issue, so I’m kind of leaning towards the women who have...I don’t like the situation I’m in right now, so I was just kind of sensitive to it. I’m sorry (Schrielberg et al., 2015, ep. 10).

Because Victoria was exercising choice and control outside of the resources she was expected to, Kelli associates her behavior with immaturity, “I feel like we’re at a point where you really need to take a real mature approach to this as a job. And I don’t think you’re ready,” and later saying

when Victoria leaves the room, “I want her to grow up” (Schrielberg et al., 2015, ep. 10). This situation renders Victoria disempowered, without the ability to control her environment how she sees best fit.

“America’s Sweetheart” is Sexually Objectified

“America’s Sweethearts” do not neglect Connell’s (1987) third element of emphasized femininity, that of sexual objectification to appease the male gaze. This is accomplished through the performance of candidates predominantly appearing in bedazzled dance wear, which covers the same amount of skin that standard undergarments would. In comparison to the Smithsonian archived uniform, however, the rehearsal wear is hardly the most provocative clothing that the sweethearts wear during their time in training camp and, if they are lucky, as official DCCs. In a segment featuring rookie candidate uniform fittings, the candidates have to hold their breath as Kelli ties the iconic blouse knot, exposing cleavage, “these are gonna become double D’s after my tie” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). According to Kelli, it is “just like being in a corset” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). Below the waist, the magical white shorts give candidates the illusion of curves where they did not exist before. Commenting on rookie candidate, Caroline’s, appearance in the shorts, Kelli tells her, “Your tush looks adorable in it” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). Another rookie candidate, Jasmin, tells Kelli during her fitting, “It was funny when I tried these on. I don’t have a butt, but when I looked in the mirror, I was like, ‘Oh wow.’ The curve just kind of like came in there, yeah,” and proceeds to exclaim in her confessional, “I kind of feel like these are magical shorts. I finally have the opportunity to work with what my mom didn’t give me” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6), revealing that the performance of objectification is not only dictated by DCC authorities, but also upheld by the dancers themselves.

Moreover, overt sexualization is emphasized in how candidates are instructed to dance, as Judy repeatedly directs candidates, “They’re supposed to serve it from the back” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 7), “You need to be sexier...it looks robotic right now” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 9), and “It’s a sexy walk. It’s not stomping at all,” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Additionally, guest choreographers that work with candidates throughout the season emphasize the sex appeal needed while dancing. Michelle Keys, guest choreographer and former DCC, corrects a candidate, “You are sultry, so add those shoulders that adds to who you are” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6), implying that a candidate’s individuality is a product of her sultriness. Similarly, Nick Florez, guest choreographer and celebrity dancer and choreographer, tells candidates in a training session, “We’re gonna make it hot. Like it is here in Texas” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8), which suggests that merely dancing, without any incorporation of “hotness” or “sultriness,” is not enough.

Outside of the studio and off the field, the sexual objectification continues. Arguably the most concerning sexual objectification occurs during the season’s fourth episode, when veteran candidates partake in their annual swimsuit calendar photoshoot. Prior to traveling to Bimini, Bahamas, veterans try on their pre-assigned swimsuits and take test photographs. Sharing her experience, first year veteran, Alexis, says, “Coming in here and there’s so much nerves, you don’t know what to expect, but everyone makes you feel so comfortable, confident, and sexy” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4). While at the official photoshoot in Bimini, one of the squad’s photographers, Michael Voorhees, instructs candidates to pose incredibly provocatively by saying, for example, “Just kick your booty out a little bit. Boom,” “Let’s go back there, lovebuckets,” “Find your sexy. Lick your lips,” and constantly referring to the veterans as “babe” and “baby” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4). After photographing and in a confessional aside,

Michael further objectifies a couple of the women; “Alexis is - she’s um, (stammering) she’s amazing,” and “Kelli is super flirty and she’s really good at all her little moves she does” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4). These excerpts strikingly capture Connell’s (1987) final feature of emphasized femininity: women (professional cheerleaders) being sexually objectified (posing in seductive swimsuits) for appease to the male gaze (their aroused photographer).

Some of the veterans, in addition to Judy, share that Michael’s directives are comforting, but I personally cannot find any comfort in thinking about a man, much older than me, instructing me to pose quite provocatively, as he blushes. As I watched these photoshoot scenes, specifically, I could not help but compare it to catcalling - these women barely know this man, who blocks himself with a camera as he verbally sexualizes them. Furthermore, the sexualization normalized in the dance pedagogical style used exacerbates the objectification of these women. Is their dancing truly insufficient without adding sultry shoulders or serving it from the back?

Performing “America’s Sweetheart”

Becoming, and performing, “America’s Sweetheart” is no easy task. As made apparent in *DCCs: MTT*, to be considered one of the 36 proud women, one must relieve themselves of a significant degree of autonomy and comply with the beauty, physique, and objectifying codes of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987). These conventions are upheld both by DCC executives and potential DCCs as well, in the studio, salon, and gym, or on the field, beach, and stage. These findings reveal that the DCCs not only subconsciously uphold characteristics of emphasized femininity, but willingly exacerbate these qualities, as if exercising extreme beauty standards, a Barbie-like physique, and subjectivity via sexualization is used as a method of

agency. That being said, femininity, as displayed on *DCCs: MTT*, was found to be performed in ways beyond that of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987).

Performing Ambassadorship

“America’s Sweetheart” is Emotional

The word, “emotional,” here, is not meant to be read in derogatory fashion. In conducting my analysis, “emotional” was recorded when taking note of emotional expression, positive or negative affective responses, in questioning how femininity was performed on season 13 of DCCs: MTT.

Kring et al. (1994) define emotional expressivity as an external display of emotions, in the form of facial expressions, communication, and other nonverbal gestures (Latu et al., 2013). According to Kring and Gordon (1998), females are more emotionally expressive than males, as a result of gender socialization. Though this does not equate to the naive ideology that females are more emotional than males, it does indicate that females have a high tendency to externally display an internal affective response, confirmed by a reading of *DCCs: MTT* season 13.

Fear and Anxiety

The most common emotional expressions performed on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* were that of fear and anxiety. Ahmed (2004) associates anxiety with an object’s approach and fear as a product of an object’s approach. For DCC candidates, the object is not becoming a DCC, represented as a looming anxiety throughout the season, from auditions through training camp, then showcased as a fear when a candidate is met with the news that they are or have the potential of being released, and thus their dreams of becoming a DCC disappear. Throughout the multiple rounds of auditions, candidates express their anxiety about performing in front of the

judges and while they wait for judges to deliberate; Meredith exclaims, “I’ve never been so nervous in my life at an audition,” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 2), while Victoria alludes to the pressure of auditioning, “I’m about to step on stage and my dream comes down to these 90 seconds” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1), then echoed by Madeline, “Our future is in their hands” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 2).

Later in the season, throughout training camp, candidates profoundly perform expressions of anxiety and fear, as they receive the worrisome call to visit Kelli and Judy in their office after rehearsal. Whether in their personal confessionals or during the office visit, many candidates are brought to tears at the thought that they could be released from training camp. Rookie candidate, Malena, is framed by producers as being particularly emotionally expressive, and viewers are taken on her emotional journey throughout the season. In her first office visit with Kelli and Judy after the first night of rehearsal, Malena, in tears, details her previous experience with the New York Jets Flight Crew. Malena was elected the first and only Flight Crew member who was used as a prop for appearances, rather than dancing at performances (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4). Kelli and Judy initially relieve Malena of her anxiety associated with her past experience, but after getting called into the office for a third time, Malena reflects, “It is definitely an emotional point to be at going into the office for the third time” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). Riddled with choreography mistakes throughout the remainder of the season, Malena expresses the anxiety associated with inconsistent performances near the end of training camp, “With four cuts to be made I’m definitely nervous and, you know, anxious coming into it. I absolutely want this so badly. I really do. I’ve dreamed of this for so long” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 12). Kelli and Judy ultimately make the decision to cut Malena at the final rehearsal, and Malena, overwhelmed with the fear of her dream disappearing, tells, “I’m just terrified. I’m scared that I’m gonna get

cut,” in a confessional prior to speaking with Kelli and Judy (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13).

Shortly after, Malena hesitantly walks into the office, trying to keep her composure, before, for lack of a better phrase, she loses it. As Kelli attempts to say, “First, you should be very proud of yourself,” Malena, already in tears, interjects:

Don’t- No, no, no, no. No, no, no, no, no. I know that I- I messed up a lot today. Please, no, no. I- I- this was my worst fear. To be the last cut. I know I can do this. I know I can do this. I know I can do this. Don’t say it. Don’t say that I worked so hard all summer.

Don’t say that- no, please (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13).

This scene remains one of the most memorable “cut” scenes in DCCs: MTT to date. In the following season, Malena returns to auditions, and Kelli reflects, “I don’t know, yet, how I feel about Malena. I mean, the last time we saw her, it was pretty uncomfortable. (Plays cut scene). I’m hoping it was just really, really raw emotion” (Schrielberg et al., 2019, ep. 14).

Malena’s expressions of anxiety and fear are striking compared to some, but are not entirely different from others.

Other notably emotionally expressive rookie candidates were Victoria and Dayton. Both daughters of former DCCs, Victoria and Dayton grew up knowing that DCC was their destiny, however, their lifelong attachment to DCCs resulted in a rather emotionally expressive training camp experience. Upon first getting called into the office, Victoria cries in her confessional, saying:

Getting called in, this is like my worst nightmare coming to life. If tonight was my last night, oh, my God. I knew that I left it all out there. I’m sorry (wiping her tears). I’m nervous, I’m so scared...I don’t want to get emotional about this (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

In the office, Victoria expresses her fear of disappointing Kelli and Judy, “I feel like you’re disappointed and I don’t want that” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). Getting called into the office for a third time induces more anxiety for Victoria:

I’m getting called into the office for the third time. Oh my God. My heart rate’s going at 131 beats per minute right now. So it’s racing. It’s very nervous. I’m nervous. Having them have seven more cuts- (groans) What if I’m that seven that needs to be cut?” What if I’m one of them? (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8).

After receiving her fifth and final call to visit the office, Victoria is overwhelmed with fear of being cut prior to the visit itself, as she expresses, in tears, during her confessional, “If tonight was my last night...it’s just- I can’t think about it” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 12). In the office, Kelli tells Victoria, “We see you on this field. We see you on this team,” just not for the upcoming season, causing Victoria to sob, with her makeup running down her face, saying she “just want[s] to hug [her] mom” as she leaves the office (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 12).

Following the visit with a confessional, Victoria is so overcome with emotion that she can’t even speak. Likewise, training camp is anxiety and fear inducing for legacy candidate, Dayton. At the first rehearsal, Dayton makes an alarming amount of choreography mistakes, which she excuses as nervousness and pressure of a legacy candidate, in her confessional:

I think my nerves got to me tonight while we were learning the dance. I feel like there’s a lot of pressure on me just because of my mom, so, I just want to prove that I can do this on my own (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4).

In her second office visit, Dayton is brought to tears as Kelli bluntly tells her, “I don’t know who Dayton is as a training camp candidate...And as the director, I’m not sure this year’s the year

you make this team...you're not in the top 36 right now" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). Dayton emotionally responds:

When I was younger, I never thought I would be in this position, but now it's something I want more than ever. I think that I'm just trying to be a perfectionist right now, rather than just being a good performer and just trying to not worry about whether I nail it or not, just being fun to watch, and that's always been a struggle for me (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

Persisting for a few more weeks throughout training camp, Dayton is met with mixed reviews from DCC executives and guest choreographers. Upon getting her third office visit call, Dayton is anxious in her confessional, "This will be my third time going into Kelli's office. That just doesn't sound like a good situation to be in. I'm very nervous to go in there" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8). Kelli informs Dayton that they notice the choreography getting the best of her, worried that at this point, she will not be able to endure what is yet to come. Cognizant of the potential to be released, Dayton tries to save her spot with agency, "Is there anything I can do specifically I can do?," to which Kelli delivers the news, "We don't think you're ready for the team this year" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8). Leaving the office, Dayton hysterically sobs, yet remains hopeful that she "will be wearing that uniform next fall" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8).

The emotional expressions of anxiety and fear detailed above do not illustrate all of those displayed throughout all of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*. Rookie candidates, particularly, were struck with emotion after receiving a call to the office and/or while during their office visits. In reaction to getting called into the office, anxious that they could be cut, candidates are emotionally expressive in their confessionals: Jasmin confesses, "I'm really anxious right

now...I don't really know what to expect," (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6); Madeline, crying, says, "I'm just hoping I don't get cut tonight," (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 9); Taylor tells, "If tonight was my last night, I would be devastated. I put my life on hold to earn a spot on this squad" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10); and Amber adds:

"I'm being called into the office for the first time and I'm just kind of shocked, and nervous, and upset, and I really don't know what to expect, but there are six cuts that still need to be made if we want to have a team of 36" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10).

If they do receive the dreaded news, "Tonight will be your last night," candidates were additionally emotionally expressive, however, despite their dream coming to an end, candidates remain remarkably hopeful and grateful: Taylor, crying, repeatedly thanks Kelli and Judy for the opportunity to be a part of training camp, and, still in tears, expresses a sense of hope in her confessional, "Being cut tonight doesn't define who I am, and, um, I'm gonna wake up tomorrow, and it's gonna be another day" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10); Kristin also thanks Kelli and Judy, and later confesses, "After coming this far and being so close to my dream, I know that I'm not ready to give up" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11); and Lily tells Kelli and Judy, in tears, "Thank you guys, so, so much. I know, you guys know, it's not easy to break hearts. And I will be back next year to try again" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13).

These excessive expressions of fear and anxiety (candidates crying before, during and after office visits, as well as verbally expressing their anxiety during confessionals) support that of previous work suggesting women's tendency, compared to men's, to be emotionally expressive (Kring & Gordon, 1998; Latu et al., 2013). Though there is no explicit comparison between the emotionality of the candidates with their football playing counterparts on *DCCs*: *MTT*, the productional framing of these women as overtly emotional reinforces the stigmatized

ideology that “women are emotional.” With many of these emotional expressions presented in candidate’s confessionals, these findings are also in alignment with Aslama and Pantti’s (2006) and Skeggs and Wood’s (2012) reading of the confessional strategy put forth by producers of reality TV; given the opportunity to display their emotions to the audience, with no authoritative presence, cast members reveal their “true self,” expressing their emotional experiences how they wish to be heard. This Foucauldian understanding of the confessional reveals the relations of power within the DCCs as an institution (Mills, 2004). While the DCCs, or potential DCCs, have agency in aligning themselves with the elements of emphasized femininity and ambassadorship, they also have agency to express their emotional experiences in the confessional, rehabilitating themselves by verbalizing their inadequacies. That being said, the confessional site is the only environment where the candidates are autonomous, free from authoritative power. Elsewhere, they are in the presence of authority, largely controlled and influenced by DCC executives, i.e., director, choreographer, coaches, stylists, trainers, etc.

Excitement and Spirit

Despite fear and anxiety being the most common emotions expressed in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, external displays of positive affective responses are still apparent, contributing to the desired ambassadorship that a DCC must perform. These instances of expression were associated with emotional excitement, vividly on display when candidates first qualify into training camp. Candidates expressed their excitement in the form of shock, “happy tears,” jumping up and down, hugging one another, and excessively cheering, excited to be one step closer to achieving their dream. Rookie candidate, Daphne, reflects on the momentous occasion, “You know I’ve been hoping for this moment, but I didn’t expect it and I’m just so excited to get

started” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Similarly, rookie candidates, Dayton and Hannah, were in shock after the training camp announcement. Dayton says, “When Kelli first called my number, I was like, ‘Wait,’” while Hannah tells, “This is unreal and I still think I’m hallucinating, and this isn’t happening, but we’re here and I’m going to training camp” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Lastly, rookie candidate, Taylor, expresses excitement in moving forward in her journey toward achieving her dream, “It’s just the beginning of a dream come true, so I’m so excited” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3).

This same display of excitement was recorded again when the final 36 candidates officially *made the team*. After Charlotte Jones reveals, “...It’s official. You are the 2018 squad for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13), the now DCCs burst into “happy tears” and begin cheering and hugging their fellow teammates. In their individual confessionals, Madeline, in disbelief and tears, screams, “I’m a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader! I can’t believe it!” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13); Cianna says, speechless, “It’s literally such a dream come true, I can’t even talk” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13); and Amber, jumping up and down, exclaims, “My team, my team, my team! I made the team, I am so excited” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13). Following the official squad announcement, the rookies are given their uniforms and head to the locker room call their loved ones, again, bringing them to tears, cheering over the phone with their friends and family, and jumping up and down in excitement. These displays of excitement are seen later, before their first game performance. Minutes away from chasséing onto the field, Madeline tells, “My dream is literally coming true right now. It feels really good,” similarly to Hannah, “This is a really proud moment for me...” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13).

These repeated displays of excitement on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* contribute to the spirited ethos of cheerleading, a defining, core element, as noted by Grindstaff and West (2010). Spirit first gained its affiliation with cheerleading at a National Cheerleaders Association (NCA) camp in 1954, where one team, despite lacking technicality and athletic skill, was habitually the first to arrive to training, the last to leave, and was consistently supportive and encouraging of other teams. At the time, the NCA did not have an award to recognize a squad's spirit, but NCA founder, Lawrence Herkimer, presented the squad with a twig, declaring it the spirit stick (Grindstaff & West, 2010). The presence of the spirit stick continues to both motivate and haunt cheerleaders today, as portrayed in Reed's (2000) cult classic, *Bring It On*, and its succeeding versions. According to Grindstaff and West (2010), however, the excited and spirited nature of cheerleading exacerbates cheering's gender and racial politics, reproducing the stereotypical image of the cheerleader as an enthusiastic white female, confirmed by a reading of *DCCs: MTT* and discussed further in the following chapter.

“America's Sweetheart” is “Intelligent”

In addition to being beautiful, thin, objectified, and emotionally expressive, this reading of *DCCs: MTT* season 13 discovered that “America's Sweetheart” must also be intelligent. Intelligence here, though, is not necessarily associated with being educated. Rather, candidates must display a level of intelligence as it relates to American football, Dallas Cowboys, and general political knowledge, so to “communicate well on [the Cowboys'] behalf” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). While DCC executives seek out strong performers, they are also inclined to women who can serve as ambassadors for the Dallas Cowboys organization. According to Kelli, ambassadorship can outweigh a candidate's dance ability:

It is important that these ladies speak intelligently and be quick on their feet because a lot of times they're in live interview situations and if they're not likable, at some point you don't really care how well they dance (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3).

Charlotte Jones, daughter of Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones and Cowboys' Executive Vice President and Chief Brand Officer, adds:

The pursuit of excellence is a standard at the Dallas Cowboys and when it comes to the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, they are no exception. How you present yourself off the field is every bit as important as how you present yourself on the field (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3).

The first mechanism used by DCC executives judge candidates' intelligence, personality, potential ambassadorship, and overall "likability" is in the final round of auditions, where the rookie candidates, who have qualified to this third and final round, and veteran candidates, vying to keep their place on the squad, are grouped together and interviewed by a panel of judges. Candidates are interviewed on a wide range of topics, starting with criminal background history, opening up the interview with, "Any of y'all ever been in jail?" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3), which was then followed by, "What does the CIA stand for? What do they represent? What about the FBI?" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Rookie candidate, Reagan, was not able to answer with what the CIA or FBI stand for, and was highlighted as a "tanker." Kelli tells:

Reagan lost me today. She knew nothing. I was going to ask her if she knew what NFL stood for but I really didn't want to make her any more miserable. This is her fifth year to try out. She could've been more prepared (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3).

Following the topic of American politics, candidates were pressed to name Dallas Cowboys players and their positions, "Name three current Dallas Cowboys" and "Do you know

what position Ezekiel Elliot plays for the Dallas Cowboys?” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). After rookie candidate, Lindsey, incorrectly guesses that Ezekiel Elliot is a receiver, judges were disappointed with her lack of Dallas Cowboys knowledge, assuming her collegiate honors would easily translate, “I like Lindsey. She’s been Dean’s List, President’s List. We know she’s smart. She just went blank” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Candidates were then asked about their perception of the NFL as an institution, “Why do you think the NFL is so powerful?,” stumping veteran candidate, Jessika, who vaguely answers, “I have to think about that…” without following up with an explanation (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Judges further stump Jessika by posing the question, “Do you think players or cheerleaders should use the NFL platform to promote their personal agendas or opinions?,” to which she responds, “You know, I mean, it depends what personal agendas. Yeah, I think so” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Short of two years after Colin Kaepernick first kneeled during the national anthem, it is evident that this question speaks to the Dallas Cowboys’ as well as the NFL’s refusal to diffuse social justice within sport (Montez de Oca & Cho Suh, 2020). To no surprise, judges were not fond of Jessika’s response, as Kelli elaborates:

Charlotte was not impressed with Jessika’s interview today. Now I’m a little worried for Jessika. I need her to come in really, really strong because she was just kinda lackluster. She’s at risk, ‘cause we’ve got some serious talent and competition this year (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3).

Perhaps a more lustrous response for the judges to the question posed would have been to side with the oppressor, implying that sport has no room for politics and therefore players and cheerleaders should not use the NFL’s platform to promote personal agendas or opinions, regardless of the agenda.

Candidates' ability to speak on the Cowboys' behalf is further assessed later in training camp, as rookie candidates undergo "media training," simulating both a television and radio interview, which Kelli says can determine the candidates fate if they "do not seem camera-ready" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). In the mock television interview, Victoria is asked to describe the meaning of following in her mother's footsteps of becoming a DCC, to which she says, "Oh, it's just so exciting, just- Ah! I have no words, honestly" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Victoria is then asked what *making the team* would be for her. Again, Victoria replies with no words, "Oh, there are no words. I don't think there's one word that could describe how I feel," infuriating Kelli, "I wouldn't put a camera or a microphone near Victoria after today right now" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10).

"Intelligence" is also assessed during the media simulations, as interviewers inquire about candidates' football knowledge, "Well, there's a lot of talk right now about the injuries in the NFL. And there's even some speculation of maybe starting a flag football team. What would you think about that?" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Amber, answers with an "unintelligent" response, "Um, I think starting a flag football team would be definitely interesting. I haven't actually heard that that was a speculation so that's actually kind of funny and fun," which was highly concerning to Kelli, who later asks Amber, "Do you know what the question about flag football really pertained to?" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Amber tells Kelli that she is not aware of the flag football speculations and the broader conversation about football injuries, and Kelli quickly remarks, "Do your homework, that's important, she wasn't talking about a fraternity football game. It's truly addressing concussions" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10).

Later, during the media simulation training, Taylor is asked in the mock television interview, "The 'Me Too' movement is a big deal right now. Do you feel that this is a big

concern that the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders should take on?” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Stuttering, Taylor attempts to respond, “Um, the ‘Me Too,’ um...,” until the interviewer follows up, “Are you familiar with the ‘Me Too’ movement?,” where Taylor confidently replies, “I am not familiar with the ‘Me Too’ movement, no ma-am” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). The camera is turned to Kelli, who is “speechless,” glaring with wide eyes in shock and embarrassment. Following the mock interview, Kelli tells Taylor, “That’s the worst start of this media role-play I’ve ever experienced in my career. I was literally speechless if you really don’t know what the ‘Me Too’ movement is” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Taylor says, “I knew what she was talking about, I just didn’t know the name of what it was called,” again leaving Kelli “speechless” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Kelli then informs the candidates on the gravity of their “intelligence,” “It’s so important to know what’s going on in our world, especially as visible women, and that- it’s embarrassing” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Despite her infuriation, Kelli did not take the time to educate the candidates nor utilize the platform of a “hit” reality TV show to speak out in support of the movement (Schrielberg et al., 2018). According to Ozkazanc-Pan (2018), speaking out against oppressors, verbalizing experiences, and identifying the problem at large are steps toward achieving empowerment. With that in mind, ignoring the issue by punishing individuals who do not speak out and, subsequently, not giving individuals the safe space to do so, is altogether disempowering, creating an imbalance between the squad’s “empowering” mission and their inadequate attempts toward achieving that mission. Moreover, this imbalance highlights the squad’s institutional values, where none is placed on authentically “empowering” women, but only conjuring “empowerment” as it promotes the patriarchal nature of the Dallas Cowboys, NFL, and society at large.

I certainly do not endorse Taylor, here, for being unaware of the “Me Too” movement, or at least knowing the name of the movement. I, for once, agree with Kelli. Seeing Taylor confidently declare, “I am not familiar with the ‘Me Too’ movement, no ma’am” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10), is, to be frank, ridiculous. I stand by Brenda Teele, the interviewer, who, after Taylor’s interview rhetorically asks, “What woman doesn’t know about that [the ‘Me Too’ movement] right now?” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). However, Kelli, albeit infuriated, does not take the time, nor the advantage of being on a nationally broadcasted, “hit” TV show, to educate the candidates or speak about the “Me Too” movement in more depth. Perhaps a more “empowering” response to this situation would have been to proclaim that the DCCs, institutionally, support the “Me Too” movement, serving to empower candidates and viewers who identify the movement.

Though “intelligence” is deemed a key factor that candidates must display, these findings indicate that “intelligence” is only a concern as it reflects the larger Dallas Cowboys institution. DCC executives are not in search of potential candidates who are well-educated, necessarily, but are seeking those who can serve as ambassadors, with the expectation that the candidates chosen can speak confidently on behalf of the Dallas Cowboys.

“America’s Sweetheart” is Poised and Obedient

The final framing of “America’s Sweetheart” on DCCs: *MTT* season 13 is that which upholds conventional gender etiquette rituals. These rituals, according to Parker (1988), are socially institutionalized performances that further contribute to social gender normalizations. In the case of the DCCs, candidates are expected to uphold gender etiquette rituals that exude poise and refined manners. These expectations are displayed on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, as

candidates are filmed attending etiquette training. According to Kelli, the “opportunity is about poise. By definition, poise means being elegant, being self-assured, and being graceful. I personally think manners are multipliers of confidence” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11). The candidates are instructed to eat three complex continental-style courses, poised and mannerly, by long-time squad etiquette coach, Colleen Rickenbacher. Colleen elaborates on the value of the etiquette training opportunity, by emphasizing the status of the DCCs, “It is so important for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders to have all the etiquette because they’re role models to so many people, not just young people, but everybody” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11). Candidates are instructed how to hold their silverware, how to cut their food, how much food to bite, and when to eat. Rookie candidate, Victoria, then reflects on the value of the etiquette training, explaining why DCCs should always present as poised and well-mannered, “You never know when you’re gonna be in front of the Jones’ family or any sponsor, so it’s just important for us to be on our best behavior and be well-mannered all the time” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11). This finding not only supports Curtin’s (1985) tracing of contemporary gender etiquette rituals to Victorian gender etiquette practices, where the patriarchal nature of society expects women to be tact, kind, and subtle, but additionally supports Rolls et al.’s (1991) synthesis of gender discrepancies of eating patterns, suggesting females’ conservative eating style due to gender socializations as well as female bodily dissatisfaction.

Along with being poised, DCC candidates are displayed as heavily obedient. There are no explicit scenic features that wholly encapsulate the candidates as obedient, however, any time that candidates are given a correction, critiqued, or posed a question, they reply, almost robotically, “Yes ma’am” or “No ma’am” (Schrielberg et al., 2018). This militaristic mechanism of respect operates as a norm in the American South, a region that demands a “culture of honor”

(Cohen et al., 1999, pp. 257), in the form of politeness and respect for authority. Though this is a regulated Southern convention, it transparently reveals the operations of power within the DCC organization, further rendering candidates and potential cheerleaders as powerless. The Southern “culture of honor” (Cohen et al., 1999, pp. 257) serves as a governing rule that produces the discursive, “yes ma’am, no ma’am” practice (Foucault, 1972).

Performing “Empowerment”

“America’s Sweetheart” is “Empowered”

Kabeer’s (1999) notion of empowerment reflects a changing process, where one cannot be empowered, or acquire the ability to make choices, unless they have been previously disempowered, or denied choice. Empowerment, in this context, however, is rooted in neoliberal individualism, contingent upon personal responsibility and making “correct” choices. Consequently, individuals’ agency lies in the practice of “conscious decision-making,” where empowerment is rewarded to those who change their behaviors that comply to predisposed expectations (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1214; Cornwall et al., 2008). Displays of empowerment on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* reflect this neoliberal understanding of empowerment as the ability to exercise choice, emphasizing that the “correct” choices are those where candidates subjectively position themselves in a patriarchal, capitalist environment. These performances were noted when a candidate was thought to exercise personal agency, taking control in an environment where they have little to begin with. Rookie candidate, Gabby, demonstrates agency upon reflecting on her parents’ experience as immigrants from the Philippines:

I want to be like my mom. She’s so inspiring and so strong...she grew up incredibly strong, and her strength inspires me every day...My dad, growing up, has always taught

me to just chase after my dreams, no matter what. I am ready to make my dreams come true and become a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 2).

Gabby's readiness to ensure the fulfillment of her dreams exhibits agency, controlling her own trajectory. Other candidates demonstrate agency by being conscious of the control they have over their performances, even if they have limited control over their environment and the overall audition process. Prior to the final round of auditions, the first time judges see the veteran candidates during auditions, veteran candidate, Heather, displays agency through confidence, "I am going into the audition as confident as I can because you never know when it's going to be your last" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Another veteran candidate, Miranda, discusses the control that veteran candidates, specifically, need to exhibit during performances:

So, us veterans, we have to re-audition every year and I think there's always a chance that, you know, a veteran won't make it back and I just can't dwell on that, I have hope that I show them enough today that I deserve to be back (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3).

The agency demonstrated by Heather and Miranda exaggerate the little control that candidates have in their environment, that is, performing, through dance and appearance, in a way that appeals to the judges. Other candidates exercise control after receiving corrective feedback during rehearsals or a call for an office visit with Kelli and Judy. For example, rookie candidate, Malena, reflects on comments received from a guest choreographer during a rehearsal:

Tonight it was a mix of 'You're doing really well,' but 'We want more,' and so I'd like to show Nick even more. I'd like him to think, you know, 'You're beautiful and I got something,' you know, 'more out of your performance' (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8).

Here, Malena displays control of her environment, taking what was originally a critique, and using it as a motivational tool to exercise agency through her performances to come. Agency was

also noted when a couple of candidates appeared eager to have a one-on-one check-in with their authority figures, demonstrating agency by having confidence, despite the negative connotation attached to the office call, and therefore control in the environment. Ashlee, a rookie candidate, says, “It could be nerve wracking talking to Kelli and Judy, but honestly, I just want to take it as an opportunity, I haven’t had that one-on-one with them and hopefully tonight that’s gonna be a great conversation” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 9). Similarly, veteran candidate, Tara, says, “I’m eager to get in there and check in with them” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Whereas most candidates expressed a lack of agency after getting called into the office, the eagerness displayed by Ashlee and Tara was perceived as a mechanism of control in their environment.

When candidates exercise what is considered too much agency, in the eyes of Kelli and Judy, however, they are immediately reprimanded. For example, rookie candidate, Kristin, is criticized by Judy for being “defensive” in an office visit where Kelli tells Kristin that “We think we’ve seen enough,” and in response, Kristin asks, “Okay, well, what do I need to do to fix?” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 9). Kelli cuts Kristin off as she tries to take control of her trajectory, by asking what areas she specifically needs to improve in, as Kelli tells her, “We’re through talking” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 9). Although Kelli and Judy originally intended to release Kristen from training camp in that office visit, they decide to keep her for one more week, giving her the chance to make improvements on specific corrections. Kristin, agentively tells Kelli and Judy:

I promise you that I will do everything that I can. I will do exactly what you said, and that next time I come back I’m gonna wow you and I’m gonna perform the best that you’ve seen me perform (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 9).

After Kristin leaves the office, Judy tells Kelli, “You know what? I think she got a little defensive,” critiquing Kristen for wanting to take control (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 9), highlighting the candidates’ extremely limited amount of control they can exercise in their environment (Kabeer, 1999).

Through this investigation of authentic empowerment on display in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, it is evident that it is up to the candidates themselves to be empowered, that is, making the “correct” choices that can give them control. Empowerment is not institutionally provided, as the squad’s mission suggests. In the audition and training camp environment, where candidates are monitored, and depicted as Taylored machines (Maier, 1970), for their appearance, weight and physique, and performances, both on and off the field, candidates themselves have little to no agency in their environment, other than the narrow elements they can control themselves, which is, as this reading suggests, their attitude and confidence as they prevail throughout the audition and training camp process. It is therefore inappropriate for the squad director to proclaim that the *DCCs*, institutionally, promote empowerment, when the candidates must, solely, harbor it amongst themselves.

“America’s Sweetheart” is Disempowered

Mishra (2014) defines disempowerment opposite to that of Kabeer’s (1999) understanding of empowerment; where empowerment is the ability to exercise choice and control, disempowerment is the neglect of having or making a choice, or the lack of agency. With a rather limited display of authentic empowerment, one can infer that the lack of empowerment on display in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* is counteracted with displays of

disempowerment. This reading confirmed that displays of disempowerment flooded each episode of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*.

Disempowerment was first recorded in the final round of auditions, featuring both rookie and veteran candidates. When candidates are performing their pre-taught choreography, they are grouped together, wearing the same bedazzled navy blue dance top and shorts, categorized by height, hair color, and overall appearance (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). This militarized grouping of candidates based on their appearance inhibits individuality, and therefore choice and agency, but Kelli justifies it because it “brings out the best talent” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Furthermore, later in training camp, veteran and rookie candidates are differentiated in each rehearsal session by mandating that veterans wear navy blue dance wear and rookies wear pink. Kelli notes, “The color differentiation with pink for rookies and blue for veterans just helps us identify each group” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4), and though it may provide a straightforward visual queue for authorities to assess candidates, it incessantly reminds rookie candidates of their subordinate position, ultimately lacking control in their environment.

Disempowerment was arguably most alarmingly recorded as veteran candidate, Keyra, was released in the final round of auditions. During the final judges’ deliberation, Kelli offers her vote against Keyra, “She was late to our Christmas hospital visit appearance and then she rushed in late to do our Star grand opening. So, for me, it’s that, am I sure she’s gonna be the veteran that I am telling all these other girls to follow,” despite Judy expressing her fondness for Keyra, “She’s always- eye catching, she’s great” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). Ultimately, she was cut, as Kelli explains, “because she was late to our hospital visit appearances, and punctuality and professionalism are more important for veteran consideration” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). In a confessional following the announcement, Keyra expresses, “I would just, of course,

want an explanation, what exactly went wrong this year, and I wish they could have told me” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 3). It is assumed that Keyra was never given an explanation for her release, nor was she given an opportunity to justify her tardiness, although it is unlikely that a justification for lateness would change Kelli’s opinion. Releasing Keyra from training camp is disempowering in and of itself, but further disempowering, as later in the season, two rookie candidates, most notably being Dayton, are late for their makeover appointments are not immediately reprimanded (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

Though not immediately released from training camp, Dayton, one of two rookie candidates who arrived late to their scheduled makeover appointment with squad stylist, received a strike in Kelli’s record for her tardiness, telling Dayton, “When you’re late to my stuff, I remember,” reminding her that a veteran was cut for being late (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). After the following rehearsal, Dayton gets called into the office for Kelli to further express her disappointment about Dayton’s lack of responsibility:

Dayton, honestly, I can’t discern whether or not you’re disinterested or kind of nonchalant, late because you don’t care or late because you’re immature. I don’t know who Dayton is as a training camp candidate. And as the director, I’m not sure this year’s the year you make this team (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

Kelli continues expressing her concerns to Dayton, flipping through pages of the training camp roster, “Two to three people from each one of these pages has to be released, and you’re not in the top 36 right now... We need to see enthusiasm, power, punctuality, maturity. Bring audition Dayton to our dance floor” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). These words are extremely disempowering to Dayton, as Kelli harshly reminds her of her lack of agency in the training camp environment.

Training camp candidates, both wholly and individually, are met with disempowerment on multiple occasions, first being prior to the start of training camp. Rookies and veterans gather for their “first meeting,” where candidates are given their DCC handbooks, are directed with rules, and get to know each other prior to their 10-weeks spent with one another. Kelli warns the room:

Your schedule will be busy and your curriculum will be full, your mind will be overwhelmed, your body will be fatigued, your spirit will get dampened some with all of our feedback, and you will really have to lean on yourself because I’m not gonna say there’s not a lot of pressure because there is (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4).

Candidates are instructed to eat, sleep, and breathe DCC, ultimately disempowering their personal and occupational lives.

Second, disempowerment was recorded repeatedly throughout training camp, when candidates are ridiculed and made to feel shameful for choreography or performance related mistakes. Although this is not unique, as it is regular in a physical cultural environment for coaches to give athletes corrections, particularly in commercial dance (Lakes, 2005), the way that candidates are singly called out is especially disempowering. For example, rookie candidate, Malena, struggled with choreography until the final rehearsal, and was single handedly called out on multiple occasions. After making a minor mistake, Kelli loudly says to Judy, “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?,” and Judy replies, “Malena? Horrible” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). Almost the same situation happened again just a couple of rehearsals later, with Kelli saying to Judy, “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?,” and Judy responds, “Dayton and Malena. I don’t know who’s worse” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8). After, Judy calls both Dayton and Malena out in front of the rest of the candidates:

Dayton and Malena, y'all are not ready. You could not be put on the football field with that dance, and that's what's gonna happen on the field. They're gonna surprise you with a song. You have to know them all (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8).

Another rookie candidate, Kristin, who did not make any choreographic mistakes, but rather was called out for not standing out, in a "good" way, as Kelli says, "Kristin, I hate to say this again, but you just seemed...pastel" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6).

Third, disempowerment was recorded as candidates who were called into the office to visit with Kelli and Judy were compared to their previous appearances or performances, "Did I see finals Dayton tonight? No" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4), "You were super strong at auditions and that's the Kristin we need to see" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5), "Last year, you were at a stronger performance place than you are right now..." (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11), and:

For some reason, at auditions, you were basically stronger. If I were to have seen what we saw tonight and read what I read about you at auditions, I would have said this is a different...I literally looked to see if we had the wrong Taylor file. You wouldn't be the final squad at this hour (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

It is assumed that these warnings are strategic tactics used by Kelli to encourage candidates to always appear and perform their best, but by not providing candidates with the agency of knowing that performing at one's best at all times is nearly impossible, candidates are rendered disempowered.

Fourth, it was considered disempowering when candidates were cut during their first office visit. Typically, when candidates are called to meet with Kelli and Judy after rehearsal, Kelli will verbally queue their concerns, providing candidates with insight for improvement and

how to better align with the “DCC look,” whether through performance or appearance. However, some candidates are surprisingly met with the news that they are being released during their first office visit. This situation first happened to rookie candidate, Jasmin, who was cut because she did not have the “dance aptitude” required to *make the team* (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). Similarly, another rookie candidate, Lily persisted throughout the entirety of training camp without ever visiting the office, only to be cut at the final rehearsal prior to the official squad announcement. She expresses her shock after Kelli breaks the news to her, “I’m definitely caught off-guard, this being my first office visit. Not that I, in any way, thought that I was safe, at any point. Definitely did not think that. And there’s nothing that I can say to change your minds?” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13). Kelli shakes her head saying “no,” giving Lily no opportunity for agency in the matter.

Another particularly strikingly disempowering scene is during rookie candidate, Malena’s, uniform fitting. As Kelli and the seamstress are poking and prodding at Malena’s uniform, Kelli incorrectly calls Malena, “Melissa” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). Kelli falls to the floor in laughter, while Malena reacts, “I have a lot of names,” also in laughter (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). Rather than apologizing, Kelli says, “I totally give up. I give up...,” insinuating that Malena is too difficult to pronounce. Kelli then proceeds to list the number of names that she has incorrectly called Malena, “Malena, Malana, Melania, Maria, today is Melissa,” and later jokes in a confessional, “Malena is going to just always be a mouthful for me. I don’t know why. It keeps evolving for me, so I don’t know what her name will be next week,” implying that instead of rectifying the situation, she will continue to call Malena, one of three Black rookie candidates, by a wrong name because a non-white name is too difficult to comprehend (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6). It is disempowering to once call Malena by the

wrong name, but to repetitively call her by an incorrect name exacerbates the lack of control that Malena has in the environment, ultimately requiring Malena to make light of the situation and comply with being incorrectly addressed, “I like the name Melissa, I could go for it” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6).

The scene detailed above welcomes an inquiry into the disempowering productional strategies on display in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*. If part of the DCCs’ mission is to authentically empower both the women who occupy the organization as well as those who they reach through performances and appearances, featuring disempowerment in any fashion on their self-produced reality TV show contradicts their self-proclaimed, “empowering” mission (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). However, there are a number of productional strategies, beyond actions and discursive practices, that disempower candidates. One particular productional strategy noted occurred while featuring many rehearsal sessions, zooming in on two or three candidates at a time to easily compare and contrast those that are succeeding with choreography and style, versus those who are not. Likewise, while showcasing rehearsals, producers will show large groups at a time performing their choreography, but decrease the brightness of the broader screen and increase the brightness on candidates who make mistakes. It is disempowering for these candidates who are riddled with mistakes to receive quick criticisms from Kelli and Judy each time they make a mistake, but these productional strategies capitalize on the already disempowered candidates.

“America’s Sweetheart” is Faux-Empowered

This analysis is telling that the DCCs uphold a faulty sense of empowerment, or faux-empowerment. Faux-empowerment is a contemporary construct, resulting from neoliberal

feminism, where feminists commitments are transformed from altering social pressures to incessant, individualized self-regulation or self-monitoring in order to foster the “revolutionary” energy needed to reach the pinnacle or “point” of the power pyramid (Rottenberg, 2014; Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Thorpe et al. (2017) understand neoliberal feminism as a new form of mainstream feminism, in which women are encouraged to be “entrepreneurial agents in control of their own destinies via careful economic, and very much individualized, strategizing” (pp. 24). The articulation between neoliberal feminism and mainstream feminism is highlighted by Eisenstein (2017), who argues that this contemporary interpretation calls for supporting individual achievement, while utterly dismissing the collective goals of the Women’s Liberation Movement – what it is to be a woman, how femininity and sexuality are defined, and how femininity and sexuality can be redefined (Weedon, 1997) – where social justice is translated to “empowering” individual women. Eisenstein (2017) breaks down what “empowerment” means here, defining it as no more significant than “the incorporation of women into the structures of capitalist power, whether as entrepreneurs or low-wage workers” (pp. 45). This faulty sense of empowerment, or faux-empowerment, exploits women for capitalist reproduction, imposing a forfeit to feminist social and political commitments (Eisenstein, 2017; Hemmings, 2011).

Faux-empowerment is prevalent throughout season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, with Kelli, among others, repeatedly reminding candidates of the “opportunities” exclusive to those who *make the team* (Schrielberg et al., 2018). In “first meeting,” veteran candidate and group leader, Kashara, explains to her fellow training camp candidates that, “This uniform gives us an amazing opportunity to elevate in every aspect of our lives” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4), indicating that the candidates would be powerless if not for the uniform that they have the chance of bearing one day. Likewise, reflecting on a meeting with Cowboys’ head coach, Jason Garrett,

rookie candidate, Ashlee, says, “It really made me proud to be able to hear Jason Garrett talk to us and inspire us. I felt really privileged...it kinda brings you back to this opportunity” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). Furthermore, after rookie candidate, Kristin, shares her experiences working with the deaf community, Kelli encourages her, “We’d like to see ‘wow’ Kristin. So that the other things that are actually more important could be an opportunity for you” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6), insinuating, again, that Kristin would not have an opportunity for broader concerns unless bearing the uniform.

It remains ambiguous, however, what the emphasized “opportunity” for these candidates is. Though, Kelli gives insight to rookie candidates prior to a performance at a senior center about the “power of the Star,” “There’s nothing I think, personally, that’s more impactful than you guys getting to use your visibility and touch the lives of others” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 8). In this excerpt, it is evident that the “opportunities” available to candidates is translated to universal visibility, likely resulting in candidates becoming “entrepreneurial agents” (Thorpe et al., 2017, pp. 24), confirming the DCCs understanding of empowerment as that of faux-empowerment.

Capitalizing on Eisenstein’s (2017) definition of empowerment, Charlotte Jones, makes the announcement to the 36 lucky ladies who *make the team*, by telling them:

This has been an incredibly tough process for these two ladies [Kelli and Judy]. I know they are very proud of you, but I am as well, for wanting to be a part of the Dallas Cowboys and all that we represent. So take a look around at the women that you’re sitting by and the women whose hands you’re holding. ‘Cause, ladies, it’s official. You are the 2018 squad for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13).

This memorable moment is masked by the underlying faux-empowerment, situating the women within Dallas Cowboys' capitalist power structure.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Performances of Femininity

As this analysis suggests, season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* is yet another mediated platform, specifically that of reality TV, that reproduces emphasized femininity (Press, 2011; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Marwick, 2010; Waggoner, 2004; Deery, 2004; Silk et al., 2009; Connell, 1987). Beauty, thinness, and sexual objectification are all central themes upheld and performed by the DCCs and their authorities, including squad director, choreographer, coaches, trainers, judges, and photographers, evident in ritual performances and appearances outside of *DCCs: MTT*, but specifically addressed and endorsed in the series (Schrielberg et al., 2018). This display of “America’s Sweetheart” frames world class, professional cheerleaders, and idealized “American women” more generally, in a homogenous form, that is conventionally beautiful, thin, objectified, and synonymously, subjected to disciplinary regimes.

Though there is no transparent institutional definition of beauty that candidates must satisfy, there is a somewhat ambiguous, yet specific “DCC look” that candidates’ appearance must align with (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5). Performativities and championing of the “DCC look” on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* contradicts notions of universal beauty, reproducing a stereotypical, homogenous, and hegemonic image of what is deemed “beautiful,” implying that inappropriate hair colors and/or styles and appearing “bare faced,” is not considered beautiful (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 4; Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5; Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 11). There is more to the “DCC look” than just styled hair and sparkling eyeshadow, though. Beyond hegemonic beauty ideals, the DCCs also uphold the thin-ideal, requiring that candidates must comply to weight and physique standards (Ahern et al., 2011; Schrielberg et al., 2018). Similar to the vague, yet exclusive definition of beauty that the DCCs endorse, there is also an ambiguous,

yet evidently precise weight requirement that candidates must meet, despite claiming on their audition information page that “We DO NOT have specific height and weight requirements” (FAQ, n.d.). Beyond, and in conjunction with, performing beauty and physique ideals, DCCs are also highly sexually objectified, succumbing to and capitalizing on Connell’s (1987) third component of emphasized femininity. Applying objectification theory to the candidates’ treatment when they are “visually sized up and appraised based on sexual attributes and physical attractiveness” (Moffitt & Szymanski, 2011, pp. 68), separates the candidates’ personal attributes from their physical bodies, disempowering the women and further subordinating them in a patriarchal society (Johnson, 2005). Moreover, the objectification consistently imposed onto candidates encourages and normalizes the women to self-objectify, perceiving themselves from an outsider perspective, which justifies why the candidates comply with these practices, rather than resisting them (Moffitt & Szymanski, 2011).

Enforcing potential and official DCCs to perform hegemonic beauty standards, the thin-ideal, and sexually objectifying practices contradicts the DCCs “empowering” mission (Connell, 1987; Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). By upholding and celebrating the codes of emphasized femininity, and mandating that women who wish to *make the team* embody those elements, candidates, past, present, and future, and viewers of *DCCs: MTT* are ultimately disempowered. Candidates experiencing these regulations are not given the space to be agents, make their own choices as it regards their appearance or challenge the objective nature of their positions (Mishra, 2014; Schrielberg et al., 2018). Viewers are thus repeatedly exposed to the endorsement of emphasized femininity throughout season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*. It is made clear that those who do not embody hegemonic beauty ideals, would not “look right in the uniform” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 6), nor would oblige to verbal sexual harassment, is not worthy of bearing the DCC

title and, synonymously, “America’s Sweetheart,” regardless of dance ability or apparent ambassadorship. This finding of the pervasive endorsement of emphasized femininity brings to light a textual “underlying meaning embedded” in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, where idealized American women are those who obey, through enforced performativities and self-surveilling methods, beauty, thinness, and objectification. The reproduction of this narrative is not “empowering” to all women, and hardly empowers those who do comply with emphasized femininity’s elements (Markula & Silk, 2011, pp. 125; Connell, 1987). Season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* thus offers a discourse of emphasized femininity, offering viewers a subject position to be taken up.

In addition to emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987), candidates also performed a particular ambassadorship on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* (Schrielberg et al., 2018). The term “ambassadorship” is taken directly from the text, as Kelli proclaims that she, on behalf of the Dallas Cowboys, is in search of ambassadors for “America’s Team.” She explicitly tells one rookie candidate, “I know you could be a good ambassador for this team” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 7). Hence, not only must candidates have an extreme dance aptitude and ability, they must also perform femininity in the form of beauty, thinness, objectification, as well as a degree of American ambassadorship, as it resembles emotional expression, “intelligence,” and poise and obedience.

Candidates’ ambassadorship is first on display in the form of emotional expression, exhibiting their emotional investments in what is a lifelong dream. Confessionals were valuable in reading candidates’ emotional expression, specifically those of fear and anxiety, as they were the one site in which candidates were able to verbalize their inner dialogues, reflect on their experiences, and make themselves visible in an otherwise indistinguishable environment.

Candidates' use of the confessional, though, was not necessarily utilized "for the sake of rescuing, rehabilitating, and saving them," as it has been found in other reality TV shows (Rail & Lafrance, 2009, pp. 78); rather, it provided them a space to personally share their experiences with the audience, expressing their fears and anxieties as they endure the brutal and excessively competitive training camp. Providing candidates with the opportunity to confess their inner dialogues was, partly, designed to atone for their inadequacies, utilizing the site to reflect on their previous performances, surveilling and rehabilitating themselves for later improvement (Foucault, 1980; Fejes, 2015; Schrielberg et al., 2018). Confessionals were also used, though, for candidates to verbalize their hardships as they endured training camp, displaying the not-so-spirited side of cheerleading, which audiences would otherwise not be exposed to in ordinary performances and appearances. Grindstaff and West (2010) categorize spirit as expressions of smiling, support, and enthusiasm, exceptionally-regulated gendered conventions and expectations situated within emphasized femininity, where cheerleaders' spirit enhances their roles "as the supporters and subordinates of men" (pp. 151). While spirit was undoubtedly performed throughout season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, the confessional site was predominantly used to express fear and anxiety that contradict the spirit nature of cheerleading.

Candidates' potential ambassadorship is also measured through their performances of "intelligence," poise, and obedience. Intelligence is only marked, however, as the candidates' ability to speak on behalf of the Dallas Cowboys, rendering the cheerleaders as brand ambassadors for "America's Team." "America's Sweethearts" are thus enforced to communicate in ways that will not embarrass their respective team and broader league, and that which reflects their positioning as "visible women" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). The visibility and "sweetheart" title of the DCCs also reflects enforced performativities of poise and obedience.

Candidates are subject to disciplinary regimes that not only enforce their performances and appearances on the field, but also off the field, such as paying respect to authority, maintaining decorum that adheres to gender etiquette rituals, and eliciting an overall innocence that the “America’s Sweetheart” title suggests (Schrielberg et al., 2018). The discursive practices, such as teaching candidates how to properly eat and expecting an adaptation to Southern language conventions, used to ensure candidates’ poise and obedience utterly belittles the adult women, regardless of their influence or “visibility.” More importantly, this display of femininity on offer to viewers of *DCCs: MTT* encourages women to subject themselves to authority and reproduces gendered conventions.

Intersectionality

Analyzing season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* with an intersectional framework posits additional concerns about versions of femininity endorsed by the DCCs, on offer to viewers of *DCCs: MTT*. Enforced performativities of emphasized femininity and ambassadorship reveal an unspoken adherence to whiteness, heteronormativity, and ableism, ignoring candidates’ diverse racial and ethnic makeup, sexuality, and ability, albeit a severe lack of diversity for those who qualify into training camp. This adherence to a singular feminine form reproduces the archived cheerleader image, as seen in the cult classic *Bring It On* franchise and *But I’m a Cheerleader*, disempowering candidates and viewers who do not embody white, heteronormative, and able-bodied qualities.

Examining season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* through a lens of intersectionality, it is notable that the hair of three training camp qualifying Black rookie candidates’, and one Black veteran candidate’s, were singled out for attention (Schrielberg et al., 2018). Out of the numerous Black

candidates who auditioned during the three preliminary rounds, it is presumably not coincidental that the three who qualified into training camp, namely, Malena, Ashlee, and Jasmin, were those who adorned a hairstyle that conformed to Eurocentric hair ideals, i.e. straight, as opposed to more “natural” styles, such as Afros or braids (Patton, 2006; Thompson, 2009). During the rookie candidate makeover scene, Malena, Ashlee, and Jasmin are all seen getting their hair straightened using heating tools, thus assimilating to the dominant cultural beauty standards and, specifically, the white DCC beauty standards (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5; Patton, 2006; Thompson, 2009). Juxtaposing these racial hair standards, white candidates with naturally curly hair were not required to straighten their hair, unlike their Black counterparts, and enhancing their natural style was, comparatively, celebrated. For example, rookie candidate, Cianna’s, hair was seen being diffused, so as to emphasize her natural curls, in the rookie candidate makeover scene and showcased with additional curls after the makeover scene in a before and after feature (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 5).

Adherence to whiteness is also on display when Kelli incorrectly calls Black rookie candidate, Malena, with traditionally white names on multiple occasions (i.e., Melissa, Maria, or Melania). Both Kelli and Malena make a joke of the situation, as if “Malena” is too difficult of a name to comprehend and articulate, forcing Malena to accept being called by a list of incorrect, white names, trivializing her identity as a Black woman. A more nuanced display of unspoken whiteness is when Kelli decides to cut Black veteran candidate, Keyra, for no more than tardiness to appearances during the DCCs previous season (Schrielberg et al., 2018). Despite judges celebrating Keyra for her dance ability, Kelli is adamant in her decision because she would not recommend rookie candidates nor broader audiences looking up to Keyra as an ambassador. Though seemingly unrelated to racial issues, later in the season, two white rookie

candidates are late to an appearance, and are not immediately cut, as was Keyra (Schrielberg et al., 2018). This situation is suggestive of a double standard held by the DCCs, where white candidates are granted a “free pass” that is unavailable to Black candidates. Furthermore, insinuating that Keyra is not someone worthy of being an ambassador is disempowering to audiences of color, implying that one cannot be Black and timely, for example, or more broadly, looked up to.

While not directly on display in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, preceding seasons show a history of the DCCs tokenizing candidates, particularly in seasons one and 11 when Japanese candidates auditioned. In season 11, during the judges’ deliberation after the final round of preliminary auditions, one judge, in offering his vote for Japanese rookie candidate, Yuko, says, “I think it’s great for diversity. America’s Sweetheart isn’t only just blonde, and beautiful, and tall, whatever it may be, it’s all different things” (Schrielberg et al., 2016, ep. 1), implying that Yuko’s later DCC title was solely for the squad to appear diverse. Bearing that quote in mind, it further suggests that any candidate of color that *makes the team* is in the squad’s best interest simply “for diversity” (Schrielberg et al., 2016, ep. 1).

Adherence to heteronormativity is explicitly displayed through performances of emphasized femininity, offering versions of femininity on season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* that suggest “America’s Sweetheart,” or the idealized “American woman,” is subject to the male gaze and has heterosexual relations. Heteronormativity is predominantly performed by adopting the elements of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987), subordinating and objectifying women for the pleasure of men. More clearly, heteronormativity is celebrated during a background feature on veteran candidate, Tasha, showcasing her heteronuclear family. While Tasha’s personal feature is the only one in season 13 that explicitly displays a heterosexual relationship, similar features

and heteronormative discourses are seen on preceding and succeeding seasons of *DCCs: MTT*. For instance, in the show's first season, one candidate gets tearful during an office visit with Kelli and Judy, and Kelli unwaveringly inquires, "Is it...boyfriend problems?" (Schrielberg et al., 2006, ep. 2), casually normalizing, idealizing, and shaping the DCC as a heterosexual body (Ahmed, 2004). To date, only one lesbian DCC has taken the field, and though featured as a candidate on *DCCs: MTT* from seasons eight through 12, and appearing as an assistant in season 13, her personal relationships were seldom highlighted in background features, presumably for the show to remain a reproducer of heteronormative femininity narratives, celebrating and further privileging heteronormativity.

Finally, a stark adherence to ableism is also on display in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*. Ableism is upheld through both productional strategies and discursive practices, framing those who do not have a "world class" dance ability as "tankers" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). In every season opening episode of *DCCs: MTT*, season 13 included, showcasing the first round of preliminary auditions, producers are quick to highlight and mock those who are presumed to not make it past the first round. During these scenes, the background music and film become slow-paced, while judges verbally mock the "tankers" (i.e., those who could barely do a full pirouette or did not appear to have a sense of rhythm). Judge, DCC showmanship coach, and former DCC, Melissa Rycroft, tells, "I don't think everybody read the job description;" Kelli shares, "It's always a colorful mix...at round one;" and guest judge, Nick Florez, says, laughing, "There's some girls maybe that I don't think will make the cut" (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). While all candidates in season 13 were seemingly able-bodied, season 12 featured a candidate with a hearing disorder who auditioned and did not make it past the preliminary round of auditions,

despite auditioning with a suitable dance performance (Schrielberg et al., 2017, ep. 1), suggesting an inherently ableist institutional mentality.

In the final episode of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, Kelli, sharing her pride with the squad, says, “One of my goals for this team is that you guys have a positive influence on young people, and I think you do, and I think it’s because your backgrounds are so different and we celebrate that” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 13). However, it is not clear, from this analysis, how individuals’ backgrounds and/or differences are celebrated, let alone acknowledged. Enforcing homogenous performativities and reproducing racist, heteronormative, and ableist narratives negates any celebration of difference, contradicting the squad’s “empowering” mission (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1).

Shame and Empowerment

In the first three minutes of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, Kelli tells viewers that being a DCC “[Is] more than just about performing. It’s making lifelong friends, empowering women, and growing in a safe environment” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Evidently, empowerment is not institutionally provided, but constructed within the neoliberal feminist ideology that in order to be empowered, one must, agentively, make the “correct” decisions (Rottenberg, 2014; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018; Cornwall et al., 2008). For potential DCCs, “correct” decisions include an obedience to and application of dance related corrections (regarding style, technique, and form), compliance to appearance and physique directives (changing one’s hair color or style and/or losing weight to achieve the “DCC look”), and subjecting themselves to a patriarchal, capitalist regime. Those who do make these choices (or who are able to align with these expectations) are then rewarded with a faulty sense of empowerment, by earning a place on the official DCC

squad and therefore incorporated into a capitalist power structure (Eisenstein, 2017). This construction frames empowerment as the result of enforced behavior, rather than a developmental process that encourages self-reflection, conscientization (Friere, 1970), and social and political action and change (Carr, 2003).

Candidates who do not make “correct” decisions are disempowered and made to feel shameful about their “poor” decision making. Taking Mishra’s (2014) definition of disempowerment as the absence of the ability to exercise choice, disempowerment is central to *making the team*, as candidates internalize enforced performativities, constructed to make seemingly individual decisions that more broadly reflect what squad authorities deem appropriate for the institution. The appearance- and physique-related discourses reproduced on *DCCs: MTT* – coining Eurocentric hair colors and styles as “beautiful,” telling candidates that they must lose a certain number of pounds in order to *make the team*, forcing militarized fitness regimens, and praising bodies that “look right in the uniform” (Schrielberg et al., 2018. ep. 6) – contradict the squad director’s claim of the DCCs “empowering” mission (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). These practices disempower the candidates by requiring them to look and fit within a narrow range, despite their natural appearance and bodily composition. Not only is it disempowering to the candidates who are subject to these discourses, but it is also disempowering to potential DCCs, viewers of *DCCs: MTT*, cheerleaders, and women who do not fit this celebrated mold, by idealizing and reproducing a homogenous, and unattainable for most, image.

Notably, when candidates are disempowered by receiving harsh criticisms related to their dance performances, they are made to feel ashamed. Shame, a negative primary affective response marked by defeat or sense of lack of worth, is a critical mechanism used in dance

pedagogy to ensure “world premier” worthy performances (Tomkins, 1963; Lakes, 2005; Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). Though the infliction of shame on display in season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* is not as extreme as what Lakes (2005) identifies – bullying, the “silent treatment,” and/or exercising physical aggression – shame is verbally administered both in the form of harsh criticisms candidates receive during and/or after dancing and productional strategies that highlights candidates’ errors while rehearsing (Schrielberg et al., 2018). While this analysis confirms shame’s position in commercial dance, it also contributes to the existing literature of shame as a universal, neoliberal narrative produced on reality TV (Palmer, 2006; Silk et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2010; Hirdman, 2015; Barton & Davis, 2018; Lee, 2020). On *DCCs: MTT*, shame is utilized not only to humiliate candidates for making choreography mistakes or “encourage” them to lose weight, but also to elicit raw emotional reactions, making for more authentic and entertaining reality TV. However, whether for dancing or productional purposes, inflicting shame works to disempower candidates by neglecting personal agency and eventually faux-empowering those who “correctly” choose to comply.

Eistenstein’s (2017) notion of neoliberal empowerment as “the incorporation of women into the structures of capitalist power” (pp. 45), provides a framework for understanding the *DCCs* “empowering” mission (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). If the *DCCs* are about “empowering women,” they would provide an environment that encourages education, reflection, celebration of diversity, and taking part in enacting social and political change. As this analysis suggests, the *DCCs* serve to reinforce the patriarchal, capitalist power structure in which they exist, supposedly “empowering” those who earn the “America’s Sweetheart” title by giving them the opportunity to high-kick their way through the NFL and provocatively dance on its sidelines. Kelli’s declaration of the squad’s “empowering” mission serves to mask the not-so-

empowering nature of professional cheerleading, and the DCCs as a whole, in an attempt to appeal to audiences during a conjunctural moment in a quest for empowerment.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Summary

Season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* remains the only season of “America’s Sweethearts” “hit” reality TV show where a squad-affiliated member reveals a feminist-oriented mission, specifically that of “empowering women” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 1). With a theoretical framework in feminist discourse theory, neoliberal feminism, and intersectionality and a reading for dominance methodology, this analysis revealed that femininity on offer to viewers of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* is in alignment with emphasized femininity and ambassadorship. Emphasized femininity was performed by upholding hegemonic beauty ideal, weight shaming and thin-ideal, and sexually objectifying discourses. Ambassadorship was on display in the form of emotional expression, “intelligence,” and poise and obedience, enforcing subjectivities that endorse gendered conventions, expectations, and rituals. These productional displays of femininity construct a reading of femininity as a homogenous structure, with an unspoken, critical adherence to whiteness, heteronormativity, and ableism, ultimately rejecting Mills’ (2004) discourse of femininity (Johnson et al., 2004). Additionally, empowerment was assembled as a reward for making “correct” decisions that appeal to DCC authority figures; however, this neoliberal construction of empowerment only faux-empowers the women by subjectively positioning them within a larger, patriarchal, capitalist structure (Eisenstein, 2017).

Season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* is comparative to other mediated displays of the archived cheerleader and the commodified dance body, reinforcing the idealized “American woman” to be taken up for entertainment. Placed within the “Me Too” movement, an “explicitly political moment of power” (Johnson et al., 2004, pp. 171), the text is represented in juxtaposition of the movement, as DCC executives simultaneously endorse sexual objectification and adjacently

address the “Me Too” movement without any empowering affect, while candidates are also ridiculed for not speaking about the movement as “visible women” (Schrielberg et al., 2018, ep. 10). Evidently, season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* upholds the historical legacy of which the DCCs are situated, adhering and contributing to neoliberal, late-capitalist, and patriarchal ideologies and formations.

Limitations and Future Directions

While providing telling insight to the standards that the DCCs institutionally uphold, this analysis is limited in many ways. First, the present analysis was only concerned with one of 16 seasons of *DCCs: MTT*, despite being informed by the series at large. Preceding and succeeding seasons of season 13 of *DCCs: MTT* do not display an alternative performance of femininity, further cementing the squad’s entrenchment with emphasized femininity and ambassadorship, but do provide more detailed examples of how femininity intersects with race, sexuality, and ability. The second glaring limitation of this study is the text as a product of reality TV production. Although particular productional strategies aided in reading season 13 of *DCCs: MTT*, reality TV production, according to Mast (2016), wholly masks authentic reality. Critics of reality programming have long declared the genre as hyper-real, where reality is proportional to the entertaining, performative, fictional “real,” and sheer vacancy to referential value or reliability. This postmodern critique is sound, as productional executives interviewed by Mast (2016) express the “simulation” (Dovey, 2004) that is the majority of reality programs, “it’s a managed reality,” “a prearranged situation that’s invented by program-makers,” who create a “preferable, scenario of events” (Mast, 2016, pp. 904). Inauthenticity floods the reality TV genre, ranging from the selection of cast members and their lack of comfort with being followed by a

camera, to the “trans-reality” that viewers see on the screen, a manipulation of true reality so as to maximize entertainment value (Mast, 2016). Mast’s (2016) argument begs questioning whether or not this analysis is based on authentic reality, while also encouraging additional inquiry beyond the present study.

Though limited, this analysis serves a severe gap in the literature regarding professional cheerleading. Despite being emblematic of popular culture, neoliberal feminism, nationalism, late-capitalist uber-sport, and sporting femininities more generally, professional cheerleaders and professional cheerleading is hardly served as an empirical site in physical cultural studies, as well as broader cultural, gender, racial, and American studies literature. While limited, the present analysis does provide a groundwork for further inquiry about professional cheerleaders and cheerleading, considering recent exposés of current and former professional cheerleaders’ lawsuits against their respective teams and leagues for wage and sexual harassment and discrimination (Cooky, 2022; Hosty, 2020; McGee, 2016). Given the limitation of the reality TV empirical site of the present analysis, additional research that would benefit the voice of the cheerleaders would be in the form of an ethnography, investigating professional cheerleaders’ performance(s) of femininity, constructed empowerment, and experienced discrimination behind the camera.

Bibliography

- Adams, N., & Bettis, P. (2003). Commanding the Room in Short Skirts: Cheering as the Embodiment of Ideal Girlhood. *Gender and Society, 17*(1), 73-91.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202238979>
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge.
- Alexander, C.S., & Grow, N. (2015). Gaming the System: The Exemption of Professional Sports Teams From the Fair Labor Standards Act. *Georgia State University College of Law Reading Room, 49*(Faculty Publications By Year), 123-181.
- Andrews, D.L., & Giardina, M.D. (2008). Sport Without Guarantees: Toward a Cultural Studies That Matters. *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies, 8*(4), 395-422.
- Andrews, D.L. (2019). *Making Sport Great Again: The Uber-Sport Assemblage, Neoliberalism, and the Trump Conjecture*. Springer.
- Banet-Weiser, S. & Portwood-Stacer, L. (2006). 'I just want to be me again!' Beauty pageants, reality television, and post-feminism. *Feminist Theory, 7*(2), 255-272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700106064423>
- Barton, A. & Davis, H. (2018). From empowering the shameful to shaming the empowered: Shifting the depictions of the poor in 'reality TV'. *Crime Media Culture, 14*(2), 191-211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016679475>
- Bell-Jordan, K.E. (2008). *Black.White. and a Survivor of The Real World: Constructions of Race on Reality TV*. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 25*(4), 353-372.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802327725>

- Belson, K. (2018, April 02). *No Sweatpants in Public: Inside the Rule Books for N.F.L. Cheerleaders*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/02/sports/nfl-cheerleaders.html>
- Bettis, P.J., & Adams, N.G. (2006). Short skirts and breast juts: cheerleading, eroticism and schools. *Sex Education*, 6(2), 121-133). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810600578800>
- Bissell, K.L. & Zhou, P. (2004). Must-See TV or ESPN: Entertainment and Sports Media Exposure and Body-Image Distortion in College Women. *Journal of Communication*, 54(1), 5-21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02610.x>
- Brown, W. (2005). Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory & Event*, 7(1), 37-59. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2003.0020>
- Buckley, D. (Director). (1978). *Debbie Does Dallas*. VCX.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay In Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 40(4), 519-531. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>
- Cardinal, M.K. (2013). Deciphering Dance in Reality Television: The Good, the Questionable, and the Unconscionable. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 84(1), 7-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2013.744915>
- Carr, E.S. (2003). Rethinking Empowerment Theory Using a Feminist Lens: The Importance of Process. *AFFILIA*, 18(1), 8-20.
- Caudwell, J. (2006). Femme-fatale. Re-thinking the femme-inine. In Caudwell, J. (Ed.), *Sport, sexualities and queer/theory* (pp. 145-158). Routledge.

- Cho, S, Crenshaw, K.W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis. *Journal of Culture and Women in Society*, 38(4), 785-810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>
- Collins, J., Corella, J., Stinson, B., Sharenow, R., McCarthy, G., & Chessler, K. (2011). *Dance Moms* [TV Series]. Collins Avenue.
- Collins, J., Corella, J., Stinson, B., Caplan, R., & Hammond, M. (2014). *Dance Moms* [TV Series]. Collins Avenue.
- Collins, P.H. (1990). Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (pp. 553-564). HarperCollins.
- Collins, P.H. (2019). *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Duke University Press.
- Connell, R.W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Polity Press.
- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Cooky, S. (2022, February 12). At Super Bowl 2022, the NFL, Rams and Bengals rake in money. Cheerleaders get pennies. *NBC News: Think*.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/super-bowl-2022-nfl-rams-bengals-will-rake-money-cheerleaders-ncna1289003>
- Cornwall, A., Gideon, J., & Wilson, K. (2008). Introduction: Reclaiming Feminism: Gender and Neoliberalism. *IDS Bulletin*, 39(6), 1-9.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139-140.

- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Curtin, M. (1985). A Question of Manners: Status and Gender in Etiquette and Courtesy. *The Journal of Modern History*, 57(3), 395-423.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2003). *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Davis, C.U. (2018). Laying New Ground: Uprooting White Privilege and Planting Seeds of Equity and Inclusivity. *Journal of Dance Education*, 18(3), 120-125.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2018.1481965>
- DCC History*. (2018, March 27). Dallas Cowboys. Retrieved from
<https://www.dallascowboys.com/news/dcc-history>
- DeBenedette, V. (2016). Are Cheerleaders Athletes?. *The Physician and Sportsmedicine*, 15(9), 214-220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913847.1987.11702091>
- Deery, J. (2004). Trading Faces: The makeover show as prime-time “infomercial.” *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(2), 213-216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000251256>
- Dion, K., Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. (1972). What is beautiful is good. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 24(3), 285–290.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0033731>
- Domoff, S.E., Hinman, S.G., Koball, A.M., Storfer-Isser, A., Carhartt, V.L., Baik, K.D., & Carels, R.A. (2012). The Effects of Reality Television on Weight Bias: An Examination of *The Biggest Loser*. *Obesity*, 20(5), 993-998.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/oby.2011.378>
- Dovey, J. (2000). *Freak Show*. Pluto Press.

- Eichberg, H. (1998). Body Culture as a paradigm: The Danish sociology of sport. In *Body cultures: Essays on sport, space, and identity* (pp. 111-127). London: Routledge.
- Eichhorn, F. (2020). How the NFL “Protects” Cheerleaders with Discriminatory Policies. *ABA Journal of Labor & Employment Law*, 34(2), 289-307.
- Eisentstein, H. (2017). Hegemonic Feminism, Neoliberalism and Womenomics: ‘Empowerment’ Instead of Liberation?. *New Formations*, 91, 35-49.
<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/671949>
- FAQ. (n.d.). Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. Retrieved from
<https://dallascowboyscheerleaders.com/auditions/faq/>
- Fejes, A. (2015). Foucault, Education, and Confession. *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_256-1
- Ferguson, G. (2010). The Family on Reality Television: Who’s Shaming Whom?. *Television & New Media*, 11(2), 87-104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476409357595>
- Forbes. (2003, September 14). *Pom-Poms And Profits*.
<https://www.forbes.com/forbes/2003/0915/084.html?sh=34aa3f9c51f7>
- Foster, S.L. (2017). Dance and/as Competition in the Privately Owned US Studio. In R.J. Kowal, G. Siegmund, & R. Martin (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics* (pp. 53-76). Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
(Original work published 1969).
- Foucault, M. (1979). The Life of Infamous Men. In M. Morris & P. Patton (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Power/Truth/Strategy* (76-91). Feral Publications.

- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, & K. Soper, Trans.) The Harvester Press. (1972).
- Foucault, M. (1998). *The will to knowledge: The history of sexuality: 1*. Penguin.
- Friere, P. (1970). Cultural Action and Conscientization. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40(3), 452-477.
- Gines, K.T. (2014). Race Women, Race Men and Early Expressions of Proto-Intersectionality, 1830s-1930s. In N. Goswami, M. O'Donovan, & L. Yount (Eds.), *Why Race and Gender Still Matter: An Intersectional Approach* (pp. 13-26). Cambridge University Press.
- Glascock, J. & Preston-Schreck, C. (2018). Verbal Aggression, Race, and Sex on Reality TV: Is This Really the Way It Is?. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 62(3), 427-444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2018.1451859>
- Green, E. (2014, September 23). Cheerleaders' Fair Wage Lawsuits Add To NFL's Problems. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2014/09/23/350946942/cheerleaders-fair-wage-lawsuits-add-to-nfls-problems>
- Grindstaff, L., & West, E. (2006). Cheerleading and the Gendered Politics of Sport. *Social Problems*, 53(4), 500-518. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.500>
- Grindstaff, L., & West, E. (2010). "Hands on Hips, Smiles on Lips!" Gender, Race, and the Performance of Spirit in Cheerleading. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 30(2), 143-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462931003628910>

- Grindstaff, L., & West, E. (2011). Hegemonic Masculinity on the Sidelines of Sport. *Sociology Compass*, 5(10), 859-881. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00409.x>
- Gu, Y (Director). (2021). *A Woman's Work: The NFL's Cheerleader Problem* [Film]. Cheer Film, LLC.
- Hall, S. (1996). For Allon White: Metaphors of Transformation. In D. Morley & K.H. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (pp. 287-305). Routledge.
- Hanson, M.E. (1995). *Go! Fight! Win!: Cheerleading in American Culture*. Bowling Green University Press.
- Harrington, H. (2020). Consumer dance identity: the intersection between competition dance, televised dance shows and social media. *Research in Dance Education*, 21(2), 169-187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2020.1798394>
- Harris, A.P. (1990). Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory. *Stanford Law Review*, 42(3), 581-616.
- Hemmings, C. (2011). *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Duke University Press.
- Hirdman, A. (2015). The passion of mediated shame: Affective reactivity and classed otherness in reality TV. *European Journals of Cultural Studies*, 19(3), 283-296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415609325>
- Hopper, T.F., Madill, L.E., Bratseth, C.D., Cameron, K.A., Coble, J.D., & Nimon, L.E. (2008). Multiple Voices in Health, Sport, and Physical Education Research: Revealing Unfamiliar Spaces in a Polyvocal Review of Qualitative Research Genres. *Quest*, 60, 214-235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2008.10483578>

- Hosty, M.A. (2020). The Voices of Professional Cheerleaders and Dancers: Perceptions of Sexual Harassment (Publication No. 27960634) [Master's thesis, Arkansas State University]. ProQuest LLC.
- Jane, E.A. (2016). Is *Debbie Does Dallas* dangerous? Representations of cheerleading in pornography and some possible effects. *Feminist Media Studies*, 17(2), 264-280.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1187641>
- Johnson, A. (2005). *The gender knot: Unraveling our patriarchal legacy*. Temple University Press.
- Johnson, A.B., & Sailors, P.R. (2013). Don't bring it on: the case against cheerleading as a collegiate sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 40(2), 255-277.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2013.785421>
- Johnson, R., Chambers, D., Raghuram, P., & Tincknell, E. (2004). *The Practice of Cultural Studies*. SAGE Publications.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30, 435-464.
- Karsay, K. & Schmuck, D. (2019). "Weak, Sad, and Lazy Fatties": Adolescents' Explicit and Implicit Weight Bias Following Exposure to Weight Loss Reality TV Shows. *Media Psychology*, 22(1), 60-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1396903>
- King, S. (2008). Offensive Lines: Sport-State Synergy in an Era of Perpetual War. *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies*, 8(4), 527-539.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708608321575>
- Kluge, M.A. (2001). Confessions of a beginning qualitative researcher. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 9(1), 329-335.

- Kring, A. M., & Gordon, A. H. (1998). Sex differences in emotion: expression, experience, and physiology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(3), 686–703.
- Kring, A. M., Smith, D. A., & Neale, J. M. (1994). Individual differences in dispositional expressiveness: development and validation of the emotional expressivity scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66(5), 934–49.
- Kurman, G. (1986). What Does Girls' Cheerleading Communicate?. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20(2), 57-64.
- Lakes, R. (2005). The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 106(5), 3-20. <https://doi.org/10.3200/AEPR.106.5.3-20>
- Langlois, J.H., Kalakanis, L., Rubenstein, A.J., Larson, A., Hallam, M., & Smoot, M. (2000). Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(3), 390–423. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.126.3.390>
- Latu, I., Mast, M. S., & Kaiser, S. (2013). *Gender and emotion : An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Peter Lang.
- Lee, S.R. (2020). When Neoliberalism and Patriarchy Conspire: Plastic Surgery in the South Korean Reality TV Show Let Me In. *The Drama Review*, 64(2), 101-116. https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00922
- Liebler, C.M., Hatef, A., & Munno, G. (2016). Domestic violence as entertainment: Gender role, congruity and reality television. *Media Report to Women*, 44(1), 6-20.
- Lifetime. (n.d.). *Dance Moms*. <https://www.mylifetime.com/shows/dance-moms>
- Lorde, A. (1984). Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 53-59). The Crossing Press Feminist Series.

- Loy, J.W., McPherson, B.D., & Kenyon, G.S. (1978). Chapter 1: Sport as a social phenomenon. In *Sport and social systems* (pp. 3-26). Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Maier, C.S. (1970). Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5(2), 27-61.
- Markula, P. (2018). The Intersections of Dance and Sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 35(2), 159-167. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2017-0024>
- Markula, P., & Silk, M. (2011). Practice and the Politics of Interpretation: Textual Analysis. In *Qualitative Research for Physical Culture* (pp. 112-134). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marwick, A. (2010). There's a Beautiful Girl Under All of This: Performing Hegemonic Femininity in Reality Television. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27(3). <https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1080/15295030903583515>
- Mast, J. (2016). Negotiating the 'real' in 'reality shows': production side discourses between deconstruction and reconstruction. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(6), 901-917. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716635860>
- McGee, J. (2016). Bring It On: Professional Cheerleaders Rally Against NFL's Employment Policies. *Jeffrey S. Moorad Sports Law Journal*, 23(2), 565-594.
- McMillen, J., & McMillen, R. (2011). Sport Slogans and Trademark Law: Are the Dallas Cowboys Really 'America's Team'? *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 20, 53-55.
- Miller, T. (2001). What it is and what it isn't: Introducing...Cultural Studies. In T. Miller (Ed.), *A Companion to Cultural Studies* (pp. 1-20). Blackwell.
- Mills, S. (2004). *Discourse*. Routledge.

- Mishra, A. (2014). Multidimensional Measures of Female Disempowerment. *Social Indicators Research*, 119, 1393-1410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0544-z>
- Moffitt, L.B., & Szymanski, D.M. (2011). Experiencing Sexually Objectifying Environments: A Qualitative Study. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 39(1), 67-106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000010364551>
- Montez de Oca, J., & Cho Suh, S. (2020). Ethics of patriotism: NFL players' protest against police violence. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 55(5), 563-587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690218825210>
- Nash, J.C. (2008). Re-thinking Intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, 89, 1-15.
- Nash, J.C. (2019). *black feminism reimaged*. Duke University Press.
- Ouellette, L. & Murray, S. (2004). *Reality TV: Remaking television culture*. New York University Press.
- Ouellette, L. & Murray, S. (2008). Makeover television, governmentality and the good citizen. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 22(4): 471-484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310801982930>
- Palmer, G. (2006). Video Vigilantes and the work of shame. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 48(1). <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc48.2006/shameTV/text.html>
- Parker, S. (1988). Rituals of Gender: A Study of Etiquette, Public Symbols, and Cognition. *American Anthropologist*, 90(2), 372-384.
- Patton, T.O. (2006). Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair. *NWSA Journal*, 18(2), 24-51.

- Press, A.L. (2011). 'Feminism? That's So Seventies': Girls and Young Women Discuss Femininity and Feminism in *America's Next Top Model*. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (pp. 140-156). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rail, G., & LaFrance, M. (2009). Confessions of the flesh and biopedagogies: discursive constructions of obesity on *Nip/Tuck*. *Medical Humanities*, 35, 76-79. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jmh.2009.001610>
- Reed, P. (2000). *Bring It On* [Film]. Beacon Pictures.
- Rhode, D.L. (2010). *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*. Oxford University Press.
- Risner, D. (2008). The Politics of Gender in Dance Pedagogy. *Journal of Dance Education*, 8(3), 94-97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2008.10387364>
- Rolls, B.J., Fedoroff, I.C., & Guthrie, J.F. (1991). Gender Differences in Eating Behavior and Body Weight Regulation. *Health Psychology*, 10(2), 133-142.
- Roth, A. & Basow, S.A. (2004). Femininity, Sports, and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 28(3), 245-265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723504266990>
- Rottenberg, C. (2014). The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. *Cultural Studies*, 28(3), 418-437. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>
- Ryan, P.T. (2005). A Case Study in the Cultural Origins of Superpower: Liberal Individualism, American Nationalism, and the Rise of High School Life, a Study of Cleveland's Central and East Technical High Schools, 1890-1918. *History of Education Quarterly*, 45(1), 66-95.

- Scharrer, E. & Blackburn, G. (2018). Is Reality TV a *Bad Girls Club*? Television Use, Docusoap Reality Television Viewing, and the Cultivation of the Approval of Aggression. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(1), 235-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699017706482>
- Scholz, S., Scholz, S., & Scholz, S. (1991). *Deep In the Heart of Texas: Reflections of Former Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders*. St. Martin's Press.
- Schrielberg, S., Kroopnick, S., Pack, E., Finglass, K.M., & Wechter, D. (Executive Producers). (2006-2007). *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team* [TV series]. CMT.
- Schrielberg, S., Kroopnick, S., Pack, E., & Finglass, K.M. (Executive Producers). (2009-2011). *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team* [TV series]. CMT.
- Schrielberg, S., Kroopnick, S., Pack, E., Zazuly, P., Anderson, C.A., & Finglass, K.M. (Executive Producers). (2018). *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making The Team* [TV series]. CMT.
- Schupp, K. (2019). Dance Competition Culture and Commercial Dance: Intertwined Aesthetics, Values, and Practices. *Journal of Dance Education*, 19(2), 58-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2018.1437622>
- Sedgwick, E.K., Frank, A., Alexander, I.E. (1995). *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Duke University Press.
- Sender, K. & Sullivan, M. (2008). Epidemics of will, failures of self-esteem: Responding to fat bodies in *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 573-584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310802190046>

- Silk, M.L. & Andrews, D.L. (2012). Sport and the Neoliberal Conjuncture: Complicating the Consensus. In Andrews, D.L. & Silk, M.L. (Eds.), *Sport and Neoliberalism: Politics, Consumption, and Culture* (pp. 1-19). Temple University Press.
- Silk, M.L., Francombe, J., & Bachelor, F. (2009). *The Biggest Loser*: The discursive constitution of fatness. *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Popular Culture*, 1(3), 369-389. https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc.1.3.369_1
- Skeggs, B., & Wood, H. (2012). *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*. Routledge.
- Smith, D. (1990). *Texts, Facts and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling*. Routledge.
- Stinson, S.W. (2005). The Hidden Curriculum of Gender in Dance Education. *Journal of Dance Education*, 5(2), 51-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2005.10387285>
- Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2011). Choosing to conform: The discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(1), 98-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353511424362>
- Thompson, C. (2009). Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of *Being*. *Women's Studies*, 38(8), 831-856. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870903238463>
- Thorpe, H., Toffoletti, K., & Bruce, T. (2017). Sportswomen and Social Media: Bringing Third-Wave, Postfeminism and Neoliberal Feminism into Conversation. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 41(5), 359–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723517730808>
- Tom, E. (2010). Flip Skirt Fatales: How Media Fetish Sidelines Cheerleaders. *PLATFORM: Journal of Media and Communication*, 2(ANZCA Special Edition), 52-70.

- Tomkins, S.S. (1963). *Affect Imagery Consciousness: Volume II: The Negative Affects*.
Springer Publishing.
- Tyree, T. (2011). African American Stereotypes in Reality Television. *The Howard Journal of Communication*, 22(4), 394-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2011.617217>
- Waggoner, C.E. (2004). Disciplining Female Sexuality in Survivor. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(2), 219-222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000251256>
- Warner, M. (1991). Introduction. In M. Warner (Ed.), *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (pp. 3-17). Duke University Press.