What about me? Identity, subjectivity and reality TV participation

Winnie Salamon

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Abstract

This thesis examines first person accounts of former reality television participants who have appeared on Australian versions of *Big Brother*, *Australian Idol* and *The Biggest Loser*. While scholars have researched audience responses to a wide range of reality shows, little research has been conducted on the participants themselves. My qualitative research study involving 15 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with reality TV participants addresses this gap, using these accounts to explore broader issues surrounding late modern identity and subjectivity.
Declaration

This is to certify that

1. the thesis comprises only my original work
2. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all material used
3. the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of bibliography

Winnie Salamon
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Introduction

In many ways, research for this project began several years before its official commencement. In 2003 I was asked to cover the first *Australian Idol* auditions for popular Australian tabloid magazine, *NW*. My role was to arrive at the Melbourne-based auditions before sunrise and interview contestants, many of whom had camped out overnight to audition for a program that most people in Australia had not yet heard of. Some were professional musicians, most were not. While some auditionees turned up, tongue firmly in cheek, dressed as Michael Jackson or Elvis or a sex-kitten of some sort, it appeared that for the majority of this group of thousands, this was yet another potential opportunity to catapult themselves into a career in show-biz, to show the world a talent that participants would often describe as a ‘gift from God.’ For me, this was the first of many reality television show auditions I would attend as a media professional, and the beginning of a series of interviews I would conduct with reality television hopefuls and participants, some of whom would go on to achieve subsequent career success courtesy of their program of choice, while others, arguably most, would experience first-hand the reality television cliché of fifteen minutes of ‘d-grade celebrity’, and not a single second more.

During these years working as a journalist for various entertainment magazines I would go on to interview participants on family reality show, *Wife Swap*, copious Elvis and Roy Orbison impersonators hoping for a spot on *Star Struck*, potential male strippers on *Strip Search*, young women embarking on a journey of decorum on *Australian Princess*; and I would be commissioned to be the exclusive *TV Week* reporter on the Idol-like talent show, *X Factor*, which was such a flop I was eventually advised to give up reporting on the program.
because nobody cared about the contestants, not even while the show was still on air.

During this time, I also continued to interview contestants from subsequent series of *Australian Idol* as well as the then Queen of reality television, *Big Brother*.

For a journalist, interviewing reality television participants just before, and during, the peak of their success was in many ways inspiring. While I cynically understood the ‘reality’ that most of the people I interviewed would not be able to maintain the level of fame and career ‘success’ they were currently experiencing, and that most would probably not be able to utilize their reality television experience as a springboard to become famous musicians or media personalities or actor/models, it was difficult not to get a little caught up in the youthful joy of their overnight success, especially when they talked about how much more exciting their lives had become now that they didn’t have to work at Target, or shear sheep or simply go to high school. Looking back over my interview notes from that time, phrases such as ‘grown in confidence,’ ‘character building’ and ‘more than I ever dreamed of’ appear repeatedly. Of course, this discourse of life-changing personal transformation resides at the core of reality television programming and it is, at least in part, what makes such programming so appealing to audiences, myself included. At the same time, the confessional aspect on which such programming is based is also what makes good tabloid magazine copy.

Professionally speaking, interviewing reality television contestants was relatively easy. Unlike more experienced celebrities, most reality television participants were more than willing to reveal the kinds of personal details about themselves that a more media-savvy television personality would be likely to keep quiet. While there was the odd occasion when a participant would insist on a three-way conversation that included the presence of his or her
manager or publicist, the interview experience was usually unhindered by bossy gatekeepers censoring half the questions on my list. This is not to say the interview direction was entirely up to me. Prior to such interviews, editors would often shamelessly admit that they were not interested in reality participant’s relationship with God, their talents, career aspirations or their journey of self discovery. If I did submit a piece that talked about a participant’s love of music, for example, it would be described as boring and I would be required to resubmit a piece that explored a more ‘appropriate’ angle. Sometimes I would even be supplied with a list of potential ‘hot’, or ‘interesting’, topics on which to focus. These would include issues such as weight problems, drug issues, relationship dilemmas, romance or conflict with fellow reality contestants, serious family problems such as suicide or jail sentences or overcoming hardship such as the death of a loved one or mental illness. More than once I was instructed to ask an interviewee for an old ‘fat photo.’ Despite the openness with which most reality television participants would talk, it would usually take at least an hour of conversation to get the kind of copy requested by my editors. By that time I had inevitably developed a rapport, and a respect, for the person I had interviewed and, more often than not, I would keep much of the salacious information to myself, knowing that the context in which it would be presented would probably not be favorable. In this sense, perhaps, I was not a very good journalist.

When I began researching this thesis in 2006 I knew I wanted to tell the stories of former reality TV participants, using their words as extensively as possible, in a way that has not been done before either in the mainstream media or academic scholarship. While very few former reality TV participants have the opportunity to discuss their experiences publicly post-reality TV, I had a feeling that these stories involving self-improvement, career
advancement (or not), struggles with self-esteem, body-image, identity construction, fame, relationships, health, success and failure could tell us about more than simply what it’s like to appear on a reality TV show. While the participants interviewed for this study appeared on Australian versions of *Big Brother*, *Idol* and *The Biggest Loser*, the internationally franchised nature of these programs suggests that such programs, and therefore presumably experiences, are not unique to Australian television programming. While there are no doubt some cultural differences unique to each country that produces their own version of the programs I have studied, many of the issues raised by reality TV participants arguably confront, and shape, the ‘journey of the self’ within 21st century western capitalism. For these reasons I wanted to use the stories of former reality TV participants as a springboard to further explore broader issues surrounding late modern identity and subjectivity.

This thesis has therefore been divided into seven chapters that examine various facets of late modern identity and subjectivity. *Chapter One* provides an overview of current scholarship concerning reality TV, talk shows and other forms of lifestyle programming. It also looks to the work of various identity theorists and sociologists (Allen and Malhotra 1997; Bauman 2000, 2007; Bauman and Vecchi 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Beck and Wllms 2004; Foucault 1978; Foucault and Rabinow 1997; Furedi 2004; Giddens 1991; Goffman 1959, 1968, 1981; Goffman, Lemert, and Branaman 1997; Illouz 2003, 2008) in order to set up the theoretical framework that was used to analyse the first person interview data that provided the primary material of this project.

*Chapter 2* outlines my methodological approach which involved 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals who have appeared on *Australian Idol*, *Big Brother* and *The Biggest
Loser. It discusses issues and concerns surrounding qualitative research and emphasises the role of the ‘ethnographic gaze’ when conducting and analysing interview transcripts.

Chapter 3 asserts that the performance of identity is an inevitable part of both the postmodern subject and, of course, reality television participation. Drawing on the primary material it explores the tension that exists between postmodern and Cartesian theories of identity, arguing that Giddens’ theory of a consistent biographical narrative is useful for explaining the way that most individuals make sense of who they are in a shifting, postmodern universe. Chapter 4 moves on from the concept of performing identities and looks to the reality TV ‘journey’ of personal transformation as indicative of the way that therapeutic discourse has come to play an increasingly significant role in everyday life, shaping how individuals view and construct their sense of self.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the construction of the self within the context of consumer-driven capitalism, a self encouraged to become a marketable ‘brand’. By looking at the way in which many reality television participants move from being typecast to ‘branded,’ this chapter argues that all citizens residing in late modernity are encouraged to construct themselves, in the words of self-help guru Tom Peters, as ‘a brand called you’ (Peters 2006). Chapter 6, in contrast, interrogates experiences of disappointment and failure that have become an inevitable side effect for many reality TV participants and everyday citizens living in a consumer driven and relatively disposable society. It draws on theories of fame and celebrity to interrogate the reality television participant experience of disposable celebrity and success.
The final chapter discusses the impact reality television participants can realistically have when it comes to challenging and reconstructing the traditional public sphere. It argues that while difficult, it is possible for participants to subvert and challenge both political policies and directly engage with what Giddens refers to as ‘life politics’, ‘the politics of self-actualisation in a reflexively ordered environment’ (Giddens 1991 p. 214). Ultimately, this chapter concludes, reality television is political in a way that transcends traditional politics and therefore contributes to the broadening of the public sphere.

While Chapter Two outlines how and why the reality shows and interview subjects were selected for this study, it is useful here to explain in some detail what Big Brother, Australian Idol and The Biggest Loser are actually about. All three programs have aired on Australian free-to-air network, Channel 10. Big Brother was the first of these programs to air in Australia, commencing in 2001 with the final season airing in 2008. Between 14 and 23 ‘housemates’ were selected each year to participate on the program. All contestants committed to living for up to three months in a share-house style situation in the Big Brother house, located in the Queensland based theme park, Dreamworld. Isolated from the outside world and subjected to 24 hour video surveillance, Big Brother participants were able only to communicate with each other, the program’s host or the disembodied voice of Big Brother himself. Each week housemates were required to complete a task prescribed by ‘Big Brother’. If they completed the task successfully they were rewarded. If not, they were punished, often by being forced to live on basic food rations for a week. On Sunday nights participants visited the private ‘diary’ room to nominate three housemates they would like to see evicted from the program. Participants who received the most nominations by their fellow housemates were then put up for ‘eviction’ and voted ‘off’ by audiences who could phone in to determine who would
be evicted the following week. The final person left in the house became the overall winner of a cash prize that ranged from $250,000 to $1 million over the eight seasons the show aired. *Big Brother* Australia was cancelled after its final 2008 season attracted only around 945,000 viewers, in contrast to the 1.7 million individuals who watched during the show’s peak in 2003.

*Australian Idol* follows a similar format to the British singing competition *Pop Idol* created by entertainment executive Simon Fuller. Like *Big Brother*, *Idol* is also defined as an ‘interactive reality show’ in that the winner is determined by audience telephone voting. In *Idol*, however, 12 finalists are determined by a panel of judges who watch participants undertake a series of auditions that are held in cities around Australia. Both professional musicians and amateurs can audition for the program, but participants must be between 16 and 28 years old. After a series of semi-finals the final 12 are selected and audiences then watch a weekly Sunday night performance show where participants must perform a song consistent with a weekly theme – eighties, jazz, top 10 hits and so on. Audiences then vote on who they believe should be the next ‘Australian Idol.’ At the beginning of each Monday night elimination show, the ‘bottom three’ are announced and the contestant who receives the least number of votes is eliminated. When only two contestants remain, a grand finale is held at the Sydney Opera house. The winner is voted for by audiences and receives a recording contract with record label Sony BMG.

The third reality show included in this study, *The Biggest Loser*, debuted in 2006 and is based on the American version of the same name. It is primarily a weight loss competition where overweight contestants, guided by two personal trainers, compete to lose the most
percentage of their body weight while being broken up into two teams and voting each other out. The program airs for 30 minutes on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and for 60 minutes on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Participants are weighed during a weekly ‘weigh in’ and the team who loses the least amount of body weight in total is up for elimination. Participants must then vote for one of three team members who fell below the ‘yellow line’ because they lost the least percentage of body weight during the week. Participants who remain ‘above the yellow line’ cannot be considered for elimination. This process of elimination continues throughout the series until only three participants remain. When only the ‘final three’ are left, all the previously eliminated contestants return to the program and are weighed for one last time at the season finale. However, only the ‘final three’ are eligible to be crowned ‘the biggest loser,’ a $200,000 cash prize determined by the most percentage of body weight lost.

‘Narrative has become a key category to understand how selfhood is constituted through culture, how the self communicates with others, and how one makes sense of one's place in a particular social environment’ , writes Eva Illouz (Illouz 2008 p. 172). ‘A biographical narrative selects and connects the significant events in one's life, giving a person's life meaning, direction and purpose’ (Illouz 2008 p. 172). This thesis argues that by examining the narratives constructed by both reality television programming and the individuals who have participated in it, we can develop a greater understanding of what it means to be an individual residing in western capitalist late modernity. We have after all, as Nicholas Rose puts it, become ‘psychological selves’ (Rose 1997 p. 234). Through the magnifying lens of reality TV, a genre that puts the psychological self under the spotlight, manipulates,
deconstructs and then reconstructs the individual in the form of a drama-fuelled narrative, we can interrogate the late-modern self up close.
Chapter 1

Reality television and our collective selves: a history and a review of the literature

During a recent trip to a suburban Melbourne shopping mall, I overheard a conversation between a young man and woman. The woman, clearly distressed, said to the man, ‘I just don’t know who I am anymore. I feel lost.’

‘I know what you mean,’ the man replied.

‘I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, I can’t relax’ the woman continued. ‘Bloody iPod. Why did it have to break?’

In her own way, this woman with the faulty iPod was signifying the precarious nature of late modern identity. Without her iPod, the woman felt that a part of her was missing and that she would have to, once again, renegotiate her sense of self in order to discover ‘who she is’ now. Experiencing the burden of ontological insecurity, the woman is, in many ways, an exemplary member of what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as ‘liquid modernity,’ a consumer-driven society where ‘the opportunity to ‘shop around,’ to pick and shed one’s true self, to ‘be on the move,’ has come…to signify freedom’ (Bauman 2000 pp. 16-17), but also, insecurity (Giddens 1991). For the woman at the shopping mall, owning a particular consumer object, her iPod, identifies her in a specific way. Without it, she becomes someone else – an insecure and sleepless individual, uncertain of her core identity. A woman lost in a constantly shifting, postmodern universe.
Many scholars have written extensively about the ontological insecurity that individuals face in late modernity. No longer born with a set identity at birth, ‘belonging and identity are not cut in rock, they are not secured by a lifelong guarantee…they are eminently negotiable and revocable’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 11). As Bauman suggests, the thought of ‘having an identity’ will not occur to people as long as ‘belonging’ remains their fate, a condition with no alternative. Bauman, for example, didn’t question his identity as a Pole until he was expelled from Poland in 1968 (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 12). In 21st century life in the West, however, identity is, in the words of Bauman, the ‘burning issue on everybody’s mind and tongue’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 pp. 16-17). For individuals residing in Western capitalist nations, the organizing force of external institutions such as the Church, the State or the family is lessened, making it is almost impossible not to ponder who one is or who one wants to become (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 23).

With this in mind, late modern identity is the ‘burning issue’ of this thesis. The reality television programs examined in this study are a mediatised, constructed and highly manipulated version of ‘reality.’ Yet, like the conversation at Highpoint, they work to highlight the modern day task of renegotiating one’s sense of self over and over again. The \textit{Biggest Loser}, \textit{Australian Idol} and even \textit{Big Brother} are ultimately programs about challenging oneself to discover who one ‘really’ is. Through ruthless competition, physical makeovers and a series of competitive ‘tasks,’ these programs operate as ‘aspirational’ opportunities for participants to improve and shape their lives, and their sense of self, in various ways. This thesis looks to first-person accounts of reality television participants to question the broader issue of individual subjectivity. How do such individuals negotiate the tension between themselves as fluid post-modern beings and as beings with an innate core that defines who
they are? What does this paradox say about late modern identity construction in general?

This study also aims to interrogate the contradictions present in reality TV notions of performance and authenticity and also of the self as a kind of work-in-progress. How do individuals navigate their way through present day consumer culture and what impact does it have on the way they construct their identities? Finally, I want to test how reality television participation might contribute to the broadening of a public political sphere.

**Reality TV: the research so far**

By 2002, a year after its Australian debut, *Big Brother*, which first aired in the Netherlands in 1999, had become an academic media phenomenon. Researchers began to question how programs like *Big Brother* could be linked to theories and concepts of everyday life. Or, as Ib Bondebjerg points out, ‘Everyday life has always been related to studying TV, but never before have academics been offered the chance to see specific, concrete examples of role playing, ritual behaviour, scandals, moral outrage and cultural values at work within the scope of one format’ (Mathijs and Jones 2004 p. 2). Not surprisingly, academics have approached this hybrid, not easily definable¹ format in a variety of ways.

Drawing on and challenging the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault 1978; Foucault and Rabinow 1997), John Dovey focuses on the confessional aspect of ‘first-person’ media arguing that its growing popularity is indicative of a fundamental change in the public sphere to the extent that a new public sphere, based on the acknowledgement of both difference

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¹ Like tabloid journalism, Hill argues, reality TV is a fluid and hybrid genre that uses three main strands of media production – tabloid journalism, documentary TV and popular entertainment such as talk shows, game shows, sports and leisure programs (Hill 2005).
and mutuality, is emerging (Dovey 2000 p. 103). He sees the confessional discourses of personal transformation and growth that dominate reality television, and other forms of first-person media such as talk shows, as being largely connected to contemporary capitalism. He writes, ‘Is it any surprise that an economic system that offers us personal power only through consumer choice should also offer the often unattainable goal of personal liberation through quick fix psychic solutions, rather than through a therapeutic process or sense of socially situated action’ (Dovey 2000 p. 121)? Dovey also disputes the application of the Foucauldian confessional to contemporary television culture, arguing that Foucault’s interpretation of the linear hierarchy whose power structure often results in the confessor being marked as deviant is now ‘dispersed and diffracted, operating laterally amongst many different sites within television. It no longer commands a totalizing grip on identity and necessitates in this case, a far more specific engagement with the particular ways of speaking the self that the contemporary media produce’ (Dovey 2000 p. 108).

Ouellette and Hay expand on this preposition by arguing that, ‘Reality TV has become another resource for a better life’ (Ouellette and Hay 2008 p. 3). They suggest that reality TV has become the ‘quintessential technology of advanced neo-liberal citizenship’ (Ouellette and Hay 2008 p. 4), replacing, to some extent, a downsized public welfare system. For McQuire, however, the confessional nature of reality TV is not so much about replacing a traditional welfare system, but about a shift in what privacy actually means. ‘What is at stake in this shift is not only a new degree of flexibility in self-construction,’ he writes, ‘but a new understanding of the level of personal detail it is acceptable to reveal in everyday social interaction.’ Within the context of reality television, at least, ‘Expressing one’s innermost
feelings in public is no longer seen as placing a burden upon others, but constitutes a mark of one’s personal integrity’ (McQuire 2008 p. 196).

TV is central to the role of the lifestyle expert, argues Tania Lewis. She agrees with Ouellette and Hay that television has, in fact, developed a more educational function because, ‘the growing ordinariness of television is marked in part by the breaking down of gender hierarchies around expertise and the mixture of male and female presenters of lifestyle television’ (Lewis 2008). Lewis uses the hosts of the lifestyle makeover show, *Queer Eye For a Straight Guy*, to emphasise the increasingly blurred boundaries between masculine and feminine as ‘the fab five and their queered masculinity function to mediate, negotiate and most importantly colonise the feminine realm traditionally associated with lifestyle issues’ (Lewis 2007 p. 288). Life-politics thereby become emancipatory in a mainstream commercial television format that champions the knowledge of five gay men whose marginalized sexuality is celebrated and is, in fact, a large part of what makes them experts. For Catherine Lumby, there is much to celebrate about what she deems to be an increasingly democratic public sphere. According to Lumby, the traditional patriarchal public sphere offered little benefit to women, whereas first-person media not only offers a diversity of voices, it can also be empowering. Lumby’s example of the Lory family, whose appearances on shows like *Sally Jessi Raphael* and *Hard Copy* not only enabled their daughter’s story of sexual assault to be heard but also helped pay for decent legal representation (Lumby 1999 p. 254), demonstrates the potential that first person confessional media has to contradict and challenge traditional hierarchies.
But while ordinariness may be central to the success of reality TV participants, the democratic promise of this new media is problematic according to scholars such as Alison Hearn and Mark Andrejevic (Andrejevic 2004; Hearn 2006, 2008). According to Andrejevic, the idea of the ‘savvy viewer’ participating in a new democracy is a false one, because by enticing viewers to participate, producers are getting cheap labour for big profit. Participants are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to that in which they sell their labour power. For Andrejevic, ‘The notion that collective participation in the creation of cultural commodities salvages their claim to authenticity implicitly invokes a critique of the top-down forms of control associated with the culture industry’ (Andrejevic 2004 p. 12). To support his view, Andrejevic looks at Big Brother contestants who often tend to argue they enter into the Big Brother house, not for the potential prize money, but for the experience. Andrejevic cites an example from one Big Brother series where producers offered contestants $50,000 if they agreed to leave the show voluntarily. No one accepted this offer because, they said, the very experience of being on the show is ‘priceless.’

Ironically, what the contestants were arguing as priceless, asserts Andrejevic, was an experience of comprehensive surveillance, one typically associated with oppression and control. For what they perceived to be an experience of self-growth and betterment, contestants were prepared to enter ‘freely into a relationship in which most of them would receive less than minimum wage for their participation in a show designed to earn the network millions of dollars’ (Andrejevic 2004 p. 145).

While Andrejevic’s argument is compelling, reality TV cannot be wholly evaluated in economic terms because this ultimately dismisses the experience of participants. As Lewis points out, ‘Speaking directly to ordinary issues through powerful personalised narratives of transformation, lifestyle-related advice addresses audiences not only as individual consumers but also as members of an emotional or affective community. Rather than late modernity
being conceptualised purely in terms of 'the evolution of individualism,' social existence can also be seen to be marked by 'networks of solidarity' forged around sensual and emotional ties' (Lewis 2008 p. 15). Audiences, and arguably participants, are therefore not simply subject to Andrejevic’s ‘top down’ forms of control, but part of an emotional ‘community’ forged together by these overt displays of emotion.

The complex nature of reality television programming has of course inspired scholars to examine a plethora of other issues related to the genre. John Corner’s work on documentary, for example, interrogates performance and authenticity on Big Brother (Corner 2000, 2002) while The Tube has Spoken, a collection of essays about reality television, takes a historical perspective (Taddeo 2010). Su Holmes’ excellent analysis of the construction of the ‘success myth’ on Pop Idol is one of (Holmes 2004) several examinations of fame and celebrity (Collins 2008; Littler 2003; Tolson 2001; Turner 2004; Turner 2005; Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000; Biressi 2004) while many others have explored notions of ‘reality’ (Busse 2006; Cummings and Institute of Ideas. 2002; Hill 2005; Tolson 2001) and surveillance (Andrejevic 2004).

But while scholars such as Hill (Hill 2002, 2005) and Lumby and Probyn (Probyn and Lumby 2003) have researched audience responses to a wide range of reality shows, little research, so far, has been conducted on the participants themselves. Although there have been some strong, fascinating and thorough studies into the experience of talk show participants (Griffen-Foley 2004; Priest 1995), former reality television participants tend to find themselves, and their experiences, quickly dismissed as yesterday’s news in both the mainstream media and academic circles. In their edited collection of essays about reality
show *Survivor*, Smith and Wood suggest that there can be difficulties interviewing former *Survivor* participants because they continue to be bound by contractual agreements long after the show has ceased production (Smith and Wood 2003). While the participants I interviewed were not bound by any contractual agreement, this may, at least in part, explain the limited research conducted into participant experience so far. Other researchers, such as Richard Huff, who have touched on participant experience, have limited their analysis to press clippings taken from interviews with former reality television participants (Huff 2006). Only one study, which was commissioned by the British Broadcasting Standards Commission and focused on how producers go about obtaining informed consent from reality television contestants, conducted both one-on-one and focus group interviews (Commission 2000). Outside academia, the award winning documentary *Afghan Star* followed the experiences of young Afghans often risking their lives to compete in Afghanistan’s version of *Australian Idol*. After 30 years of war and Taliban rule, the documentary, largely told through the voices of the participants, emphasises both the political and personal implications of competing in such a series.

By carrying out fifteen in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with individuals who have appeared on either *Australian Idol*, *Big Brother* or *The Biggest Loser*, I hope to, at least in some way, begin to fill this gap in the current academic research. As Hill asserts, what’s ‘real’ and what isn’t is irrelevant – what matters are the ideologies, the ethical dilemmas and the power relationships that reality shows embody (Hill 2005 p. 123). By talking to the people playing out these narratives, we can get some idea of the kind of impact these value systems have, Hill argues, not only on individual participants, but by all those who partake in the ‘endless project of the self’ (Giddens, cited in Hill p. 123). By talking to the participants
themselves, we can add a new layer to what it means to be part of a reality program and what this says about the way individuals in Western capitalist countries construct their sense of self.

**In context: reality TV and history**

While the term ‘reality TV’ was first coined when Endemol launched *Big Brother* in the Netherlands in 1999, it is useful to look back further to a time when first-person media infiltrated the printed press, setting the groundwork for the first person ‘factual’ television that would eventually follow it. Media heavily reliant on first-person accounts to both personalise and entertain an audience has a much longer history than perhaps expected. This history is peppered with controversy and suspicion, as Griffen-Foley makes clear in her analysis of audience-driven media that ranged from audience interactive periodicals of the 1880s, to popular confessional magazines in the 1920s, to the mass market women’s magazines of the 1940s to the current deluge of reality shows (Griffen-Foley 2004).

In her study Griffen-Foley looks back to the second half of the nineteenth century as the birth of ‘new journalism’ which emerged in Britain and the US. This new style of writing was brighter, friendlier and more accessible and aimed to appeal to the increasingly literate lower middle classes who, rather than focus on politics and hard news, journalism, some commentators argued, now had the potential to diminish the growing social and geographic distances between individuals. By encouraging readers contributions and feedback, editors sought to offer readers some kind of connection between their product and their audience. *Tit-Bits* was the first periodical to introduce this new, personalized style of journalism. Established in 1881, *Tit-Bits* began as an alternative to the sporting periodicals and the mid-
Victorian family papers aimed at women and families. It included question and answer segments and aimed to create a sense of community amongst its readers. The periodical proved so successful that in 1888 an imitator called *Answers to Correspondents* was successfully launched in spite of disgruntled critics who considered such forms of publishing to be responsible for national degradation (Griffen-Foley 2004). A century before Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey came along, the creators of these periodicals had already figured out a way ‘to define and exploit the common interest of the middle class in inclusive rather than exclusive terms’ (Griffen-Foley 2004 p. 535).

Of course, the hybrid nature of reality television means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint exactly when and how it began. Hill, for example, says that the rise of reality TV occurred in three waves: the first in the late 1980s and 90s with crime and emergency services programs like *Cops*. The second wave included docusoaps and lifestyle programming while the third wave consists of social experiments and reality gameshows (Hill 2005 p. 2). Richard Huff, on the other hand, cites 1950s game show, *Queen for a day*, as one of the original ‘makeover’ shows in that it rewarded a housewife with an appliance after she’d revealed a horrible life story (Huff 2006). However, as Fred Nadis points out, a man called Allen Funt was creating reality TV long before the genre had a name (Nadis 2010).

In 1947 Funt produced a radio program called *The Candid Microphone.* Considering himself a researcher who conducted experiments in human nature, Funt originally hoped to ‘create a program that would simply record the beauty of everyday conversation’ (Nadis 2010 p. 14). However, Funt soon realized that while the hidden microphone would occasionally pick up examples of riveting conversation, much of the time these secret recordings lacked the
drama required to be compelling to an audience. One day, while hiding a microphone in a dentist’s office, Funt was interrupted by a customer who mistook him for a dentist. On impulse, Funt decided to examine her mouth and pretend the woman had no wisdom teeth. The heated discussion that followed forever transformed Funt’s role from ‘eavesdropper’ to ‘dramatic provocateur’ (Nadis 2010 p. 14).

When Candid Microphone’s video-based descendant, Candid Camera first aired in 1948, television was very much in its infancy. Many believed that with its poor image quality, the small screen was best suited to live programs that created a feeling of intimacy. In fact, much of early TV was live and included talk shows, quiz shows and live dramas. Funt, however, offered off-the-cuff introductions to the films featured on Candid Camera and live banter with his co-host continued throughout the program. By 1960, Candid Camera was a huge success and, now hosted by Funt’s son Peter, it continues to air today. It’s website, Candid Camera Online! even declares it to be television’s most watched reality show (Candid Camera Online! 2010).

Like Big Brother and its predecessors, Candid Microphone and Candid Camera received extensive interest from both academics and the media. For example, David Reisman, referring to what we would now call ‘performative identity’ said that Candid Microphone ‘led to the emergence of an ‘outer-directed’ personality anxious to smile and please’ (Nadis 2010 p. 14), while in-depth articles about the programs appeared in Life, New Yorker and Saturday Evening Post. Perhaps most significantly, Allen Funt demonstrated that ‘reality’ had to be manipulated, poked and prodded in order to provide entertaining television. Like contestants in Big Brother who are manipulated through a series of tasks and whose footage is heavily edited, Candid
Camera only works because situations are constructed precisely in order to create dramatic tension. Long before Endemol produced Big Brother, Funt realized that it was not enough simply to eavesdrop on individuals in the hope that they would provide entertainment by offering the producer the spontaneous emotional reaction they seek. For the sake of entertainment, real life had to be manufactured. As Nadis concludes, ‘the last incarnation of Candid Camera, of course, is surrounded by its progeny: the many reality shows that borrow Funt’s strategies of low cost production’, constant surveillance, voiceover and editing to tweak real life into entertainment’ (Nadis 2010 p. 25).

Following Candid Camera’s success came ‘docusoaps’ such as An American Family which first aired in the US in 1973. The 12 episode series was edited down from some 300 hours of footage and followed the lives of an American nuclear family (Taddeo 2010). A year later, a UK version following the same format was produced by Paul Watson who, in 1992, produced the Australian docusoap, Sylvania Waters followed suit, documenting the lives of a newly wealthy family in Sydney.

While Hill asserts that the first wave of reality TV occurred in the late 1980s and 90s with crime and emergency services programs like Cops (Hill 2005) and MTV programs such as The Apprentice.

\(^2\) Just how cheap reality TV actually is to produce is contentious. In 2004 the Wall Street Journal ran an article about the ‘rising costs’ of producing a reality TV show. During this time an episode of UPN’s Top Model, cost around $800,000 while an episode while Donald Trump’s highly profitable, The Apprentice was almost $2 million – on par with the average costs associated with producing an episode of a one-hour drama. As sets become more elaborate and the salaries of experienced reality-show crew members increases, reality TV is becoming increasingly more expensive (Dehnart 2004). However, this multi-marketing, sponsor driven from of entertainment is, when successful, also highly profitable. As one analyst told The Age in 2002, ‘Big Brother has a ratings effect not dissimilar to Australian Football League, so paying $28 million for [the entire season]… is cheap and it sets them up for their prime time schedule. Channel Ten cannot afford not to do it next year’ (Lawson 2002).
Real World, this period also defined the confessional daytime talk show. During the 1990s in Australia, for example, Donahue, Rikki Lake, The Oprah Winfrey Show and Sally Jessie Raphael aired five days a week. Hence, while programs like Candid Camera put ordinary people in the spotlight and Cops showed ‘real-life-real-time’ footage, the confessional, first-person nature of the television talk show operated as a kind of initiation into the explosion of the ‘life-changing’ reality TV programs that feature ‘ordinary people’ telling their stories in hope for a better life. While Oprah produced numerous hour long shows featuring the before and after weight loss journey, NBC gave audiences the opportunity to view a week by week account of obese people trying to lose weight when it premiered The Biggest Loser in 2004. Or while Ricki Lake included talented teens following their dreams amongst her talk show topics, viewers from Australia to Norway to America have had the opportunity to audition for their own version of the three month long Pop Idol series. Even Big Brother, with its voyeuristic shared-house experience, is in some ways an extension of the confessional ‘spill-it-all’ nature of the day-time talk show. Academic studies of talk shows, women’s magazines, romance novels, television dramas and soap operas (Ang 1985; Grindstaff 2002; Priest 1995; Radway 1991; Hermes 1995; Blumenthal 1997; Geraghty 1991) also foreshadowed academic research into reality television in that the ‘cultural studies’ approach adopted by researchers in this field demonstrated an increased readiness to sample audience voices in more than a quantitative fashion.

Reality television and talk shows, with their emphasis on the first-person confessional and personal experience do not, of course, exist in a vacuum. It is significant, to note that by the 1960s, when Candid Camera had established itself as one of television’s most watched shows, the expanding influence of psychology began to flourish (Furedi 2004 p. 17). By the 1970s,
at least in Britain argues Frank Füredi, there began a shift from problems ‘rooted in the social realm’ to those problems being constructed as personal and emotional (Furedi 2004 p. 27). For Furedi, this increasingly dominant therapeutic discourse is about imposing a new conformity on the management of people’s everyday emotions inciting individuals to feel powerless and ill (Furedi 2004). By the 1980s emphasis on mental health and ‘public emoting’ became even more prevalent, arguably setting the stage for a climate that would not only accept, but celebrate, televised self-help and public confession in the form of talk shows and later, reality television. In Australia, organizations such as Beyond Blue, Relationships Australia and SANE Australia campaign to educate Australians about the importance of mental health. On their extensive website, Beyond Blue include personal accounts of those who have suffered depression and anxiety as well as information for primary schools, the workforce and rural Australia. They also give information for both internet and ‘real life’ support groups. To demonstrate just how quotidian therapeutic discourse has become, Füredi conducted Factiva searches of 300 UK newspapers to determine how many references there were to commonly used psych terms such as ‘self-esteem,’ ‘stress’, ‘syndrome,’ ‘counseling’ and ‘trauma.’ Not surprisingly, the use of all of these terms rose dramatically between 1980-2001. In 1980 not a single reference to the term ‘self-esteem’ was found, for example. By 1986 there were three citations, in 1990 there were 103. By 2000, this figure had risen to a staggering 3,328 (Furedi 2004 pp. 3-7).

According to Füredi, ‘The rise of reality TV and self-disclosure television…exemplifies the mass transmission of streams of emotion’ and ‘mirrors new cultural norms about notions of intimacy and private space’ (Furedi 2004 p. 40). And, just as Jane Shattuc argues in, The talking cure : TV talk shows and women (Shattuc 1997), this relatively recent, and growing,
emphasis on the inner-emotional life of the individual has ‘contributed to the process of
distracting people from engaging with the wider social issues in favour of an inward turn to
the self’ (Furedi 2004). In contrast to Furedi who pathologises the mainstreaming of
psychology, Eva Illouz looks at the growing role of psychology in the 20th century in a
broader sense. As she so aptly puts it:

‘By insisting that the therapeutic lexicon depoliticizes problems that are social and collective,
many sociologists have made it difficult for themselves to understand why the new middle
classes and women have enthusiastically endorsed the therapeutic discourse, other than by
presuming, somewhat implausibly, that theirs is a ‘false’ consciousness or by presuming that
modern societies are governed by a seamless process of surveillance equally embodied in
computerized control of citizens and in the therapists office’ (Illouz 2008 p. 19).

This thesis undeniably perceives late modern individuals as the ‘psychological selves’ Nikolas
Rose suggests we have ‘become’ (Rose 1997 p. 234). However, Chapter Four, in particular will
problematise views articulated by Füredi and Shattuc and look to Illouz and Rose who
argues that what he terms ‘technologies for the government of the soul’ do not operate
‘through the crushing of subjectivity in the interests of control and profile, but by seeking to
align political, social and institutional goals with individual pleasures and desires and with the

The interest in observing everyday behaviour, intimate confession and social interaction is
arguably an integral part of modernity. Hence, reality television has a much longer and more
complex history than may perhaps be expected and it is one that is not easily definable. It is
one ingrained in various facets of late modern society that is consumerist, individualist and
where therapeutic discourse has become the language of everyday, a language the
fundamentally underpins the reality genre.

**High culture vs low: qualitative research and television studies**

While *Chapter Two* will examine qualitative research methodologies in greater depth, it is
useful here to look at some pivotal examples of television studies, as well as at the work of
popular culture theorists such as John Hartley and John Fiske (Fiske 1989; Fiske and Hartley
2003; Hartley 1992, 1992), who have looked to both audiences and participants to increase
our understanding of the role that television plays in shaping, and representing, everyday life
and culture. In a climate of increasingly accessible participatory media, a cultural studies
approach suggests that it is inadequate to argue that the profit-driven culture industry, which
produces work for mass consumption (Adorno and Bernstein 1991 p. 3), merely provides a
uniform ideology that upholds the status quo.

In her classic reception study on the 1980s soap opera *Dallas*, Ien Ang adopts a cultural
studies approach by using first-person audience responses as her primary material. Ang
asked *Dallas* viewers to write to her about their experiences with the show, using these
responses as a basis to explore the relationship between pleasure and ideology. For Ang,
Adorno’s concept of the culture industry and the Marxist view that the capitalist market
economy isn’t interested in audience enjoyment beyond what is sold and consumed, is
problematic. ‘The way in which a cultural product is consumed can therefore not be directly
deduced from the way in which it is produced’ (Ang 1985 p. 18). From the point of view of
production, the product may be a commodity. But from the point of view of the consumer,
the product features a use value and commercially run networks are dominated by the idea of ‘giving the public what it wants’ (Ang 1985 p. 23).

For many of Ang’s informants, admitting to finding pleasure in Dallas also meant receiving some ‘odd reactions’ from people. She found that the ideology of mass culture, an ideology that labels mass culture as bad, setting up high culture as good culture in opposition, was a powerful guideline in speaking about Dallas. For those who didn’t like the show, many used this ideology as a means of explaining their reaction. For those who did, it meant making excuses as to why they find pleasure in this form of cultural product. In Ang’s study, the border between individual experience and social ideology is blurred. ‘The ideology of mass culture fulfils a comforting and reassuring role: it makes a search for more detailed and personal explanations superfluous, because it provides a finished explanatory model that convinces, sounds logical and radiates legitimacy’ (Ang 1985 p. 23). The anti-Dallas letter writers’ reliance on this highbrow ideology of mass culture gave them confidence to criticize the program. The program’s supporters, on the other hand, simply made excuses for their interest in the show. For these Dallas fans, defending such a program meant relying on what Ang coins the ‘ideology of populism’, an ideology that sits in opposition to the ideology of mass culture, lacking the intellectual language and literary power of the ideology of mass culture. However, while Ang recognises that the ideology of mass culture can be a powerful influence on the way people react to Dallas, she makes it clear that this ideology does not exercise dictatorial powers, although it provides culturally legitimised ‘organisers’ for the way in which the social meanings of Dallas are organised and constructed. The ideology of mass culture may influence what people say, but it doesn’t prescribe people’s actual cultural practices, Ang concludes. Ironically, while many informants who used the ‘highbrow’
ideology of mass culture to criticize *Dallas*, they did not let this stop them from watching the show. However, it is much easier for audiences to talk critically about shows like *Dallas*, simply because of the established and accepted highbrow discourse that surrounds the ideology of mass culture.

What such an approach suggests is that popular culture can also work to challenge and destabilize the features of commodification, because even if subordinated or disempowered people lack the resources to create their own popular culture, they have always chosen which commodities they will use within their culture. And as media access for a range of individuals becomes more attainable, so does its ability to challenge and transform cultural norms. Popular texts are reliant on audiences and inadequate in themselves, they are not self-sufficient structures of meanings, and are only completed when they’re taken up by people and inserted into their everyday culture (Fiske 1989 p. 6). As Fiske asserts, ‘The people make popular culture at the interface between everyday life and the consumption of the products of the cultural industries’ (Fiske 1989 p. 6). Popular culture must be relevant to a mass audience if it is to remain popular.

In *The Money Shot*, Grindstaff’s ethnographic study of US daytime talk shows, Grindstaff argues that talk show guests, along with anybody who decides to declare their story to the media, are never really free of the media’s influence. Not simply because producers have more power than the guests to set the agenda, but also because the ‘typical members of a subordinate class culture always partly contest and partly agree with dominant definitions of who and what they are. This is precisely how hegemony works…if it were otherwise, popular culture would not be so popular’ (Grindstaff 2002 p. 33). In other words, every
social formation, must, in some form, reproduce the conditions of its production. However
Grindstaff also suggests there are many reasons beyond self-interest that motivate
individuals to appear on talk shows. Some of these reasons may be altruistic, with
contestants wanting to tell their story with the hope that it will benefit others, others may
decide to participate because they want to be on television, to get revenge on somebody, or
simply to get a free holiday.

Patricia Priest reiterates this point of view. In her study of *The Donahue Show*, Priest divides
the motives of guests into four distinct categories: ‘Evangelicals’ who want to make a
difference; ‘Moths’ who are looking for fame; ‘Plaintiffs’ who want to plead their case against
someone who victimized them and ‘Marketers’ who want to publicise something such as a
book or a business venture. Of course, not everyone will fit into these categories. Many
guests have mixed motivations and their decision to participate can be the result of multiple
influences and can change over time. It is clear, however, that each guest has his or her own
set of expectations about how the show works, what it can do for them and what their
‘emotional labour’ is really all about (Priest 1995 pp. 45-55).

But while the ethical, emotional and economic implications of reality television are complex and
sometimes fraught, it is imperative to note that while, ‘television is a place that rewards social
visibility and where lessons in social selfhood are watched by a mass of onlookers’ (Hartley 1992
p. 4), it is also a place that allows for the experience of pleasure, as Ang points out. Or, as
Lumby and Probyn discovered in their study of young women watching *Big Brother*, a place that
allows viewers to negotiate their way through the ‘messy ethics of ordinary existence’ (Probyn
and Lumby 2003 p. 8). Hence, as the final chapter of this thesis will suggest, and as *Afghan Star*
demonstrates, reality television can even be a site for political subversion. To celebrate reality television as an idealized and inclusive democratic public sphere would be naïve, just as it is short-sighted to deride this kind of media as an exploitative product of the culture industry. When it comes to reality television, potential participants must have a reasonable understanding of what to expect if they are to benefit from the experience. Their role, in what is ultimately a disposable, consumer product that, while having the potential to connect with audiences in a positive sense, is also a direct product of the late modern era – an era where time that moves as quickly as a reality show, constantly changing, evolving and disposing (Bauman 2007 p. 21).

The conceptual framework

The following chapter will address methodological concerns regarding the interview transcripts that constitute the primary material of this study. However, it is useful here to provide an outline of the work of the key theorists I have drawn upon in order to analyse and organise the interview transcripts into themes and categories.

Identity: reality TV and the endless project of the self

‘Television is a place that rewards social visibility,’ argues Hartley, ‘and where lessons in social selfhood are watched by a mass of onlookers’ (Hartley 1992 p. 4). Hartley may have been writing about television programming in a broader sense, but his statement rings particularly true when examining the dominant discourses or self-improvement and transformation that form the basis of reality television programs examined in this study. When participants sign up for a reality television show, for example, their primary motive is
often cited as being to develop a deeper understanding of themselves as an individual, either through the experience of participating on the program itself, or with the help of expert guidance such as obtaining first-hand ‘industry’ advice from the judges on *Australian Idol*. By sharing this experience of ‘personal growth’ with a mass audience, participants publicly embark on a kind of sped-up and magnified version of what Giddens refers to as ‘the endless project of the self,’ a reflexive endeavour of self-realisation that is enforced upon all individuals residing in late modernity (Giddens 1991). In consequence, and in a relatively short period of time, reality television participants, ‘ordinary’ citizens usually with minimal media experience, become spokespeople for these lessons in social selfhood, lessons which of course include the inevitable disposability of late modernity’s objects, experiences and celebrity.

For Giddens, citizens of late modernity are rarely satisfied with their choices, constantly on the lookout for ways to improve. There is, however, a certain degree of self-awareness involved in the construction of identity in late modern life. The reflexive project of the self, which involves the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative, takes place in the context of multiple choice. While commodification provides a standardising influence, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of ‘authorities’ means that lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity. Reflexively organised life-planning, which normally presumes a consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity (Giddens 1991 p. 5). This view of identity and the self, which Giddens attributes to everyday life in late modern times, can be applied to the participant transcripts constituting my research. Reality television programming, after all, involves participants who actively seek to reconstruct a better version of themselves as
they undergo various tasks, often under expert guidance. In late modernity, ‘the question “How shall I live?” has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat…as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991 p. 14). In reality television, the question, ‘how can I live to demonstrate the best version of myself?’ becomes the fundamental premise of such programs.

Although Erving Goffman was writing some decades before the birth of *Big Brother*, his famous quote, ‘we all act better than we know how’ (Goffman 1959 p. 74), maintains an uncanny relevance to twenty-first century reality television, a genre where ‘not being yourself’ is perhaps the greatest sin of all. Goffman’s concept of the ‘cycle of disbelief to belief,’ in particular, can be read as a kind of theoretical foreshadowing of Giddens’ ‘reflexive project of the self,’ as well as providing a theoretical grounding for the way in which this project of the self operates in aspirational reality television. Citing an example of a small-town couple who established a hotel aimed primarily for middle-class holiday makers, Goffman explains the ‘cycle of disbelief to belief’ that enabled the hotel owners, who at first had to set aside their ideas of how they felt life ought to be led in order to accommodate their middle-class customers, to become increasingly comfortable and less cynical about the ‘performance they stage; they themselves becoming middle class and more enamored of the selves their clients impute to them.’ (Goffman 1959 p. 20) In other words, the hotel owners began to ‘believe’ their own performance, thus becoming the characters whose personae they had initially consciously constructed in order to appeal to their customer base. This process can of course work in the opposite direction where an individual starts out with a particular conviction about themselves only to end in cynicism or disbelief. But regardless of the direction in which this cycle operates, it makes clear that we as individuals can
discursively construct constant and sometimes dramatic change. Rather than remain ‘true’ to a predetermined ‘core’ self, socialization does not teach us to play a specific, concrete role. Instead, we ‘learn enough pieces of expression to be able to ‘fill in’ and manage, more or less, any part that…is likely to be given’ (Goffman 1959 p. 73). The performance, then, is not ‘mere performance’ but is constitutive of deeper affect.

In reality television, this cycle of disbelief-to-belief is sped up and magnified, dramatized with music and sound effects and snappy one-liners, edited to maintain all the tension and pace of a fictional narrative. *Australian Idol*, for example, requires each contestant to perform on stage week after week, organizes public outings in which contestants are greeted by autograph hunters and screaming fans, all the while making them over with help from a professional stylist. In a matter of weeks they can go from pig farmer, as Peter Ryan did, to star. Reality television narratives may suggest that contestants are simply discovering their ‘true selves’, realising their full potential, but Goffman’s cycle of disbelief-to-belief presides at the *core* of this form of reality programming. Just like the hotel owners who were able to become their performance, a reality television participant must begin to believe he/she is a star, a thin person, an interesting person. If they do not, if they decide to spend the majority of their time in the *Big Brother* house asleep in bed as season two *Big Brother* participant Clare Bellis did, or if they join *The Biggest Loser* only to raid the fridge and eat like a ‘fat’ person, they will challenge and compromise the fundamental discourse of this kind of programming whose very purpose relies on a journey or personal growth and change. Hosts, fellow contestants, judges and audiences may suggest that these belligerent contestants are not ‘living up to who they really are’ and they are therefore unlikely to be successful. As a result they are likely to be eliminated from the program early on.
Of course, Goffman’s cycle-of-disbelief-to-belief, while still relevant today, is further complicated by the increasingly fluid nature of life in late modernity. ‘The search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless,’ writes Bauman (Bauman 2000 p. 15). Identity is an invention, the ‘target of an effort, an objective…something one still needs to build from scratch or to choose from alternative offers and then to struggle for and then to protect through yet more struggle’ (Bauman 2000 pp. 15-16). It’s no wonder, then, that Bauman argues that identity seekers, ‘invariably face the daunting task of squaring a circle’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 pp. 10-11). Reality television programs such as Idol, Loser and Big Brother follow a relatively cohesive narrative which tells the story of each participant’s journey of self-discovery, subsequently reinforcing Goffman’s cycle-of-disbelief as being the basis of identity construction. However, while Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity suggests that it doesn’t matter how much an individual wants to believe in, and hold onto, a particular identity, a close reading of the interview transcripts that form the primary material of my study suggest that there is a larger, even more complex construction of identity occurring in these late modern times. As Chapter Three will explore in greater detail, while reality television is concerned with predominantly self-improvement and transformation, emphasis on a core, essentialist or ‘Cartesian’ subjectivity, which suggests that ‘The essential self is something one has, observes and analyses – not something one creates’ (Allen and Malhotra 1997)⁴, is also an integral aspect of the

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⁴ Descartes’ famous honeycomb analogy, for example, argues that while putting a piece of wax over a flame may change its shape, it remains the same piece of wax that it was in the beginning (Descartes and Moriarty 2008). Hence, individuals are all born with an essentialist self, a ‘soul’, that remains a kind of ‘core’ that defines
reality television narrative. In many ways, reality television exposes a gap in late modern scholarship, for while set identity roles are no longer provided at birth (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), it becomes clear, as Giddens asserts, that most of us opt to establish a cohesive sense of self by choosing one reasonably stable identity or persona from a choice of many (Giddens 1991).

Socially nude: reality television and the new public sphere

‘For the individual, public space is not much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without ceasing to be private or acquiring new collective qualities in the course of magnification: public space is where public confession of private secrets and intimacies is made…As to the power, it sails away from the street and market place, from assembly halls and parliaments, local and national governments and beyond the reach of citizens control, into the exterritoriality of electronic networks’ (Bauman 2000 pp. 39-40).

Like day-time talk shows, reality television has, at least to some extent, broadened the public sphere simply by allowing a wider range of individuals greater access to it. Television, argues Zygmunt Bauman, enables participants to occupy a space that is the focus of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of viewers. So while this experience of connectivity might be fleeting, before the show ends, both audiences and participants are able to alleviate the painful feeling of disconnection common in our constantly changing universe. In other words, the media are able to supply what Bauman refers to as ‘virtual extraterritoriality’, access to the extraterritorial global space in which the cosmopolitan cultural elite resides. The media is able to connect both its participants and audiences to one another, creating a kind of virtual community that counters the inevitable isolation residing in what Bauman refers to as liquid modernity – an era so rapidly evolving that nothing keeps its shape for very long (Bauman and Vecchi 2004).

who one is in spite of various physical and emotional changes. In this thesis I refer to Cartesian subjectivity as a parallel notion to the ‘authentic self.’
This liquid modern era, as Eugene Enriquez once wrote, is one in which ‘physical, social and psychical nudity is the order of the day’ (cited in: Bauman 2007 p. 3). Clear boundaries that once separated the private from the public are often blurred. It is an era that not only accepts, but celebrates, programs like *The Biggest Loser* that display overweight people in unflattering outfits crying publicly about their weight problems in front of millions of viewers, an era where public displays of emotion, at least within reality television, are represented as indicating personal integrity and courage, rather than shameless exhibitionism and self-absorption (McQuire 2008; Mehl 2005).

No discussion about the public sphere is complete without some understanding of the work of Jurgen Habermas. For Habermas the public sphere emerged during the eighteenth century, at least in Germany, when the term *Offentlichkeit* was coined (Habermas 1989 pp. 3-4). According to this him this was the golden, albeit somewhat limited, era of the rational public sphere, a period of rational, emotion-free debate, where individuals were not subject to a never-ending cycle of production and consumption, but rather a Greek sense of freedom from the constraints of survival requirements (Habermas 1989 pp. 160-161). By the nineteenth century, however, a growing market economy meant that the sphere reserved for private people as a public and as a forum for rational-critical debate was increasingly influenced by consumption (Habermas 1989 p. 161). By the latter half of the 19th century, the transfer of public functions to private corporate bodies occurred, as did the extension of public authority over sectors of the private realm and the ‘stratification of society gradually destroyed the bourgeois public sphere – the separation of state and society…a repoliticised social sphere emerged to which the distinction between public and private could not be
usefully applied’ (Habermas 1989 p. 142). This inevitably led to what Habermas perceived to be the disintegration of the public realm and the re-feudalisation of the public sphere.

Despite attempts to relieve the public sphere of the intrusion of private interests, the conditions under which the privatization of interests was to be accomplished were themselves drawn into the conflict of organized interests; and the masses, now entitled to political participation, succeeded in translating economic antagonisms into political conflicts. Even the family became increasingly disengaged from its direct connections with the reproduction of society, weakening ‘in authority the quiet bliss of hominess’ providing ‘only the illusion of a perfectly private personal sphere’ (Habermas 1989 p. 159). Quoting Bahrdt, Habermas wrote, ‘Without a protective and supportive private sphere the individual is sucked into the public realm which…becomes denatured by this very process’ (Habermas 1989 p. 158). From a culture of rational critical debate emerged a world where even conversation was administered. No public was formed around group activities anymore and, even though people had previously paid for books or concert tickets, at least the conversation they had about what they’d recently read, heard or seen was free. Now, ‘Professional dialogues from the podium, panel discussions and round table shows, the rational debate of private people becomes…a salable package ready for the box office; it assumed commodity form even at conferences where anyone can participate. Discussion, now a business, becomes formalized’ (Habermas 1989 p. 164). Rather than existing for its contribution to society as a whole, the capitalist commodification of culture means that culture now continues primarily for its exchange value. For Habermas, at least when he wrote *The structural transformation of the public sphere* in the 1950s-60s, the world fashioned by the mass media was a public sphere in appearance only. Rather than existing as a forum for
rational debate, the public sphere became a sphere for publicizing private biographies, so that ‘the accidental fate of the so-called man in the street or that of systematically managed stars attain publicity, while publicly relevant developments and decisions are garbed in private dress and through personalization distorted to the point of unrecognisability’ (Habermas 1989 p. 166).

While Habermas stresses the limitations of a public sphere that was restricted by societal hierarchies, the earlier work of Habermas has been fiercely disputed amongst media scholars. Feminist critics, such as Lumby, argue that women have very little to gain from a traditional, patriarchal public sphere (Lumby 1997 p. xi) and that the growth of the mass media has led to a diverse and inclusive public sphere where a top-down model of public discourse is now irrelevant. To confront this new public sphere means grasping the fundamental changes the mass media has wrought on the way we conceive of politics and culture. Lumby strongly contests the Habermasian view that ‘Reporting facts as human-interest stories, mixing information with entertainment, arranging material episodically and breaking down complex relationships into smaller fragments’ depoliticizes public communication’ (Habermas, Rehg, and Habermas 1996 p. 377), instead disputing polarities like public/private, local/global, right/left, media/real in the new media environment. ‘Having a truly public conversation in a society defined by difference, then, can’t proceed from universals, where rational educated discourse is presumed to take precedence over other kinds of speech’ (Lumby 1999 p. 254).

In their analysis of the Jerry Springer Show, Lunt and Stenner argue that the show works as a ‘metaphor for the complexities of the relation between the emotions of social and political involvement and their connection to deliberation and public reflection’ (Lunt and Stenner
Far from resembling a traditional Habermasian public sphere, the *Jerry Springer Show*, with its emphasis on emotion rather than rational debate, inverts the hierarchy of Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere, bringing together a wide range of people in a new kind of emotion driven public sphere. While Lunt and Stenner are careful to point out that the *Jerry Springer Show* does not, ‘in any straightforward way constitute a public sphere’ (Lunt and Stenner 2005 pp. 63-64) they ultimately conclude that there are indeed parallels between ‘Habermas’s proposals for rational critical discussion and the organising features of The Jerry Springer Show’ (Lunt and Stenner 2005 p. 76). In other words, just as Habermas called for an institutionally structured public sphere, *The Jerry Springer show* can not operate successfully ‘if we just leave people to their own devices’ (Lunt and Stenner 2005 p. 77).

But while Lunt and Stenner argue that in spite of its emotion and conflict driven content *The Jerry Springer Show* represents a kind of public sphere, Pantti and Van Zoonen argue that the role of emotion in the public sphere is a contentious issue. The hegemonic view is that emotions play a distorting role in the political arena. Being emotional is often equated with a loss of control. However, the rise of confessional media has made it much more difficult to establish what is and isn’t acceptable behaviour. While it was, quite recently, considered shameful to discuss one’s sex life in public, programs such as the UK reality show *The Sex Inspectors* featured video footage of ‘real life’ couples having sex as a way to educate audiences on a range of sexual health issues. Public confession overrides class because we, as a public, see strength in those who are willing to openly admit their shortcomings, no matter what the socio-economic background from which the confessor comes. As a result, in the main, we connect with them.
The media is often blamed for playing on this emotion to create sensational stories that have popular appeal, but through an analysis of the media coverage and public reaction to the murders of two public figures, Pantti and van Zoonen conclude that this is not always the case. Instead, they point out that the issue is not simply whether emotions should be allowed in the public sphere, for it cannot be denied that emotions are intimately connected to culture and society, but how they are articulated and expressed. In the case studies examined by Pantti and van Zoonen, the media took a restrained rather than sensational approach to the reporting of the murders, demonstrating that when handled appropriately, emotional issues and responses have an appropriate role to play in the contemporary public sphere (Pantti and Liesbet 2006).

Interestingly, in his later work, *Facts and Norms* Habermas contradicts his earlier work by suggesting that the political public sphere can fulfill its function of perceiving and thematising encompassing social problems only insofar as this develops out of the communication taking place among those who are affected.

In the diverse voices of this public, one hears the echo of private experiences that are caused throughout society by the externalities (and internal disturbances) of various functional systems…Besides religion, art and literature, only the spheres of private life have an existential language at their disposal, in which such socially generated problems can be assessed in terms of one’s own life history. Problems voiced in the public sphere first become visible when they are mirrored in personal life experiences. (Habermas, Rehg, and Habermas 1996 p. 365)

Habermas now argues that by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the traditional bourgeois public sphere could no longer immunize itself from the critic from within. Social movements fuelled by private voices, such as the labor movements and feminism, for
example, were able to join dominant discourses in order to ‘shatter the structures that had initially constituted them as ‘the other’ of a bourgeois public sphere… As a result, communication structures of the public sphere are linked with the private life spheres in a way that gives the civil-social periphery advantage of greater sensitivity of recognizing new problem situations’ (Habermas, Rehg, and Habermas 1996 pp. 374, 381). Topics such as the environment, nuclear energy, feminism and multiculturalism were at first rarely brought up in the traditional political public sphere, instead being broached first by intellectuals, concerned citizens, radical professionals and advocates. But, eventually, these issues all evolved from alternative platforms into mainstream politics. ‘In general, one can say that even in more or less power-ridden public spheres, the power relations shift as soon as the perception of relevant social problems evokes a crisis consciousness at the periphery’ (Habermas, Rehg, and Habermas 1996 p. 382). While Habermas continues to criticize the emergence of ‘infotainment’ as depoliticizing the public sphere, (Habermas, Rehg, and Habermas 1996 p. 377) his newfound perspective that ordinary citizens are able to impact the public sphere is unrealistic for Staats, in a society where corporate culture, politics and the media are so closely linked (Staats 2004).

Giddens points out that in high modernity, the influence of distant happenings on proximate events, and on intimacies of the self, becomes more and more common place (Giddens 1991 p. 5), so it is not surprising that, ‘The boundary between the private and the public is ‘notoriously mobile’ (Bauman 2007 p. 68). While it would be naïve to deny the link between capitalist consumer-driven culture and its impact on what and who is given priority within the contemporary public sphere, the new mediatised environment also supplies a much needed sense
of connectivity in an uncertain globalised universe, while allowing for the inclusion of a range voices, not simply an exclusive few.

Life lessons: the role of the expert

It has been widely argued that talk shows turn the concept of the expert on its head, placing ordinary people in the foreground, their personal life experiences giving them the expert credibility usually associated with a professional qualification. Aspirational reality television programs, however, especially *Australian Idol* and *The Biggest Loser*, somehow herald the return of the expert to first-person factual television programming whilst, at the same time, as *Chapter Four* will demonstrate, transforming participants into new experts based primarily on their experiences on the show. Even *Big Brother*, a program which does not generally offer expert advice, regularly features ‘special’ guests who have had some kind of experience with celebrity and are thereby able to pass on their knowledge of dealing with the ups and downs of being ‘famous.’ The early series (2001 and 2002) also featured the advice of psychologist, Carmel Hill.

While societies have almost always relied on some form of expertise, the changing nature of social and political life means that the role of the expert has also changed. As Giddens points out, since pre-modern times, individuals have always consulted experts, magicians or healers, about their problems (Giddens 1991 p. 29). The most significant difference now is not that we are living in more anxiety-ridden times than ever before and therefore need more expert guidance – Giddens does not believe this to be the case. What has changed is that in pre-modern society there were
few technical systems, meaning that it was possible for individuals to carry on their lives almost solely in terms of their own local knowledge, or that of the immediate kinship group. The level of time-space distanciation introduced by high modernity is so extensive that, for the first time in human history, self and society are interrelated in a global milieu, meaning that there is an increase in accessibility of expert skills and information to ‘ordinary’ people (Giddens 1991 pp. 30-32).

Bauman equates this transformation of the role of the expert to the changing nature of capitalism. ‘Heavy’ Fordist capitalism, was ‘a world of law-givers, routine designers and supervisors, the world of other-directed men and women pursuing fixed-by-others ends in a fixed-by-others fashion. It was a world of authorities, of leaders who know better, teachers who could tell you how to proceed’ (Bauman 2000 p. 63). In contrast, the new ‘light’, consumer-friendly capitalism did not abolish the law-proffering authorities, nor make them redundant. Rather, this new era created so many authorities, it became impossible for anybody to stay in authority for too long. ‘When the authorities are many, they tend to cancel each other out, and the sole effective authority in the field is one who must choose between them. It is by courtesy of the chooser that a would-be authority becomes an authority. Authorities no longer command: they ingratiate themselves with the chooser; they tempt and seduce’ (Bauman 2000 pp. 63-64). Bauman cites eighties aerobics queen, Jane Fonda, as someone who offers herself as an ‘example’ not an authority, presenting herself as a product of her work, a product anybody can obtain if they are willing to follow her example. Since Fonda, there have been thousands of examples, with reality television participants joining the mass brigade of disposable experts. As Chapter Four will reiterate and expand upon, it is not uncommon for former Biggest Loser participants, for example, to become motivational speakers, diet coaches and spokespeople for various diet foods and
products in the same way that Fonda presented herself as an ‘example’ rather than an ‘authority’ on healthy living.

For Bauman our increased reliance on expert advice, like many other forms of capitalist consumerism, is an addiction. ‘Looking for examples, for counsel and guidance is an addiction: the more you do it, the more you need to do it and the unhappier you feel when deprived of fresh supplies of the sought-after drugs’ (Bauman 2007 p. 72). While one may be inclined to agree, particularly in the face of the overwhelming, and increasing, amount of life-improvement media, Beck makes an important point when he talks about the integral role of the expert in late-modernity, a period he refers to as a ‘risk society.’ Modern science treats, ‘the world as its laboratory,’ writes Beck, and in this new world threats become ‘deterritorialised’ meaning that they cannot be confined to any specific space or time, so they can therefore not be insured against. The uncontrolled consequences of these ‘bads’, which may include nuclear energy, AIDS, global warming and natural disasters, means that not only are the consequences uncontrollable, they are also neither purely social nor purely physical. While individuals go about their lives potentially encountering such risks on a daily basis, ‘only experts with specialized recording equipment could monitor such direct exposure,’ for the naked senses are insufficient – we have to rely on experts to monitor whether or not we are subject to such risks (Beck and Willms 2004 p. 3).

In reality television, and lifestyle programming in general, the mediatised expert is more likely to be advising against wearing ankle straps or eating too much fried chicken, but this does not mean their advice is simply on hand to feed an addiction. Lifestyles, as Giddens asserts, are now forced upon us all. Like most aspects of life in late modernity, we have no
option but to choose, and we look to experts for advice on how to live, who to be and what to wear. Giddens writes that, ‘High modernity intrudes deeply into the heart of self-identity and personal feelings, it enforces on us all the process of “finding oneself,” a process of active intervention and transformation’ (Giddens 1991 p. 12). For Giddens, it is problematic to view therapy simply in negative terms as a convenient replacement for the protective framework once offered by a small community and tradition. Therapy does more than offer a secular alternative to the confessional. Therapy is an ‘expression of the reflexivity of the self – a phenomenon which, on the level of the individual, like the broader institutions of modernity, balances opportunity and potential catastrophe in equal measure’ (Giddens 1991 p. 34). Reality television operates to construct the kind of expert integral to life in late modernity. As Bauman perceptively points out, ‘The most successful counselor is aware of the fact that what advice-seeking people often need is an example of how other men or women, facing a similar trouble, go about a task. Looking at other people’s experience – getting a glimpse of other people’s trials and tribulations – one hopes to discover and locate the troubles which caused one’s own unhappiness, attach to them a name, and so come to know where to look for ways of resisting or conquering them’ (Bauman 2000 p. 66). What better place to seek such examples than the world of aspirational reality television, a place that represents a plethora of issues from weight problems to drug and alcohol addiction, grief, loneliness, physical and psychological disabilities and, of course, those seeking fulfillment in the most fundamental need of an isolated and individualized world - to feel special, successful and, ultimately, connected.
Conclusion

In the 1920s, painter/film-maker Fernand Leger considered making a documentary film that would record the life of a man and woman over twenty-four hours. Nothing would be omitted or hidden, nor should the couple ever become aware of the camera’s presence. In the end Leger decided not to make the film primarily because he believed that such a blatant display of voyeurism would be intolerable to watch (McQuire 2008 p. 188). Flash forward to the first decade of the twenty-first century and times have certainly changed. Rather than shudder at the thought of witnessing strangers share their deepest, most personal views and experiences, millions of viewers now tune in as these ‘ordinary people’ volunteer to expose their bodies, commit sexual acts, bathe, go to the toilet, cook, vomit, sweat, fart, cry and bitch for the cameras. While Leger had planned for his potential subjects to be unaware of the filming process, nowadays reality television participants must compete against thousands of hopefuls for the chance to participate. Competition is tough and only an elite few make the cut.

Although Big Brother’s Australian reign ended in 2008, reality television is still going strong. At the time of writing there were around 900 different reality TV shows listed on the US website, Reality TV World (Reality TV World). Some of these programs lasted only one season while others have made it through to season 10. Many, including the programs examined in this study, have become part of a world-wide franchise. But, as Allen Funt discovered in the 1940s, what all reality programs need in order to be successful are first-person fuelled dramatic narratives, many of which focus on the therapeutic discourses of personal growth and transformation. From The Pickup Artist, to What Not to Wear, to The Biggest Loser and Pop Idol, reality television programming has become a genre fuelled by
‘experts’ teaching ordinary people how to dress better, eat healthier and be more successful in relationships.

Of course, the ‘reality’ of how successfully these programs can ‘transform’ the lives of their participants is unsurprisingly inconsistent and variable. While some participants describe their reality TV stint as the best thing they ever did, others feel let down, cheated and ultimately exploited. In the spirit of cultural studies qualitative research, this thesis ultimately aims to explore the growing experience of reality television participation from the point of view of the participants themselves. Of course, all research is a collaboration and this project is no exception. My own experiences and interpretations are just as much a part of this project as the interview transcripts that constitute the primary material. But, in spite of the fact that many of the participants I interviewed told me that ‘there’s no reality in reality TV,’ I hope to at least, in some way, represent some version of ‘reality,’ at least as the participants I interviewed told me they see it.
Chapter 2

Qualitative research and reflexivity: interviewing through an ethnographic gaze

The past thirty years have seen a significant change in qualitative research methods. In the latter half of the 1980s, there was a wider, more pervasive questioning of the concept of objectivist conventions, particularly within ethnography (Murphy 2008). As the ‘number and scope of studies that might be considered “media ethnography” has grown’ (Murphy 2008 pp. 273-274), a satisfactory definition of what ethnography actually is has become problematic and difficult to obtain. While this study, whose primary material constitutes fifteen semi-structured interviews with former reality television participants, cannot be described as ethnographic, this chapter will assert that issues such as reflexivity, subjectivity and representation that are integral to the ethnographic research process are just as relevant to qualitative interview based projects such as this one. In other words, this chapter argues that the interviews conducted for this study have been influenced by the ‘ethnographic gaze,’ or what Davies refers to as ‘ethnographic interviewing’ (Davies 2008 p. 106). Such a position asserts that all research is ultimately a construction between the interviewer and the interviewee and that it is therefore important that the researcher be visible within the research findings, while arguing that an interview transcript is a text demanding interpretation. While, as this chapter will further assert, there can be a fine line between self-indulgence and reflexivity, I adopt the position of Davies who argues that, ‘semi-structured interviewing requires attention to the interview context and the relationship with participants beyond simply what is said’ (Davies 2008 p. 106). It should also be noted that while my
research is concerned with the experiences of participants, I have drawn on a range of audience studies. This was for practical reasons as very limited research has been conducted, so far, on the mediatised experiences of ‘ordinary’ individuals.

**Reflexivity and the ‘ethnographic gaze’**

The term ‘ethnography’ stems from a combination of two Greek words: *ethos*, meaning people and *grafein* meaning to write or draw, so ethnography simply means the description of people (Bryman 2004 p. 63). From a textbook point of view, then, ethnography may be described as, ‘establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies’ (Geertz 1973 p. 6) and so on. Elspeth Probyn describes ethnography in more abstract terms as the ‘production of the real rather than its transparent discovery,’ a practice not of revealing, but of writing culture (Ang 1989 p. 27), thereby suggesting that the researcher does more than observe and report their findings. Drawing from Skeggs, Green provides a more concrete definition of ethnography as a methodology that:

…usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork that will be conducted over a prolonged period of time; utilising different research techniques; conducted within the settings of participants, with an understanding of how the context informs the action; involving the researcher in participation and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched and focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider processes. (Green 2003 p. 135)

Media ethnography then, argues Bryman, focuses on media use in people’s everyday lives, usually involving interviews and observations from the field, which might involve entering people’s homes, for example, a process which, ‘allows us to chart how people variously intervene into, draw back from and act upon the media’ (Bryman 2004 pp. 58-59).
From this perspective, this study, which involved fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former reality television participants from *Australian Idol*, *Big Brother* and *The Biggest Loser*, is not ethnographic in the more traditional, anthropological sense. Research was not, for instance, ‘conducted within the settings of participants.’ Rather, I would describe this study as ‘observational’, meaning that its reliance on semistructured interviews allowed subjects ‘a great deal of control over the flow and direction of conversations’ (Murphy 2008 p. 277). By discussing my own experiences, to some extent, with both the consumption and construction of media texts, this study follows what Bird refers to as an ‘ethnographic way of seeing’ (cited in: Murphy 2008 p. 277). I am undoubtedly more observer than participant, but to refer back to Davies, 'the specificity and individuality of the observer are ever present and must therefore be acknowledged, explored and put to creative use' (Davies 2008 p. 7).

Though I did conduct some face-to-face interviews, the majority were conducted over the phone – primarily because of geographical and financial constraints. To fly across Australia to conduct 15 or so interviews was not financially viable and, as I will discuss later, I did not perceive telephone interviewing to significantly disadvantage this research in any way. Also, as Davies asserts, semi-structured interviewing is the ‘method of choice for ethnographic research on elite groups, where access is likely to be strictly controlled and hence participant observation is problematic’ (Davies 2008 p. 119). For this study to have involved an ethnographic immersion in the field I would have needed to become a reality television contestant myself, a highly impractical task.

But, as Machin makes clear, it is ‘not so important to think about what ethnography is precisely in terms of procedure, as this is very difficult, perhaps impossible to define, but it is important to think about why, as a mode of thinking about explaining society and social
behaviour, is it so useful’ (Machin 2002 p. 5). Ethnography may not provide a transparent view of the world, but arguably no methodology is capable of this. What ethnography, or in this case, the ethnographic gaze, can do is provide an intimate social knowledge, and in the case of reality television participation, it provides a framework from which to think about not only the relationship between the mass media and society, but also how we, as individuals, come to make sense of who we are. As Machin points out, ‘In our own cultures the mass media must be thought of as being very much a part of our own particular conversation and of the way that we make our societies. Only a methodology which allows us to think about this conversation in its entirety…can provide us with the intimate kind of knowledge required to understand that great conversation’ (Machin 2002 pp 8 & 169).

Hence, this research stems from an ethnographic philosophy that believes a reflexive and rigorous approach to qualitative research can produce a credible and valid analysis of a social reality beyond the experience of a researcher who was unavoidably a part of the construction.

Reflexivity is a term which Davies broadly defines as meaning to, ‘turn back on oneself, a process of self-reference’ (2008 p. 4). While reflexivity is now widely accepted as an intrinsic part of qualitative research, this is a relatively recent phenomena. The mid-1980s saw what Bryman describes as the ‘crisis of representation,’ a time in which ‘qualitative social researchers…developed greater self-awareness concerning in particular the fact that their accounts of their fieldwork are just one way of representing reality’ (2004 p. 369). Prior to this, it was not uncommon to see reflexivity represented as a research flaw. In fact, as recently as the late 1960s a number of ethnographic anthropologists published their research in the form of novels written under pseudonyms because they felt that academically
publishing a more reflexive fieldwork account of their research would damage their credibility and professional reputation (Tedlock 1991 p. 72).

Ethnography took an 'internal, reflexive turn' in the late 1980s when 'writers began to closely question the objectivist conventions of traditional ethnography', such as the invisibility of the ethnographer and unreflexive observation (Murphy 2008 pp. 269-270). Murphy, who describes his own work as a kind of 'interactive ethnography' argues that, 'by combining elements of both personal experience and multivoicedness,’ it is possible to ‘strike a balance between this dual inscription.’ From this perspective, the text is a product of both the researcher and the participants and, ‘foregrounding such processes in media ethnography is important for understanding how the researcher draws social actors into the ethnographic encounter,’ hence locating the researcher and revealing how ‘participants stake a constitutive voice in the direction of the inquiry’ (Murphy 2008 p. 280). Obtaining this balance between the role of the researcher and that of the participant is not without problems, however, and within qualitative research there will always lie the question of how far the commitment of ‘seeing through the eyes of the people you study can or should be stretched’ (Bryman 2004 p. 463). As Radway points out, ‘the researcher, while it is not the case that they will have nothing in common with the people they are studying, they are often significantly different from them by virtue of their position as legitimated authorities. To deny this by speaking as if from the mouths of one’s informants is classic bad faith’ (Radway 1996 p. 240).

The purpose of social research, argues Davies, ‘is to increase our understanding of social reality by developing explanations of social forms and events, as well as critically examining the conceptualizations used in these explanations’ (Davies 2008 p. 6). Critical realism, a
perspective Davies deems particularly useful for qualitative researchers, accepts that social research is tied to meaning and interpretation due to the self-conscious nature of its subject matter. One of the key difficulties associated with a reflexive research approach is the question of whether anything other than the knowledge of reflexivity is possible. Davies argues that by adopting a critical realist approach, which recognizes the role of reflexivity as important in that it expresses the researcher's connection to the research situation while also acknowledging that society exists independently of our conceptions of it, we can access the social world beyond the individual (2008).

This fully reflexive yet realist approach to research is one adopted by many qualitative researchers, though rarely openly discussed (Davies 2008). Such an approach emphasizes the need for a researcher, as many scholars have pointed out, to establish a strong connection to the research, while simultaneously maintaining some degree of separation and distance (Davies 2008; Radway 1996; Ang 1989). Radway, for example, argues that it is essential to recognise that the research/subject relation is still one that is, 'largely initiated by an intellectual with specific cultural authority and power and that the relation is established precisely to generate knowledge whose first effects will be in the cultural, or, more specifically, the academic realm’ (Radway 1996 p. 240). Self-interest, therefore, is a crucial part of this relation. It is difficult not to agree with Radway’s argument, and such a stance is supported by Davies who adds that such a continuing ‘reflexive awareness’ must be balanced in a way that does not ‘blind us to the existence of a reality beyond ourselves’ (Davies 2008 p. 23).
Ien Ang, for example, argues that there tends to be a romantic edge to the concept of self-reflexivity, as though such a relationship is characterized by equality (Ang 1996 p. 28). While the previously discussed feminist principles underlying qualitative research provide a solid ethical framework from which research can proceed, the complex and unpredictable nature of working with human subjects can make this sense of equality difficult to achieve. As La Pastina points out in his study of life in a small, conservative town in Brazil, there is an inevitable degree of intersubjectivity involved in any form of research that requires the sharing of intimate knowledge with individuals who are virtually strangers, at least to begin with. Though a native to Brazil, La Pastina was educated in Europe and the United States. As a gay man undertaking a year-long ethnographic study in a homophobic town, he opted to lie about his sexuality and pretend to be a heterosexual married man partly to protect himself, but also to help him fit into the town and subsequently benefit his research. La Pastina writes about the conflict he felt regarding his own subjectivity, highlighting Radway’s notion of the self and other as both equal, yet shifting and fundamentally challenged by the ethnographic process. He writes:

Although I was the one empowered, at least in the ethnographic sense, I was also the one feeling vulnerable...I consumed them through my gaze and regurgitated them through my writing while they devoured the outside world, the externality of the urban modern society, through me... (La Pastina 2006 p. 729)

And after hearing some discriminatory remarks about some of the town’s few openly gay residents he remarks:

I was reminded again, of why I said I was married, and the flush of shame of my schoolyard years came back and I realized how our memories of events past, as much as any other elements in our identities, ultimately help define the ethnographer’s experiences (La Pastina 2006p. 733).
Of course, La Pastina’s deception regarding his sexuality would eventually be disclosed to his participants once his research was completed and published, but the complicated and often unbalanced relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is readily apparent. During a face-to-face interview I conducted with Irena Bukhshtaber, a particularly disgruntled former Big Brother participant, and with whom I believed I had established some rapport, I was reminded, like La Pastina, of the intersubjective, yet distinctly separate, nature of my relationship with the interviewees who took part in this project. Throughout our two-hour interview I had spoken to Bukhshtaber about my ambitions for my research, as well as many personal issues, such as marriage and motherhood. As Youna Kim quotes from Hammersely & Atkinson, “Whether or not people have knowledge of social research, they are often more concerned with what kind of person the researcher is than with the research itself”(cited in: Kim 2006 p. 229). In other words, Kim argues that the subjectivity of the researcher is crucial during the interviewing process as, ‘the questions of how researchers manage to form relationships when they arrive in the field and to what extent close relationships can be constructed must depend on “who they are,” and this has profound effects on the encounter with the participants of study’ (Kim 2006 p. 229). Kim goes on to discuss the various ‘personae’ she adopted during her interviews with Korean women about their media consumption, and the Goffman-esque way that information about an individual can help to define a situation and determine context (Kim 2006 p. 230). For instance, when interviewing women in their 20s, Kim felt that she was ‘interpellated to play out their [the interview participant’s] existing fantasy or imagination about the West’ (Kim 2006 p. 230), due to her Western education, whereas when interviewing women in their 30s Kim’s identity as a married women helped to construct a position of commonality, canceling out the differences that her identity as a highly educated academic researcher could have brought to light.
During the fifteen interviews conducted as part of this research, I too attempted, like Kim, to adopt the role of a ‘non-judgmental active listener’ (Kim 2006 p. 229), while at the same time attempting to establish a sense of commonality. However, as demonstrated through my interview with Bukhshtaber, the interviewer will always, at least to some degree, be in the position of ‘the other’, as Bukhshtaber exemplified when she began to speak about her beliefs that reality television contestants are generally exploited by television networks and producers. For example, Bukhshtaber said:

*We are the least important, we’re paid at the level of least important and that’s why when you speak of books and things like that, all the best for you, make as much money, but not off my back any more. No one’s going to make a cent without me. It’s that kind of notion, what you’re doing, while your intention is certainly genuine, you’re still getting benefit out of something where most people got no benefit, who were deliberately excluded from benefit.*

Like La Pastina, while I was taken aback by this statement, it was consistent with the confrontational and opinionated aspect of Bukhshtaber’s personality that was emphasised unfavourably on *Big Brother*. And for the sake of my own self-interest, it seemed more beneficial to simply nod in agreement if I wanted the interview to continue in the open and informative way. Besides, unlike La Pastina’s confrontation with homophobic bigotry, in this case it seemed impossible not to recognise that Bukhshtaber had a valid, and not entirely untrue, point.

The study
Any form of qualitative research must be acknowledged as being subjective and subject to the inevitable ethical issues associated with studying human beings. This study was conducted with the support of the University of Melbourne Central Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). This meant that all participants were required to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed and all subjects were provided with a copy of their interview transcript after the interview. Interview recordings were stored in a secure, password protected file at the university and participants will be offered access to the completed research findings. Interview participants were also required to sign a form agreeing, or disagreeing, to the use of their full name in this thesis, which they all agreed to do.

Of course, the ethical issues surrounding qualitative research go beyond the formalities of institutional approval, and all qualitative researchers face the dilemma of what to do when one’s own perceptions do not coincide with those of their interviewees (Bryman 2004 p. 463). While any kind of writing that stems from qualitative interview-based research results in a report that is ultimately a discursive construction created by the interviewer or researcher, ethical issues of consent do imply that it is up to the researcher/reporter to present what they consider to be a fair and reasonable version of their interviewees subjective reality (Bryman 2004 p. 467). Feminist thought has been highly influential in determining ethical conduct in qualitative research. A feminist framework, as Kim’s approach exemplifies, in conducting interviews encourages the establishment of a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, a high degree or reciprocity on the part of the interviewer, the perspective of the interviewee being taken into account at all times, and finally the establishment of a non-hierarchical relationship (Bryman 2004). This presumption of equality, argues Davies, is more difficult to establish in some situations than others, but,
as we conduct interviews under the expectation that the individual being interviewed can provide us access to a social world that is beyond the individual, it is important to recognize that there is a kind of interdependency between the interviewer and interviewee that allows such access in the first place (Davies 2008 p. 109). While I like to think that the interviews I conducted for this study were based on mutual respect, the interviewing process could not be one of equality, as I would be the one writing, and therefore, ultimately interpreting the story for a very specific target audience.

But like the individuals I went on to interview for this study, I have been both an audience member and a producer. The experience of having a magazine article that I’d written altered to represent a point of view I never would have advocated is different to trusting my entire personality and image to a group of profit-driven television producers. Nevertheless I commenced this study, perhaps a little naively, with the belief that I could, in fact, produce a piece of writing that does, in some way work from the bottom up. With this in mind, I hoped to present the reality television experience through the eyes of the participants themselves. For this reason, I opted to interview the participants themselves, rather than reality television editors and producers. And as Davies rightly points out it is integral that researchers recognise that, ‘all researchers are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research’ (Davies 2008 p. 237). Hence, considerations of reflexivity are important for all forms of research. So while I can attempt to utilise the voices of the interviewees to move the narrative of this thesis along, I cannot write solely from their perspective.

Sampling
As previously stated, fifteen former reality television participants were interviewed for this study. Six interviewees had participated on *The Biggest Loser*, five had appeared on *Big Brother* and four had competed in *Australian Idol*. The participants varied in age, gender and success on the program in which they appeared – some had won while others were evicted in the first week (See Appendix 1 for more information on the interviewees). ‘Success’ after the show also varied. Some participants continued to maintain a public profile while others had intentionally, or unintentionally, given up their public face. Most qualitative researchers engage in ‘purposive sampling’ (Bryman 2004 p. 373). In other words, participants in a study are chosen for a particular reason. While it was of course impossible to predict how participants would describe their reality television experience, having been a regular viewer of all three reality shows meant that I understood how the participants had been represented on the various programs and I deliberately chose to interview a range of people I thought might provide a heterogeneous sample and have a variety of perspectives.

My previous experience as a journalist meant that I had already interviewed a number of reality television contestants for magazine articles. I used these contacts as a way of organising the first series of interviews, deliberately choosing to re-interview people I remembered to have been responsive and talkative and able to articulate their experiences clearly and openly. Some interviewees were then willing and able to help me contact other former reality television participants they felt would be interested in my study and this process of snowballing enabled me to find two interviewees. I also found several interviewees through Internet searches and the phone book. I contacted Irena Bukhshtaber at her work place because I had read an interesting and articulate newspaper article written by her about her *Big Brother* experience. I was able to call another participant at home. One
interviewee was contacted through his management agency and I approached the remaining interviewees via social networking site Facebook. I decided to keep the number of participants in my study to fifteen, partly because the standard number of interviews conducted in qualitative studies of this nature usually varies between 12-24 (Schroeder 2003 p. 136) and, as I was conducting the research, including interview transcriptions, by myself, I felt that fifteen interviews was enough to elicit a varied range of responses whilst also being manageable in terms of practicalities such as time constraints.

Very few people I approached declined to take part in this study. One *Biggest Loser* contestant refused to talk to me on the basis of having had enough ‘of all the bullshit’ surrounding his experience; and an *Idol* contestant, who was publicly vilified on the program, said that the experience was too painful for her to recall. Two participants did not return my calls and two previous *Australian Idol* contestants whose careers have taken off since their *Idol* experience claimed to be ‘too busy.’

**Interviewing**

Bryman argues that most qualitative researchers ‘prefer a research orientation that entails as little prior contamination of the social world as possible. To do otherwise risks imposing an inappropriate frame of reference on people’ (Bryman 2004 p. 389). My experience of having watched the reality television programs prior to conducting this study, however, not only enabled me to carefully choose the small sample of interviewees involved, it also meant that I was able to engage more effectively with interviewees when they discussed their mediated experience because I had a frame of reference from which we could both engage. While I inevitably had preconceived ideas of what I expected participants to be like based on their
television representation, talking to them in ‘real life’ rather than simply watching them participate on a reality television show highlighted the contrast between the televised personality and the ‘real life’ one, rather than skewing my impressions of the interviewee. At the same time, however, it must also be acknowledged that while I often felt I was meeting someone I already knew, in some capacity, because of my familiarity with the participant’s on-screen persona, for the interviewee, I was a complete stranger, once again emphasising the inevitable dichotomy between self and other that, while shifting and changing and not always equal, is perhaps an inevitable side-effect of qualitative interview based research.

There are several advantages to semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviewing. Not only are ethical issues of consent more clear-cut than during observational ethnographic research, but interviewing enables access to a wide range of issues that can not be explored simply through observation, including what the interviewee thinks is happening during the interview process and how they feel about it. Before signing a consent form, all interviewees were given a list of sample questions (See Appendix 2) so that they would have a clear idea of the nature of the research project and the kinds of issues I was interested in discussing. While I didn’t rely heavily on this list during the interviews because I more or less knew the questions off by heart, showing these questions to the participants before conducting the interviews meant that I was more likely to find participants who would be willing to discuss personal experiences thoughtfully and in-depth. Not only did this strategy fulfill ethical requirements of transparency and consent, it was very effective in ensuring that the people who agreed to participate were interested and engaged. As there was one person I approached who decided not to participate in the study after reading the sample questions because she decided that they were too confronting and personal.
Thirteen of the interviews in this study were conducted over the telephone and two were done in person. This was predominately because of geographical practicalities. All the interviews went for between one to two and a half hours and duration was largely determined by the interviewee and the amount of time they were willing to talk. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed by me which, while time consuming, was beneficial in familiarising me more closely with the primary material and thinking about early analysis.

While telephone interviewing may be seen, by some, as less intimate than face-to-face encounters, Bryman points out that not only is it highly efficient, cheap and practical, but some researchers argue that it can be advantageous in that, ‘it may be that asking sensitive questions by telephone will be more effective, since interviewees may be less distressed about answering when the interviewer is not physically present’ (Bryman 2004 p. 458). While this may definitely be the case in some situations, my interview experience coincided with that of Sturges and Harrahan who concluded that there were similarities in the quantity, nature and depth of response’ (Bryman 2004 p. 458) of both phone and in-person interviews. In fact, reading through the interview transcripts, it would be almost impossible to determine which interviews were conducted in person and which were conducted over the phone. However, as Chapter Four will discuss in greater detail, the ability to make visual observations during face-to-face interviews is a significant key difference that must be acknowledged.

Analysis
Citing Silverstone, Ang points out that television, ‘has to be seen as embedded within a technical and consumer culture that is both domestic and national (and international), a culture that is at once private and public’ (Ang 1996 p. 249). The way in which television diffuses itself into, ‘the intricate networks of day-to-day social discourse,’ Ang continues, ‘means that even if we don’t watch very much we can hardly avoid being implicated in such TV events’ (Ang 1996 p. 249). This means, argues Ang, that media research needs to be contextualised far more radically than it has been in the past. Various forms of media should not be seen as a series of separate, independent variables but as an intricate interconnected web of phenomena that are implicated in the meaning, and possibilities, of everyday life (Ang 1996 p 250). Since the fundamental premise of radical contextualism asserts that it is impossible to determine any social or textual meaning outside of the situation in which it is produced, it can be difficult to know where to begin and where to end the analysis, especially within contemporary societies which have come to be defined, ‘as information societies, learning societies, knowledge societies, network societies…as a result, it has become increasingly difficult to separate mediated and non-mediated cultures and forms of interaction’ (Schroeder 2003 p. 63).

The reality television experience embodies this connection between the mediated and non-mediated experience. On the one hand, participants are well aware that they are agreeing to perform on what is fundamentally a commercially-driven drama series in which, by performing themselves, they will play a leading role. On the other hand, reality television is presented in a way that suggests appearing on the program will open a gateway into a new and improved life beyond the mediated realm. While Australian Idol, Big Brother and The Biggest Loser all emphasise the potentially transformative ‘journey’ involved in the reality television
participant experience, NBC reality television show, *The Pickup Artist*, literally reiterates this message throughout the series, both through the voice of the participants and the hosts. *The Pickup Artist* is a program that basically teaches sexually inexperienced men how to become experts at ‘picking up’ women. However, from the outset, this program makes clear that its purpose is to change the participant’s life beyond the twelve week series. From episode one right through to the very end, we hear the very serious statement that, ‘This experience is not simply about learning to pick up women. It’s about having a better life.’

With a radical contextualist perspective in mind, this study was designed to focus on how the participant accounts of the reality television experience, when conducted through the ‘ethnographic gaze,’ are especially useful to examining the nature of identity construction in late modernity. When I first began this project I knew that I wanted to attempt to fill a gap in reality television research by giving voice to individuals who had experienced, first hand, what it is like to participate in a reality television program. I also knew that I wanted to explore the personal aspects of such an experience and focus primarily on the varying discourses of identity construction in which reality television is imbricated. While I structured my interviews with these issues in mind, by the time I had finished transcribing all fifteen interviews I was still confronted with hundreds of pages of contradictory and complex interview data. Qualitative research analysis, however, is not about being about to find neat patterns, but rather, what Schroeder refers to as a 'crisis of creative uncertainty… an interpretative science, [where] what we look for depends fundamentally on what we can see' (Schroeder 2003 p. 75).
Faced with the dilemma of making sense of some 50,000 words of contradictory interview data, I adopted a grounded theory approach to analysis, which follows the idea of allowing theoretical ideas to emerge out of collected data (Bryman 2004 p. 560). This approach, perhaps like all qualitative research methods, is not without controversy. Grounded theory is often criticised for naively advocating a ‘theory neutral’ standpoint (Davies 2008 p. 236). Practically, the amount of time taken to transcribe interviews while constantly moving back and forwards between data collection and conceptualisation has also led to some questioning about how many projects have actually been able to establish grounded theory in practice. Grounded theory also relies heavily on coding, which some researchers argue is more likely to lead to the creation of categories rather than new theories (Bryman 2004 p. 559).

Despite the fact that grounded theory is often criticised for its ‘unattainable’ suggested ideal of theory-neutral examination of the data, I felt it ‘important to seek a critical reflexive perspective on the theoretical concepts which are guiding the early development of categories’ (Davies 2008 p. 236). The fact that I was using the qualitative research computer program, Nvivo also meant that a grounded approach to analysis was a practical methodological tool (See Appendix 3 for a more detailed account of how I constructed these coded categories). As many researchers have pointed out, computer programs such as Nvivo encourage an analytical approach that suggests that theory is grounded in the data (Bryman 2004; Davies 2008; Richards 2005). This, in part, may suggest why grounded theory has become the most widely used method for analysing data. Grounded theory stresses that ‘concepts are formed from empirical data in an interlaced process of observation and analysis’ (Schroeder 2003). Bryman argues that the two central features of grounded theory are that, ‘it is concerned with the development of theory out of data and that the approach is
iterative, or recursive, as it is sometimes called, meaning that data collection and analysis proceed in tandem, repeatedly referring back to each other’ (Bryman 2004 p. 541).

Coding is not only an integral analytical process associated with grounded theory - grounded theory encourages researchers to begin coding as soon as possible and this process of generating categories, or ‘codes’ is one of the characteristics of grounded theory (Davies 2008 pp. 231 & 234) - it is also, as Richards argues, the first step to opening up meaning (Richards 2005 pp. 85-86). Ultimately, coding aims to make material more manageable, enabling the researcher to follow narratives, processes and practices (Schroeder 2003 p. 99). Coding should help the researcher find a balance between the emic perspective, or that which is generated by the interviewee, and an etic perspective, which includes categories generated by the researcher. It is thereby important for the researcher to ask what it is they want coding to do. Richards asserts that coding should be used to reflect on what coded segments tell you about the category and its meaning in the project; ask questions about how the category relates to other ideas from the data, and construct theories about these relations; gather all material about a case from different sources; create further, finer categories and search for blends or combinations of categories (Richards 2005 pp. 85-86).

There are numerous step-by-step guides to coding (see for example, Bryman 2004; Richards 2005) and while I will not go into such detail here, Appendix 3 describes my experience of ‘coding’ in greater detail. However, it must be acknowledged here that this study has followed a grounded theory approach to coding, an approach which suggests coding as much data as possible in the beginning of analysis. In this case, this meant initially generating as many as twenty categories before refining them down to the five themes which constitute the following chapters. While this technique can lead to an overwhelming amount of coded
data, it also helps avoid one of the key criticisms of coding, which argues that by selecting chunks of data from the text it is possible for the researcher to lose contact with the data and the context, perspectives and interpretations of those being studied (Bryman 2004 p. 562). Once these categories were narrowed down, they were analysed further using the theoretical conceptual framework outlined in Chapter One.

It is important to note also that this data was coded and analysed with a post-structuralist view in mind, a perspective which argues that no single message is encoded in a text. Discourse researchers, states Wetherell, view language as constructive and constitutive of social life. Discourse builds objects, words, minds and social relations. It doesn’t simply reflect them. Discourse analysts are therefore interested in studying the process of construction itself, how ‘truths’ emerge and how social realities and identities are built. They are interested in the consequences of these complex processes rather than in working out what ‘really’ happened. Texts, such as a transcribed interview or an episode of Australian Idol, are not part of some natural process like a chemical reaction or electrons moving around a circuit. They are complex cultural and psychological products, constructed in ways which make things happen and which bring social worlds into being. At its most basic, the study of discourse investigates how people tell stories about themselves and how they present themselves in talk (Taylor, Wetherell, and Yates 2001).

Discourses, then, inevitably create subject positions. Irena, described above by me as a ‘disgruntled Big Brother contestant,’ for example, is a character constructed by me, described in such a way in an attempt to provide an impression of her psychology (Taylor, Wetherell, and Yates 2001 pp. 23-24). Rather than focus on whether the texts are accurate, truthful or
show reality, it is more important to seek to understand how certain forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal. This is why reflexivity is so integral to the qualitative research process - to speak at all is to speak for a position. Hence a post-structuralist, discursively analytical view of textual analysis, is about determining, ‘what were and what are the reasonable sense-making practices of culture: rather than just repeating our own interpretation and calling it reality’ (McKee 2003 p. 19).

The interview transcripts with which I was confronted after transcribing all fifteen interviews can be seen not only as a separate text, but as a series of narratives constructed by both myself and the interviewees. Gergen argues that, ‘We use the story form to identify ourselves to others and to ourselves’ (Gergen 2001 p. 247). However, he also goes on to say that to simply say we use stories to make ourselves comprehensible does not go far enough. Not only do we tell our lives as stories, Gergen suggests, but there is also a significant sense in which our relationships with each other are lived out in narrative form. Self-narratives, then, are ‘forms of social accounting or public discourse, cultural resources that serve such social purposes as self-identification, self-justification, self-criticism and social-solidification’ (Gergen 2001 p. 249). A constructionist’s view argues that the properties of well-formed narratives are culturally and historically situated. To understand how narratives must be structured within the culture is to ‘press against the edges of identity’s envelope, to discover the limits to which identifying oneself as a human agent in good standing; it is also to determine what forms must be maintained in order to acquire credibility as a teller of truth’ (Gergen 2001 p. 249). While it is fundamentally unhelpful to argue that there is one fixed reality that research projects such as this should attempt to uncover, by combining a
constructionist framework with discursive analysis and critical realist perspective which asserts that there exists some kind of social reality that exists, perhaps in multiple forms, beyond the individual, this study aimed to utilise the reality television experience as a kind of vehicle through which to examine the way identity construction is made manifest in late modernity.

By breaking down the large number of categories I initially created through thorough and extensive coding (which included themes such as celebrity, portrayal, motivations, honesty and integrity and post-show depression), I eventually constructed smaller sub-categories as I moved back and forth between the primary interview data and the external, theory-based texts I read as part of this research project. By following both an emic and etic perspective (Schroeder 2003 p. 81), I eventually divided my proposed overriding theme of individual identity within late modern identity into the five final categories which included; the performed identity, identity discourses of self-help and transformation, the commodified/branded self, the stigmatised identity and the subversive identity.

Validity and reliability

As this chapter has already pointed out, the relevance of reliability and validity is a contentious issue within qualitative research. Techniques such as reliability, or replicability which involves doing the same case study and getting the same results is not tailored to the constantly changing and evolving social processes that inspire qualitative research (Hermes 1995 p. 206). Most researchers, myself included, view their research as one account of a number of possible representations. So while it can be difficult to apply a single application of reliability and validity standards to qualitative research, as this would assume there is a
feasible single absolute account of social reality, this study has employed the following strategies to ensure as great a degree of validity and reliability as possible.

Respondent validation

Bryman succinctly asserts that if there can be several possible accounts of an aspect of social reality, it is the feasibility or credibility of the account that a researcher arrives at that is going to determine its acceptability to others. One way of establishing credibility is by ensuring that research is carried out by the canons of good practices and by respondent validation, or the process of submitting interview transcripts to the individuals who participated in the study (Bryman 2004 p. 377). Once each interview was transcribed, participants were emailed a copy of their interview transcript to ensure that they were comfortable with what was said and that they felt it was an as accurate account of our conversation as possible. While this strategy can cause problems, particularly if the respondents feel defensive about the researcher’s interpretation of them, in this case none of the participants requested I alter, add to or remove any aspect of the interview transcript.

Transparency

The importance of reflexivity has been emphasized in this chapter. A clear, transparent account of the research process is undoubtedly integral to qualitative research as is an awareness of the role of the researcher throughout the research process. It must be emphasized that while qualitative research has the ability to represent a valid and credible version of a social reality, it is only one version of this reality and it is a reality constructed by both the researcher and the participants. Hence, while the presence of the researcher, including personal accounts, past experiences and observations in academic research is
controversial, it is integral to a research project such as this which is arguably a construction influenced by the researcher’s personal history and interests. As Radway points out, the use of ‘literary characterization and careful narrative technique, can help foreground the fact that a hierarchical social relation is the source of the offered interpretation’ (Radway 1996 p. 240). Such a technique can also characterize the social relationship between the informant and the interviewer as well as highlighting the clash of different languages that can occur within a contrived research situation (Radway 1996 pp. 240-241). For this reason I have attempted to a limited extent to include myself within this research project and where appropriate used literary and narrative techniques to emphasise both the way in which the researcher’s own biases and experiences can work to influence the research findings and the way in which the interview transcripts are both constructed and interpreted.

Conclusion

As this chapter makes clear, qualitative interview based research is subjective and influenced as much by the interviewer as by the participants who are interviewed – for the goal of free-flowing conversation is notoriously difficult to obtain, with interviews usually being full of contradictions, probings and suggestions (Davies 2008 p. 107). At the same time, however, while this study would never pretend to be ‘purely’ scientific, nor is it a piece of fictional literature. By using the interview transcripts as the basis of this research, I attempt, in the following chapters, to present a transparent and reflexive account of the experience of reality television participation. While I cannot attempt to speak for those who participated in this study, by examining the various identity discourses that constitute the following chapters, I have attempted to use the first-hand accounts of this unique, twenty-first century mediatised
experience to interrogate the broader issues of what it means to be a postmodern subject in the increasingly mediatised and globalised landscape of late modernity.
Chapter 3
‘There’s no reality in reality TV’: performing the real in a ‘reality flavoured’ universe

‘There is something about singing in character that creates that wall, you know that mask creates a kind of defense so you can, because you’re pretending you’re confident. I think there is a very fine line between pretending and believing and being.’
- Shane Jenek/Courtney Act, Australian Idol

‘Let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing as long as I think that I am something...’
Rene Descartes

‘Keep it real’
- Ali G/aka Sacha Baron Cohen

In the eighth season of NBC’s reality show, The Celebrity Apprentice, participants were allocated the usual series of business-related tasks by the program’s host, millionaire businessman Donald Trump. While each completed task was critiqued by Trump and his assistants on a range of criteria, the aim of the program was for the participating celebrities to raise the most money for their nominated charities. In standard reality television formula, participants are evicted, or ‘fired’, from the program each week until two finalists remain. This particular season of The Celebrity Apprentice saw comedian Joan Rivers compete against poker champion, Annie Duke in the finals. While Rivers was witty, compassionate and unashamedly emotional, Duke was ambitious, calculating and competitive, but she also
raised significantly more money than any of the other participants, including Rivers. Duke may have been disliked by most of her fellow participants but in a program whose catchphrase is, ‘It’s not personal, it’s business,’ Duke’s ability to win tasks and demonstrate clever ‘game playing’ meant that she also appeared to be most likely to win. In the end, however, Duke lost out to Rivers. Deemed a ‘typical’ (in other words sly and shifty) poker player, Duke, with all her ambition, ‘played the game’ a little too well. Rivers may have appeared overtly flawed, displaying regular emotional outbursts during the professional setting of the ‘boardroom,’ but such behaviour was ultimately deemed to be ‘honest’ in contrast to Duke’s unreadable, therefore untrustworthy, ‘poker face.’ Even within the context of a clearly contrived game that claims to be about strategy and business acumen, the individual most able to act out an authentic, ‘emotionally honest’, performance of the self won out.

Not only was this a moral tale for the audience, exemplifying the benefits of being ‘true to oneself,’ it was also an unintentional lesson in how to win a reality television show. It’s okay to cry and have what would usually be deemed inappropriate emotional outbursts within a corporate setting, the series implied, so long as you are ‘honest’ and therefore, ‘real.’ This chapter will explore the role of authenticity as a currency of the self. It will ask to what extent do reality TV producers manipulate the presentation of the self? And finally, how do the participants themselves feel about their constructed (usually by network producers) mediatised personas?

Back in 2005, a few years before the Rivers vs Duke finale a similar game was being played out. This time, the setting was Australia and the program was *Big Brother*. Self-proclaimed
‘lefty’ and union journalist, Tim Brunero and footy playing sales representative, Greg Logan, remained the final two contestants, with Logan eventually winning $836,000 in prize money. While Logan maintained the ‘good Aussie bloke’ persona that typified many a Big Brother contestant over the eight years the program aired in Australia, Brunero was something of a misfit, in that he was not only openly political, but that his politics became an integral element of his mediatised personality or ‘brand’. After leaving the show, Brunero also openly admitted to being a ‘game player’ and eventually set up a ‘coaching service’ for reality TV hopefuls that he advertises on his personal website (http://www.timbrunero.com).

What is particularly interesting about Brunero’s Big Brother experience is that while his success on the show most probably had something to do with his ‘strategic’ approach, Brunero was reluctant to discuss the conscious way he attempted to construct and manipulate his own image and television persona with the media. Brunero articulates this dilemma when he discusses his mediatised portrayal as either, ‘the genuine decent guy or the sly and smart guy? As I was saying before, both of them have got pros and cons.’ As Brunero further elaborates, there is an inevitable tension between authenticity and performance within this reality television experience and the media publicity that comes afterwards:

When I first came out, when I went on Rove [Australian Letterman-style talk show] which was 2 days after the show and I couldn’t say it. He said, “Oh were you playing the game?” I said, “playing the game would be like having a game plan before you got the ball in the radio,” which you obviously can’t have any game plan for. But a couple of weeks later on Chris and Craig [national radio program on the network JJJ] I was comfortable enough to say, “Of course I was playing the game.” But then, in a lot of
ways what's with this playing the game bullshit? What does it mean? That you've got to be as crass and rude as you possibly can be?

As Tolson notes in his analysis of former *Spice Girl*, Geri Halliwell’s ‘performance’ in the documentary, *Geri*, ‘the projection of the public image can simultaneously amount to a way of being yourself’ (Tolson 2001 p. 444). Further investigating what the concept of ‘being yourself’ actually means within a public context, he argues that while the construction of a public image is a ‘performance’ it is not the same as ‘acting’ (Tolson 2001 p. 445). This important difference was recognised by Goffman some 50 years ago when he wrote, ‘The very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces one to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage’ (Goffman 1959 p. 23). But while Brunero’s ‘performance’ may have been practiced in the way of the stage, his reluctance to reveal the performative aspect of his experience is indicative of a very present tension that defines late modern subjectivity – that between the notion of the postmodern fluid, ever changing self biography (Bauman 2000; Bauman and Vecchi 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Goffman 1959; Hall 1996; Giddens 1991) and what might be called a Cartesian self. Also significant is that, while Brunero was ultimately positive in discussing his *Big Brother* experience saying, ‘I’d never regret it and I...constantly wish, I don’t constantly wish, that’s not the way I’d put it, I don’t constantly wish I was back there...but I remember it with enormous fondness and I enjoyed it very much.’ He was the only participant I interviewed who, after acceptance, thoroughly researched the program on which he was to participate. And, like *The Biggest Loser’s* Chris Garling, who was also criticized for being a ‘game player,’ his calculated approach is one that the majority of the reality participants I interviewed disapprove of. From *Big Brother’s* Irena Bukhshtaber who said, ‘Tim...had a really
good game plan and stuck to it…I’m a bit dubious of people who are able to hold it together for that long,’
to The Biggest Loser’s Alex Tsao who said to win Loser he would have needed to, ‘Play the game
and lose my integrity…Integrity means everything to me,’ many of the participants I interviewed
equated ‘playing the game’ with presenting a ‘false’ or inauthentic persona.

Big Brother, The Biggest Loser and Australian Idol all follow a formula where there can only be
one clear winner and such programs thrive on the politics and the pressures and stresses that
such competition creates. But in spite of this transparency, it is clear that ‘playing the game’
in a strategic sense is also represented as the antithesis of maintaining an ‘authentic self’.
When Big Brother participants are evicted from the house, for example, one of the first
questions they are asked by the host during their exit interview is, ‘Who was playing the
game?’ ‘Playing the game’ within this context does not signify cunning, intelligence or even
being media savvy, but rather the heavily stigmatised conduct of a performance that is not
deemed to be ‘real.’ It refers to a technique used by contestants who participate on a reality
show under a contrived and constructed persona that is different from the way they would
behave in everyday life. Annie Duke, for instance, was ‘playing the game’ by remaining cold
and aloof, openly altering her behaviour in an effort to win. Brunero played the game by
deliberately transforming his image and controlling his behaviour in order to stay in ‘the
game’ for as long as possible.

To assume that participating on a reality show cannot be anything other than ‘playing a
game’ is of course feasible. As Theo Van Leewuen asserts, the very notion of authenticity is
a problematic concept in itself as, ‘authenticity cannot be seen as an objective feature of talk,
or any other form of sociocultural production, despite all the scientific and scholarly
procedures and methods that have been developed for establishing it’ (Van Leeuwen 2001 p. 396). The commercialized, manipulated and manufactured nature of reality television is, in many ways, the antithesis of ‘authenticity’. Participants have little control over the product once it reaches the airwaves, their mediatised self dependent almost solely on the profit-driven whims of powerful network producers. But on the other hand, a successful reality television program must have contestants who, at the very least, appear to be ‘authentic’ – every episode must provide what Grindstaff, in her interrogation of television talk shows, refers to as the ‘money shot,’ the moment of real, pure, raw and unscripted spontaneous emotion (Grindstaff 2002). Brunero may have eventually admitted to blatantly controlling his behaviour in order to be successful, but he never wanted this to be obvious to the audience or even fellow housemates. So while he entered the ‘house’ with a plan that included a list of ‘dos and don’ts’ stemming from extensive research into what makes a successful housemate, it was a secret plan which included strategies such as always wearing shoes in order to appear taller and saving his biscuits to share with the other participants after they’d eaten their share. As Brunero states:

Chaz⁴ and I talked about how to inject yourself into subplots and how to, if you see subplots growing and forming to inject yourself into them, and better still, create them for yourself. Some of this I learnt when I was on the show, but it’s like Madonna, you know, every single time she brings out an album she changes her image. So what I’m saying is, every week you’ve got to be different, every week you’ve got to, so I got my hair cut and the audience responded to that. I got my hair colored and the audience responded to that. I was the little guy doing weights and the audience responded to that. So reading very carefully what Gretel [Kileen. Big

⁴ Chaz Licciardello is a member of political satirist team, The Chaser, and a friend of Brunero’s who helped him prepare for his Big Brother stint.
Brother host said, the questions she asked, seeing what was resonating on the outside. Planning your themes, what you were doing based on that. I had this thing towards the end called ‘the war on filth.’ It seems silly but I was simply the janitor I suppose and I was cleaning the house, and I had this war on filth and I made this big thing about it for a couple of days. Because I knew that by the time there were four of us left in the house there was scant little for them to make a show out of. Exactly what happened, what I planned to happen, happened. And for 2 days it was all about Tim’s war on filth.

The above statement clearly indicates Brunero’s deliberate and considered approach to his reality TV experience. Like Madonna, Brunero cleverly constructed his image to appeal to a mass audience. But, in spite of his game plan, Brunero is also adamant that he was ‘true to himself’ arguing that, ‘You can’t draw on resources you don’t have. You can’t be someone you’re not. You can’t be someone you’re not for 3 months. So I am actually very comfortable to showcase who I am and be me.’

Brunero, then, was doing what John Corner refers to as ‘performing the real’ (Corner 2002), or ‘acting’ himself, albeit in a very unusual situation. In what Corner famously coins ‘postdocumentary culture’ participants must insist that they are being themselves, but they are also existing within a living space that is fundamentally a performance space (Corner 2002). Corner goes even further to argue that the very nature of this ‘real’ performance marks a shift in the nature of the broader sphere where ‘vectors both of structure and agency combine to produce an experience that John Hartley has dubbed ‘popular reality’ (Corner 2002 p. 68). To argue, then, that ‘playing the game’ jeopardises the ‘authenticity’ or ‘reality’

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5 Participants in Big Brother have a media contract during their stay in the house. They are interviewed periodically by the host, not only for the weekly eviction program. It is these talks that Brunero is referring to as a means of picking up information.
of reality television is to assume that such a thing is possible in the first place. In other words, most of us are playing out some kind of ‘performance’ far beyond the parameters of reality television. Like the set of a reality show, our realities shift and change, depending on the situation we are in. Brunero argues that ‘You can’t be someone you’re not for three months’ because, in his view, his stable sense of self-identity was not jeopardised by the way he behaved in the Big Brother house. As Giddens suggests most of us are able to construct this consistent sense of self that accepts ‘the reality of things’, such as needing to perform in a particular way in order to succeed on Big Brother, while at the same time, our identity not necessarily being ‘derivable’ from such a reality. For Brunero, the very nature of identity means that one must wear a series of Goffman-esque masks in order to adapt to various situations, in both everyday life and on Big Brother. In his own words he states:

I ‘MC’ things regularly and do work out at Rooty Hill and Blacktown, I’ve never felt uncomfortable in the University of Western Sydney, then I came to the University of Sydney, I could go to a dinner party in Mosman or Bellevue Hill or I could go to a pub in Liverpool or Revesby or Campbelltown or Penrith. What I’m trying to say to you is I’ve always tried to treat people well and I’ve been equipped with the skills from my parents to mix with any company. I can mix with, I know all the social mores, all the spoons and forks you’ve got to use to be able to participate at a very sort of ladida ruling class situation, but also I’m equally comfortable talking to other people.

In this passage Brunero is presenting himself as a post-modern subject in that he reflexively changes his mask depending on his external circumstances. On Big Brother Brunero aimed to play the ‘nice guy’, while during our interview he exemplified and constructed the inevitable intersubjectivity involved in the interviewing process by referring to me as a ‘fellow intellectual’,
while he emphasises the need for such fluidity by saying that he chooses ‘not to swear’ when talking to his parents because you talk to them differently than you would a ‘church minister or your closest friends.’ But while participants such as Bukhshtaber may criticize Brunero for what she deems an inauthentic persona, Brunero understands himself in way that Giddens refers to as ‘continuous self identity.’ He ‘performs the real’, changing ‘masks’ when he needs to, while ultimately retaining what he feels is a continuous and relatively consistent self-biography. But while Brunero self-consciously constructs his self-identity, as this chapter will demonstrate, not all the participants I interviewed shared Brunero’s reflexive sense of subjective control.

**Playing the game**

The first thing former *Biggest Loser* participant Tracy Moores tells *Biggest Loser* fans who approach her on the street is, ‘*There’s no reality in reality TV.*’ Moores who argues that she went on *Loser* primarily to lose weight says, ‘I thought I was going to a holiday camp to work my ass off and the winner was the winner at the end of the day. I think they’ve turned it into Big Brother for fat people. They created a lot of the drama.’ For Moores, *Loser* was comparable to *Big Brother* in that it became a competition, fuelled by ‘drama’ and conflict amongst the contestants. She is highly critical of fellow participants Adro Sarnelli and Kristie Dignam, for example, who she felt were ‘in it for the money from day one…they’ve been so pushy and pushed themselves into everything.’ Yet, she maintained contact post-*Loser* with participants such as Jo Cowling, who she says, ‘*pissed me off in the show, but deep down I think she’s got a few problems, a few hang ups and I see that in Jo now. You know with all that bad publicity that she got and all that sort of stuff, I honestly think she didn’t know how to handle it…And that’s why I have a lot of time for her now.*'
While Moores may be considered somewhat naïve in assuming that a reality TV weight loss program would be little more than a ‘holiday camp,’ she ultimately expresses a desire for what Busse refers to as a ‘reality beyond the performative, for some central core that…defines who we are’ (Busse 2006). She supports Cowling because her flaws and personal problems make her ‘real’ in that they explain why she behaves the way she does. According to Moores, Cowling was a kind of victim of the *Biggest Loser* machine, unable to ‘handle’ the situation in which she was placed. In contrast, according to Moores view, participants such as Sarnelli and Dingham created a false reality about who they were, acting rather than ‘performing the real’. As Moores states, ‘I think there were only about 4 people there who weren’t there for the money. The rest were all there for the fame and fortune. I was there to get rid of my big fat ass, you know what I mean. But there were some pretty ruthless characters on the show.’

Like Moores, Cowling differentiates herself from many of her fellow participants, making clear that she had no need to perform as anyone other than ‘herself’ because her motivations for appearing on the program didn’t go beyond a desire to lose weight.

*I probably thought I that I was a skinny girl in a fat girl’s body. I was such in denial because I had a good career, good family, good relationships, good everything, but I was a bit like, if you had a problem with my weight then that was your problem. I didn’t let anything in my life stop me because of my weight, that’s not what I do. Then I went to the doctors maybe 12 months before and he told me, “Jo, if you don’t do something about your weight you’re going to be a diabetic”. And I was sort of like, yeah OK, whatever. Then I went to see him again after 12 months and he said, what part of me saying that you’re going to be a diabetic didn’t you understand? And I’m absolutely, totally so scared of needles. That was just a couple of days after I think I saw *The Biggest Loser* for the first time and I saw the ad at the end of it and I thought, OK, I’ve got to*
admit I’ve got a problem and the only way of not turning back is getting up in front of the whole of Australia and saying, OK, I’m very unhealthy and I’m going to get very sick…I never had a game plan. It was not a game for me. So I was shocked to find out to what lengths some people [would go to] to play the game.

One could speculate that Cowling and Moores, who had never watched Loser, simply had limited knowledge of the program on which they’d agreed to appear and were therefore incapable of ‘playing the game’. Perhaps this ignorance was even deemed an asset by producers undertaking the selection process. But while the majority of participants I interviewed were like Moores and Cowling in that they dismissed the idea that they would even consider acting in a particular way simply to succeed, six participants openly admitted to ‘playing the game’ in varying ways. These strategists included The Biggest Loser, winner Chris Garling and member of the final three, Courtney Jackson, Big Brother’s Tim Brunero, Jamie McDonald and Merlin Luck and Australian Idol’s Anthony Sumbati. While they appeared on different programs and their methods varied – Luck auditioned for Big Brother primarily with the ambition of mounting a political protest, for example, while Sumbati staged fake phone calls and wore ‘rags’ in an attempt to construct a rags-to-riches narrative, they all had one thing in common: the insistence that they were ultimately ‘true to themselves’ even when they were ‘acting’. Even Sumbati, who has appeared on several reality show and lied about his background or experiences says that while programs like Idol are clearly manufactured, ‘if people are open and straightforward regardless of what it is, keeping in part that discretion is the better part of valor, it’s good to be honest, it’s good to be forward, people appreciate that. People like honesty.’ In other words, Sumbati may have been acting, to some degree, when he appeared on Idol, but his honesty about his intentions amounts, at least from his point of view, to authenticity.
For others, such as Jackson, ‘playing the game’ was a matter of practicality and the experience of having watched reality TV since childhood. Having extensive knowledge of reality TV from the point of view of an audience member, Jackson initially felt equipped to cope with the manipulative and constructed nature of the reality TV formula.

The difference between me and the other contestants was that I grew up with reality TV. I knew how it all worked and I had more of an idea. I could make educated guesses about what was coming next because I had watched the American show and I had watched Survivor and all that sort of stuff so I could make guesses. The number one plan was to suss everyone out and see who I should form an alliance with so I figured that out pretty much straight away. Then I was trying to recruit other people that you could manipulate and stuff like that. I thought it was going to be a lot easier than it was. But I didn’t realize how much I was not in control of, especially when it came to other people and what they were thinking. There were so many times when I almost came close to everything crumbling down around me and that sort of thing. The whole of the game, that’s thrown at you as well and that puts a spanner in the works every time. You get there and you think, this is the way it’s going, and then it will completely turn around and you’ll go, oh, bloody hell.

Jackson’s ability to ‘play the game’ landed him a spot in the final three. But while Jackson clearly attempted to manipulate situations to enhance his position on the program, he also says that ‘I just went in there and I just was myself’ – a complex paradox that will be examined further in this chapter. So while his mediatised persona may have been exaggerated by producers with his ‘bitchy’ side emphasised, Jackson says that in spite of his ‘game playing’ he remained ‘true’ to himself. Which inevitably raises the question as to why, in this artificial reality, is authenticity so important – not simply to producers who want their profit-inducing
‘money shot’, but to participants who are willing to participate, and sometimes ‘play the
game’ on such a program in the first place?

As Chris Garling demonstrates, being ‘fake’ is not the same as ‘playing the game.’ In fact,
people who do admit to ‘playing the game’ may be considered, as Sumbati suggests, more
‘honest.’ Garling states:

*On TV* they’d [the contestants] be crying every five seconds, they were hugging each other and crying, behind
closed doors they were stabbing each other in the back. There’s that whole head held high, integrity, the guys
that kept spinning on about that, were usually the worst ones. It was all planned, “I’m leaving with my head
held high”, they’d be thinking that when they got off the show they’d be making millions in promos. They also
thought it would be better for their image…It used to make me laugh, that head held high thing…These
guys, they were the slimiest, they would crawl over their own mother for $5.

While those critical of ‘game playing’ associate it with a lack of authenticity, those who did
‘play the game’ did so because, from their point of view, reality TV programming is, after all,
a game. Hence playing the game, to them, does not mean embracing a fluid post-modern
position by instinctively adapting to a situation and behaving accordingly. Rather, it involves
constructing and retaining a cohesive sense of self while reflexively donning a Goffman-
esque ‘mask.’ As Goffman notes when he cites Robert Erza Park, ‘It is probably no mere
historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a
recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously,
playing a role…It is in these roles that we know each other, it is in these roles that we know
ourselves’ (cited in: Goffman 1959 p. 19). What these game players are, somewhat
unwittingly, revealing is the nature of late modern identity itself. An identity that may not automatically be created at birth, but one that, as Giddens explains, remains continuous within a constantly shifting postmodern world. Within the artificial reality TV landscape, even the most cynical players maintain ‘the persistence of feelings of personhood in a continuous self and body’ (Giddens 1991 p. 55). No matter how much these game players need to reorder their identity within the game in which they are involved, the importance they place on what they refer to as authenticity, and their belief in retaining a sense of who they ‘really are’, is demonstrative of the fact that, even in the wider world, most of us rely on the consistency of our personal self-chosen biographical narratives to create a grounded sense of self (Giddens 1991).

‘Who you are shines through’: searching for the authentic self

There’s little doubt that the way we view identity has changed. It was only a few decades ago, says Zygmunt Bauman, that identity was ‘nowhere near the centre of our thoughts…Today, though, identity is the loudest talk in town, the burning issue on everybody’s mind and tongue’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 pp. 16-17). This is exemplified by reality participants, for whom appearing on a reality show is very much about, in the words of Brunero, ‘showcasing’ who they are. Identity is no longer determined at birth, but a continuous, largely self-determined, ‘work-in-progress.’ But while most of us rely on Gidden’s notion of a continuous biographical narrative to provide us with a consistent sense of who we are, it is, as Ulrich Beck points out, quite ironically, that ‘the main activity of the self-chosen life’ still continues to be ‘the search for one’s true self’ (Beck and Willms 2004). From the Biggest Loser which, each season, features participants admiring their potential post weight-loss bathing suits and jeans that they feel reflect their ‘true’ self, to Australian Idol participants who are
constantly reminded to ‘find their voice’, the emphasis on discovering one’s ‘true self’, in western popular culture and reality television in particular, now prevails. And, as the participants interviewed for this study remind us, a significant feature of this constructed reality TV cohesive sense of self is the perception of authenticity. Authenticity then, or the construction of it, is not only key to a successful reality program, but to the way we see ourselves as individuals. The recommendation to ‘just be yourself’ is offered as tried and true advice for those going on a first date, attending a job interview or when, of course, auditioning for a reality TV show. While all these situations require a certain degree of performance, they are also times when individuals are required to reveal the crucial ‘authentic’ self – an all important quality in late modern life. As on a reality TV show, individuals who are at least perceived to be ‘authentic’ in everyday life are likely to be considered more trustworthy because others may know who they ‘really’ are. While there are numerous examples where authenticity and performance both merge and contradict one another, to understand this process within reality television, and arguably everyday life, it is useful to look to the construction of celebrity - a realm where authenticity becomes central to success and, ‘a quality necessary for the star phenomenon to work’ (Giles 1999 p. 84).

In a recent In Style magazine profile, Hollywood actress Sandra Bullock was described as ‘the down-to-earth actress with friend-you’d-love-to-have appeal (Meyers 2009 p. 108). The cover story, whose overall theme was Bullock’s ordinariness, commented on Bullock’s preference for comfortable clothes and the way she apparently feels sexiest when, ‘the person I love wakes up next to me and looks at me with love, even if my hair looks like the dog’s been chewing on it’ (Meyers 2009 p. 110). In this piece, ordinariness is clearly equated with Bullock’s authenticity and In Style works hard to construct her ‘down-to-earth’ core in
spite of her extraordinary life as a Hollywood movie star. The actress is further contextualized within everyday circumstances when her family and co-stars are given the opportunity to ask questions that only the actress’s inner-circle would know to ask. Her friend/co-star Thomas Haden Church, for example, asks, ‘How is it that you can smell a hamburger from 100 kilometers away?’ Through the combined discourses of intimacy and authenticity, readers are invited to get to know the actress (albeit photographed in Ralph Lauren silk) as she ‘really’ is minus the artificial glare of the Hollywood film set. Ultimately, the article concludes that Bullock has managed to maintain ‘integrity’ in spite of her celebrity by, ‘not succumbing to the trappings of stardom’ (Littler 2003 p. 13), thereby remaining true to her ‘authentic’ self.

While the public/private split is widely recognised as constituting the constructed persona of the celebrity (Busse 2006; Littler 2003; Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000), this dichotomy becomes more complex in relation to reality participants because they are literally expected to be ‘acting themselves.’ When 21 year old Shane Jenek first auditioned for *Australian Idol* in 2003 he was turned away. So he returned the following day, this time dressed as a woman called Courtney Act.

*I think that Courtney added a little bit of zing and I think in myself I was a little bit, um, uncertain as to where I placed myself – I’ll refer to myself as Shane and Courtney as Courtney if you like for ease of distinguishing. As Shane I guess I think it was, 2003, I would have been 21, I was a little bit uncertain and I was just discovering myself and that sort of thing in life. So I just went along to the auditions and I think that would have translated and I would have been just another blonde boy singing a tune and so while I did make it through the producers when it came to the judges it was like, no, you know, could have taken you*
either way. With Courtney I think there was that mask and also the extra element, you know the costume and the hair was different. And I think that the performance that I delivered as Courtney had a lot more zing to it. The judges said that they almost put me through yesterday as Shane but you’ve come back and added a whole new layer and they really loved it.

Jenek’s situation works well to highlight this dichotomy between his private and public self because, dressed as a woman, Jenek was clearly wearing a mask that distinguished him from his ‘authentic’ private self. Interestingly, Jenek says that Idol’s producer embraced his drag-queen persona and that, while on the show, he, ‘could have done more or less anything that I wanted. I felt that I was portrayed in a positive way. I felt that I was portrayed accurately and I felt that my Idol experience was actually really positive.’ It was only when the series finished and Jenek was offered a recording contract with Sony BMG that Jenek began to find his two biographical narratives became confusing and imbalanced.

I was kind of told what to do and that was, Courtney is a girl, almost as though Shane doesn’t exist. I think that’s what was marketed for a long time and to me that wasn’t what I wanted and it created a real imbalance. Now in Rent I’m playing a boy and a drag character so I’ve really been able to get that balance back and I’m really excited by that. Even including photos of myself as a boy on my blog, that I couldn’t do before and it feels so much more normal.

From the point of view of Sony BMG, Jenek’s day-to-day identity as a biological male interfered with his persona as recording artist, Courtney Act. As Busse argues in her article about ‘popslash’ fiction, a form of web-based writing where fans write fictional stories based on characters from popular bands such as Take That and ‘N Sync, the split between the ‘real’
and the public self ‘foregrounds the way subject positions not only are chosen but are consciously created and shaped by the audience at the same time as they address a desire for an imaginary core identity’ (Busse 2006 p. 255). Hence, conflicting discourses of authenticity and performance are drawn to light by addressing the difficulty of performing the postmodern self, ‘a difficulty exemplified but not exclusive to stars’ (Busse 2006 p. 254). While BMG may not have been trying to present Jenek’s drag queen persona as a biological female, they may also have been concerned about his ‘real’ identity interfering with his precarious public self. But, as Goffman and Van Leeuwen both suggest, any individual can ‘rapidly alter the social role in which he [sic] is active, even though his capacity as animator and author remains constant’ (Van Leeuwen 2001 p. 395). Authenticity, then, from this perspective is relative to norms connected with the social identity within a particular context and thereby a highly problematic concept. From Jenek’s perspective, his ‘authentic self’ was that of Shane Jenek but for BMG Jenek was a persona who interfered with the image of Act they wished to market. A ‘core’ self, however ‘inauthentic’ it may be from the point of view of the individual in question, is therefore a highly desirable commodity in a society equally and paradoxically reliant on adaptability and fluidity. In Chapter Five I will argue that having a public ‘core’ self is essential if an individual wishes to present themselves as a personal ‘brand.’ In other words, a ‘core’ self is the first step in establishing a ‘brand message’ which is ultimately about sending a ‘strong and consistent message (Gordon 2006)’ that exemplifies what the particular brand is about. For Jenek, having to grapple with two biographical narratives became confusing and unbalanced, causing him to seek therapy as a way of making sense of what his continuing self-identity might be.
For Goffman, the structure of the self can be seen in terms of how we arrange these performances of the self. The self as a performed character is not ‘an organic thing that has a specific fate to be born, mature and die. It is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited’ (Goffman 1959 pp. 23-24). The success of a reality television program, and of the individuals who participate in it, is largely concerned with how ‘credible’ the participants appear to be, just as the success of an actress like Sandra Bullock resides on a careful balancing between the extraordinary and the ordinary. But, with the projection of authenticity being so crucial both to the construction of celebrity and to those presented on reality television, it is perhaps not surprising that fakeness, as the antithesis of authenticity, is so heavily derided.

For example, restaurant owner Greg Koutsovidis says that while he was grateful for his *Biggest Loser* experience because it helped him lose weight, he also said that he ‘hated’ his time on the show in part because of all the ‘fakeness’ that surrounded him. The practicalities associated with television production mean that it is impossible for the television production experience to mimic the final product – ‘I had no idea that us walking into the house would take the whole day to record. It was draining. Walk up, walk this, walk this, walk that.’ But Koutsovidis was also disappointed by the perceived lack of ‘authenticity’ of the people working within the television industry. Of host, AJ Rochester, herself chosen to host *The Biggest Loser* because of her own public struggles with her weight, Koutsovidis says, ‘Yeah, very fake…but understandable. She’s in that society, in that world where it can eat her up and spit her out. She has to brownnose the right people, you know… “Oh hell, ladida, that’s a funny joke, hahaha.”’ Television, then, is a world that is a *stage*, a place where those involved have to perform in a specific way
in order to succeed. This performance, according to Koutsovidis, is ultimately ‘fake’ because the individuals involved cannot be themselves because they must be what is expected of them. An exception, perhaps, include the camera crew – those working behind the scenes, performing a necessary job, but not making decisions as to how the program would turn out. From Bukhshtaber who described the Big Brother camera crew as, ‘the most generous people on the show,’ to Moores who said The Biggest Loser ‘camera men were what made me get through seven weeks of hell. They were human,’ a number of participants commented on the production crew as being ‘authentic’ in contrast to the ‘fake’ hosts and untrustworthy producers. Such a perception of the camera crew as ‘authentic’ while television hosts are ‘fake’ harks back to Littler’s theory of celebrity and authenticity in which she argues that the most ‘authentic’ moment of a celebrity’s self is often the moment before he or she becomes famous (Littler 2003 p. 13), as though a public profile distorts, even destroys, the authentic self.

Yet, despite this perceived lack of authenticity, participants such as Koutsovidis also declare the reality television environment to be a kind of mirror, reflecting the ‘true’ personalities of those involved. Within this discourse, behind the mask lies a core self that cannot be disguised simply by performance. Participants who might disagree, who feel manipulated and misrepresented by the network producers or the editing process, argue Koutsovidis, ‘obviously didn’t like what they saw and you can’t blame the producers for that. You can’t hide it, who you are. The show cannot lie. Yeah, they can manipulate situations. But it doesn’t matter. Who you are shines through.’ Yet while Koutsovidis says that participants approached him for advice ‘asking if they are conducting themselves right because I was so honest. And no one else was,’ he himself admits that during filming he evaded answering questions in order to avoid being implicated in particular narrative arcs he anticipated were being constructed. ‘They got really fed up with that. I didn’t care.'
What happened was, one lady she said to me, at a certain point I’m going to have fans out there, people watching the show, so when something does happen they’re going to want to know my opinion on it. Why I don’t care. If I don’t care, tell them why I don’t care. Yeah, um, that’s what the producers wanted.’ In his kind of ‘anti-performance’ even Koutsovidis, who clearly prides himself on being an ‘honest’ person, was unable to avoid the inevitable performance of the ‘real’.

Of course, even the concept of what is and what isn’t ‘real’ is problematic. As Zizek points out, in today’s market a whole series of products is deprived of its ‘malignant properties’ in the way of no-fat cream, decaf coffee or sugar-free lollies, for example. In a similar way the other, too, is deprived of its otherness (Zizek 2002 pp. 10-11).

Virtual reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real – just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, virtual reality is experienced as reality without being so…It was when we watched the two World Trade Centre towers collapsing on the TV screen, that it became possible to experience the falsity of ‘reality TV shows’: even if these shows are ‘for real’, people still act in them – they simply play themselves…what we see are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real (Zizek 2002 p. 12).

Such sentiment brings into question Koutsovidis’ argument that ‘who you are shines through,’ especially if we are to adopt a postmodern perspective that problematises such a concept anyway. Just how ‘authentic’ reality television is actually able to be is arguably less important than the ‘popular reality’ it constructs, a popular reality that is able to astutely demonstrate just how complex, contradictory and fraught with uncertainty the experience of identity in
late modernity is for all of us. *Australian Idol* participant, Chanel Cole, described reality television as ‘reality flavoured,’ just as Zizek compares it to coffee deprived of caffeine. But while programs like *Big Brother* are always falsified versions of reality, for Zizek they also highlight the ‘lack of real underlying our performative selves’ (cited in: McQuire 2008 p. 197). The more extreme examples of the performative self, such as that of the television host, may remind a disillusioned reality participant of this striking lack of ‘real’, but as the contradictory nature of Koutsovidis’s interview text highlights, a consistent ‘core’ self, despite its continued prominence in Western popular culture, is difficult to detect at the best of times. However, many of us feel we can create, as the interview transcripts that form the basis of this study imply, a reasonably consistent biographical narrative that provides us, not only with a reliable sense of self, but with a sense of ontological security in an environment so filled with choice and external stimuli, that it is easy to feel ungrounded.

**The art of looking real**

If there was ever any doubt about the performative aspect of reality television participation, the somewhat cynical establishment of New York’s Reality TV School in 2008 has shed light on the artificially constructed nature of reality television programming. As the following letter in response to a magazine article about the Reality TV School demonstrates, such open recognition of the mediatised self as a performance can be considered to undermine claims of authenticity in a ‘popular reality.’

I am not a fan of reality TV but have always assumed these shows do justice to 'real people' and 'real' circumstances in life. However, *Keeping it Real* (November 9) has vanquished that assumption altogether. I am repulsed by the existence of the New York Reality TV School.
Clearly, the whole situation has become twisted - it's the most treacherous form of entertainment today. The article makes clear that reality programs do not show authentic situations and instead have mastered the art of looking real…(Urbanski 2008).

‘The art of looking real’ provides a stark contrast to ‘authentic situations’ according to this angry reader. However, the letter writer also exemplifies this expectation that such a thing as authenticity exists, even within television programming. Similarly, in her study of reality television audiences, Annette Hill found that only 12% of viewers perceived reality television programming to be ‘real.’ The majority presumed reality television programs to be a combination of ‘real’ and ‘made up’ events. At the same time, however, judging levels of ‘authenticity’ in what Hill refers to as ‘popular factual programs’ is equated with judging the integrity of the self. Participants may have no choice but to ‘perform’ as themselves, but what matters is that they engage in this performance with authenticity and ‘integrity’ (Hill 2005). For, even in the mass media, it is the perception of truth that matters, as much in reality television programming as in the daily news. As Hartley points out, the media aims, ‘to combine and intertwine the tidal power of a major novel with the bone-rattling immediacy of front-line journalism’ (Hartley 1992 p. 46). When this highly valued ‘truth’ is revealed to be an illusion, a kind of simulacra (Baudrillard 1996), anxiety and disconcertion are likely to follow. It makes sense then, Giddens argues, that for feelings of ontological security to occur, there needs to be some sort of shared framework of reality – of what is and isn’t appropriate (Giddens 1991). For reality television participants such as Irena Bukhshtaber, such a framework was notably absent as she exemplifies just how important this notion of ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’ can be for ontological security.
Bukhshtaber was a self-confessed fan of *Big Brother*, watching the program’s second season on television and online while also participating regularly in web-based discussion forums. While her familiarity with the program undoubtedly helped her during the audition process, she says that once she was on the program she was shocked that the level of ‘reality’ did not meet her expectations. Bukhshtaber was a participant on the third series of *Big Brother* (2003), a season I watched regularly as a fan and journalist. This season was unique in that many of the participants were in their late 20s and early 30s, in comparison to later seasons of the program that tended to involve significantly younger participants. It was also a season that involved some controversy involving participant Belinda Thorpe who allegedly drunkenly confided in a fellow housemate that her younger sibling had been involved in the murder of a homosexual man. For legal reasons, the network claimed, footage of such a confession was never televised. Instead, episodes following the incident simply presented housemates in distress, clearly stating that they did not want Belinda to remain in the house. For audiences, this period of the program was confusing in that what Belinda had actually done that was wrong was never clarified on the program, with rumors of her legal situation documented predominately in the tabloid press.

A year or so after the incident dubbed ‘Belindagate’ by fans, I interviewed *Big Brother* producer Peter Abbott for a magazine article I was working on. He told me that Belinda was the only person he’d ever regretted choosing to appear on the program, yet he refused to tell me why, again citing legal issues. Yet for Bukhshtaber, it was Belinda’s method of getting in the house in the first place that made her question her perceived notions of ‘authenticity’ within reality television and ultimately doubt her decision to participate in *Big Brother* the first place.
She [Belinda] didn’t go through the process. Well, she might have lied, but she told us that she got handpicked and went on it. She also said that she lied in her [audition] video. She said in front of us that she lied in her video. That she said she was left wing, had sex with everyone, was a big loose morals girl when in fact she was a right wing, Howard voting, super committed. But she said she didn’t get in the regular process, she got told to make a video and she had been hand picked. If people found out there’d be a back door for certain people they’d be…it wasn’t fair essentially. Anyway, she said that she lied and she said it was all lies and all this stuff. And I swear, at that moment, because I’d been told to be honest and that if you lied you’d get kicked out multiple times, I thought the wall would open up and someone would come and drag her out! I was absolutely convinced that that’s what would happen. We all ended up having a massive screaming match about it, particularly the two boys, so it turned out that Daniel, Saxon and Carlos looked like they were abusing her and that turned it against Carlos. Belinda was a favorite because she got in that back door way she was a favorite and they saw her as someone going far and they do decide these things before you go in…So that was the story, inside that’s when I realized the whole thing was a crock of shit. All that effort, I’d kept to the rules. I’d been honest and that’s when I went, oh my God. And we were all shocked. All of us thought that she was going to get removed…I remember my mum saying to me, she seemed like such a nice girl. But living with her, she was a fruitcake, but they never showed it because they wanted her to stay on…All of us thought that if someone admitted to lying to that extent, fundamentally about who they are, they’d be removed.

Like Urbanski, Bukhshtaber clearly had expectations of ‘authenticity’ in reality TV that were not met. She became disillusioned upon discovering that Big Brother producers not only allowed Belinda to remain in the house after admitting that she lied in her audition video, but also because the producers had apparently solicited Belinda’s participation in the first place.
For Bukhshtaber, and many of the participants I interviewed, ‘performing the real’ is equated with being ‘true’ to oneself. Whereas someone like Belinda, who unashamedly ‘lied’ about who she was, is, in the words of Bukhshtaber, a ‘fruitcake.’

For reality TV producers, on the other hand, it is most important that participants conform to the characters needed to fuel a particular narrative. Hence, producers are constantly on the look out for particular ‘characters’ to fuel their program. It is therefore quite possible that producers decided to paint Belinda in a favourable light because such a representation advanced the narrative they were striving to create. But despite her positive portrayal, Belinda voluntarily left the program after 31 days, possibly because her presence in the house was not accepted by her fellow housemates. As Ouellette and Hay point out, it is not especially useful to compare the televised representation of ‘reality’ to the ‘reality’ of everyday life, just as it is limiting to criticize reality programs for creating a manipulative sense of ‘false consciousness’ (Ouellette and Hay 2008 p. 38). Big Brother, The Biggest Loser and Australian Idol are all examples of cleverly edited commercial programming that construct popular realities, not real life. Yet it is also considered a responsibility, at least from the point of view of the participants, for reality television participants to represent their authentic selves, however manipulated such representations may end up being. For while the saying ‘all the world’s a stage’ is commonplace, it is also limited, argues Goffman who wrote, ‘An action stated in a theater is a relatively contrived illusion and an admitted one; unlike ordinary life, nothing real or actual can happen to a performed character – although at another level of course something real and actual can happen to the reputation of performers qua professionals whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances’ (Goffman 1959 p. 25). Reality television is a kind of hybrid of the staged and the ordinary.
life - the performers are literally playing themselves so there is no distinction between their professional and personal life as with professional actors and musicians. ‘Real’ things can happen to these reality television performers, so to behave like a professional actor playing a character is a different (and inauthentic) act entirely because in the case of reality television participants, the signifier is supposed to represent her or his everyday self. For Bukhshtaber and the other housemates, it wasn’t simply that Belinda lied about her politics and sex life that caused distress, but the fact the program’s producers did not seem to be bothered by these lies. When Bukhshtaber recognised the Big Brother producer’s disregard for Belinda’s ‘authentic’ self, her perception of Big Brother changed entirely. As Tolson suggests, while performing oneself is an inevitability in ‘authentic celebrity’, claiming to perform oneself while acting as somebody else is a lie (Tolson 2001).

**How do you feel about your portrayal?**

When it comes to social identity, ‘first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate the category and attributes into which an individual fits’ (Goffman 1968 p. 12). Of course, we may not be aware we have made particular assumptions about an individual until they either reinforce or dispute our assumptions about them, a situation that Goffman calls the ‘virtual social identity.’ An actual social identity, on the other hand, refers to attributes that an individual is proven to possess (Goffman 1968 p. 12). Those within the public eye are therefore arguably known publicly by their ‘virtual social identity’ with their actual social identity kept private. While this virtual social identity is largely dependent on impressions others make of us, celebrities such as Sandra Bullock have a plethora of publicists and agents working hard to ensure this virtual social identity is favourable. For reality television
participants, however, their virtual identity lies largely in the hands of network producers and the narratives they wish to convey.

When Chris Garling entered *The Biggest Loser* house in 2007, he did so as an ‘intruder’ which meant that he didn’t appear on the program until week six. His role was constructed as that of an ‘outsider’ thrust into the middle of the competition in order to ‘shake things up.’ On the program he appeared highly competitive and unfriendly, completely disinterested in forming relationships with any of his fellow contestants. But, according to Garling, this role was forced upon him, not only by the network who he says deliberately edited him in a particular way, but also by the other participants. Garling says, ‘I tried to get on with a few of them but, with everyone playing politics and ganging up on me, that manipulation, I didn’t really play into that.’ About his broader portrayal he says:

*The only problem I had was when you look at that portrayal of what happens on the show, well I’ve got that competitive side well and truly, but half the time I was cracking jokes every 5 seconds, half the time I would just wet myself because I was cracking jokes but they’d always edit it out. I’d love to get hold of my gag reels from the show because I’m sure with every week there’d be 3 or 4 hours of footage they could have used. But it didn’t go with that whole competitive outsider angle they had going. Like, the way I was portrayed, my friends and family were like what the hell is this? Where’s the guy we know? But what they wanted for the show was the young competitive guy… Like friends and their friends were at my house the other day and this girl I’d just met said, “On the show they said they couldn’t stand you, you were too competitive, too rough, but I don’t know what they’re talking about, you’re one of the nicest guys I’ve ever met.” And she said that to me last week after she’d been there for 5 minutes. She said, “Why did they portray you like that?” I said,” It’s a TV show, once they’ve got the footage they can do whatever they want with it you know.”*
In everyday life we don’t always have control over how we are perceived by others. But in the celluloid world of reality television, it appears that control over one’s representation of one’s own self is not only unlikely, but even impossible. What participants can do, however, as McQuire points out, is to pass the ‘character test’ by projecting a ‘convincing display of emotional qualities such as empathy and compassion…perform the true self without self-consciousness’ (McQuire 2008). But such a display of calculated authenticity is no easy feat, as Brunero sums up when he says, ‘I was so guarded for so long, I’m almost not the opposite, but it’s funny, it must have been intense concentration to do that for so long.’

Indeed, Brunero was one of the participants I interviewed who did feel positively about the way they were portrayed. Not surprisingly, this satisfaction was only noted by participants who felt that they were represented favorably, like Brunero who said, ‘of course I was happy. I almost won and I came out looking like this great guy who looked after other people, who was fair and dignified and smart…There’s a lot of labels you can have, but the smart guy from Big Brother is not a bad one.’ In other words, participants who felt positively about their portrayal were participants whose own self-perception coincided with the way in which producers opted to represent. From this perspective, Brunero was fortunate in that his constructed mediatised persona suited the character the program’s producers wanted him to play. Others, like Garling, were invariably disappointed, even angry about what they perceived to be a two-dimensional and largely unfair mediatised representation of their ‘whole’ self. As Moores, in contrast to Brunero, asserts, ‘I was actually devastated when I came off the show because the producer created me into this bitchy role, like I was the alpha female. And I actually believe I’m not that. Well I know, there’s a
What role do reality television participants play in a broader mediatised public sphere? For if we are to believe that they can never be in control of their own representation, they can never be seen as anything beyond pawns trapped in an all-powerful profit-driven machine. Theorists, such as Baudrillard, for example, argue that the mass media can never strive for authenticity because its function is fundamentally to ‘neutralize the lived, unique, eventual character of the world and substitute for it a multiple universe of media which, as such, are homogenous…’ (Baudrillard 1998 p. 123). From this point of view, reality television will always be a sanitized, contrived and heavily edited version of the everyday. While it is not especially useful to argue that mediatised representations of reality even have the potential to mirror the ‘real thing’, what is interesting here is how many participants who have experienced such media manipulation first hand, still argue that ultimately, television, however removed from everyday life, has the potential to represent the ‘core’ of who people really are, to almost magnify and highlight this core ‘reality’ through the camera lens, rather than neutralize it as Baudrillard suggests (Baudrillard 1998). Perhaps this tendency to view reality television as a lens into the ‘authentic self’ has something to do with the fact that while reality television remains a mediatised construction, the dominant discourses surrounding identity and the self that run through such programming parallel the same discourses that dominate theories of the self in everyday popular culture and day to day life.
Conclusion

The media plays a powerful role in the way we construct our external realities. As Giddens suggests, while the media has a powerful influence on the nature of self-identity and of the basic organization of social organization, identity within late modernity, while occurring against the backdrop of mediated experience, is ultimately a reflexive project of the self (Giddens 1991 pp. 4-5) largely concerned with the self-creation of a consistent biographical narrative. Hence, while ‘The media do not mirror realities but in some part form them… this does not mean that we should draw the conclusion that the media have created an autonomous realm of hyperreality where the sign or image is everything’ (Giddens 1991 p. 27). For Giddens, the content of self-identity may vary socially and culturally, but the establishment of some kind of consistent sense of self is essential for ontological security (Giddens 1991 pp. 54-56). While one would be naïve to enter a reality program believing one can control the manner in which one is portrayed, it is arguably less important than the fact that these so-called ‘ordinary individuals’ are portrayed at all. Hence, reality television participants have the ability to broaden the public sphere by bringing to light a range of personal and political issues in an accessible, and ultimately powerful, way.

As author Kurt Vonnegut once wrote, ‘The secret of good storytelling: to lie, but to keep the arithmetic sound’ (cited in: Hartley 1992 p.13). Such sentiment applies as aptly to an episode of Big Brother or The Biggest Loser as it does to an action-packed popular novel. The difference of course between the characters in a novel and those on a reality show is that in a novel the characters, however well constructed and realistic they appear on the page, are not usually expected to actually exist. A reality television participant, however, must put their best ‘authentic’ foot forward and hope they are portrayed in a way that they believe accurately
reflects their ‘true’ self. A reality participant must demonstrate an authentic inner-core no matter how shaky the outside shell may be. To want to transform into something better, to become a singing star, a thin person, even a media personality is acceptable, but to do so without demonstrating an ‘authentic’ self behind this ambition signifies, in the world of reality TV, a lack of integrity.

Performance is an inevitable part of the new popular reality in which reality television plays a part, just as it is a crucial aspect of the postmodern subject. While the historical Cartesian view of the self is comforting in an uncertain, shifting day-to-day reality, it is increasingly problematic in a world that demands individuals to constantly make choices about how they want to live and who they want to be. But while an unshifting ‘core’ self may be a nostalgic dream, most of us, it appears, are able to construct a consistent biographical narrative that provides a sense of ontological security in an insecure world. At the same time, for all the uncertainty surrounding the postmodern self, an effective performance is also judged by how well it conforms to particular standards and constraints established by the society in which we live.

Reality television cannot be deemed as ‘real’, nor can it be expected to mirror everyday life. While some participants feel confident that their mediatised representation presented an accurate picture of how they see themselves, for many, their reality television identity was frustratingly limited and one-sided. From this perspective, television is full of what Koutsovidis deems fakeness. On the other hand, however, reality television is capable of playing a powerful role in broadening and democratizing the very nature of the public sphere. Like the talk shows that preceded it, reality television utilizes television as what
Grindstaff dubs the ‘feeling medium’ (Grindstaff 2002) and brings the dilemmas of late modern personal identity to the foreground. It is a contrived, constructed and manipulated environment that participants must grapple with, not always successfully. But, in spite of these flaws, reality television powerfully and engagingly brings to light the burning issues of late modern identity, such as authenticity and the way in which we all must construct and navigate our sense of self.
Chapter 4

What about me? Reality TV and the transformative journey of the self

‘Have I used my means to the best advantage?’ is the consumer’s most haunting, insomnia-causing question.

- Zygmunt Bauman

You cannot dodge responsibility for how and why your life is the way it is. If you don’t like your job, you are accountable. If you are overweight, you are accountable. If you are not happy, you are accountable.

- Dr Phil McGraw

I know you're hurting
Feels like you're learning
'Bout life the hard way
And it ain't working

Cause I know how hard it can get
But you gotta lift
You gotta lift
And sometimes that's how it is
But I know you're stronger
Stronger than this
You gotta lift
You gotta lift

- ‘Lift’ by Shannon Noll, The Biggest Loser Australia theme song

It’s hard to imagine a better suited combination of singer and song for Australia’s Biggest Loser opening credits. Written and performed by Australian Idol (2003) runner up, Shannon Noll, the lyrics not only address the hardships of everyday life, but suggest that with inner strength and determination, individuals can ‘lift’ themselves out of their personal pain and into a strong and positive future. Although Noll did not grapple with weight issues like contestants on The Biggest Loser, his Australian Idol ‘journey’ made clear that he is no stranger to hardship. A former sheep shearer and farmer, Noll and his brothers were forced to sell the drought-ridden family farm, which they ran after the tragic and accidental death of their father. When Noll, then a 28 year old father of two, auditioned for Idol he cited the death of his father as inspiration for his music career. By the time he sang the Moving Pictures hit, ‘What about me’ during his forth performance in the Idol series, Noll’s hard luck Idol persona clearly resonated with the lyrics, ‘What about me, it isn’t fair. I’ve had enough now I want my share.’ Some seven years later, Noll has received Aria music award nominations, won MTV awards for ‘best male artist’ three years in a row and released four albums, some of which went platinum.

If Noll is a kind of reality TV success story, he also exemplifies that way that reality TV has become yet another resource on how to live a better life (Ouellette and Hay 2008). Or, in the words of Ouellete and Hay, Noll’s success, at least to some degree, demonstrates the way
reality TV has arguably become ‘the quintessential technology of advanced or neo liberal citizenship’ (Ouellette and Hay 2008 p. 4). By combining advice and instruction on how to improve one’s everyday life with voyeurism, suspense, emotional intensity and humour, reality television programs such as *Australian Idol*, *The Biggest Loser* and *Big Brother* present individuals as actors in charge of their own destiny, capable of empowering themselves privately without government intervention or support (Ouellette and Hay 2008). When Noll left his farm life behind, for example, he ‘took charge’ by auditioning for a reality TV show while publicly declaring that he no longer wanted to be a struggling sheep shearer but a professional musician. In a relatively short period of time he was able to transform his personal identity from Aussie battler to star musician, becoming such a source of inspiration that his single *Lift* was used to introduce another potentially ‘life changing’ reality TV show, *The Biggest Loser*.

The transformative narrative on which much of reality TV relies indicates that it is not merely traditional notions of ‘talent’ that account for success in this genre, but the ability to convey one’s emotional state in a way that connects the participant to their audience. Noll’s ability to connect his father’s death and struggles on the farm with his passion for music proved to be a winning *Idol* formula. A formula which, argues Frank Furedi, constitutes ‘virtuous behaviour’ in a culture defined by therapeutic discourse and the public and open display of emotion. ‘The act of acknowledging one’s feelings and by implication, an openness to seeking help is culturally represented as virtuous behaviour,’ writes Furedi.
‘Openness to the therapeutic management of one's emotion encourages the public display of feeling. The recent growth of the phenomenon of public emotion has been widely commented on, but is often misinterpreted as representing the celebration of the display of intense raw emotion. In fact, the public display of emotion has become a ritual of collective help-seeking that creates a supportive environment for its management. Through the display of emotionalism, therapeutic culture transmits clear signals about the conduct of everyday life’ (Furedi 2004 p. 37).

As Furedi argues, this ‘turn’ towards emotionalism ‘represents one of the most significant developments in western culture’ (Furedi 2004 p. 4). We have become, in the words of Nikolas Rose, ‘psychological selves’ (Rose 1997 p. 234), ‘assembled’ in a way that means the ‘private effects of psychological interiority are constituted by our linkage into public languages, practices, techniques and artifacts’ (Rose 1997 p. 226). Therapeutic discourse is, after all, a kind of performance. Whether an individual is discussing his or her battle with obesity with a therapist or on a national TV show like the Biggest Loser, they are ultimately displaying ‘for others the meaning of their social situation’ (Illouz 2008 p. 179). For Furedi, ‘The rise of reality TV and self-disclosure television…exemplifies the mass transmission of streams of emotion’ and ‘mirrors new cultural norms about notions of intimacy and private space’ (Furedi 2004 p. 40). This is a problematic notion for Furedi because this dominance of therapeutic discourse has, in his opinion, subsequently vilified silence and stoicism, insinuating that healthy individuals are people who openly talk about themselves, creating a new conformity (Furedi 2004 p. 40). But while Furedi implies that therapeutic culture ultimately disempowers individuals by both disconnecting them from politics and making them feel insecure, emotionally damaged and dependent on authority figures such as therapists, I do not believe this to be a satisfactory explanation. As Illouz so aptly points out, an approach such as Furedi’s is problematic in that it make it difficult for us to
understand ‘why the new middle classes and women have enthusiastically endorsed the therapeutic discourse – other than by presuming, somewhat implausibly, that theirs is a ‘false consciousness’ or by presuming that modern societies are governed by a seamless process of surveillance equally embodied in computerized control of citizens and in the therapist’s office’ (Illouz 2008 p. 19). In other words, to dismiss the point of view of individuals who have embraced therapeutic discourse is to limit our ability to understand its significance and success.

It is from this perspective that this chapter will expand upon the discussion of reality television and self improvement discourse that was introduced in Chapter One. By analyzing first person accounts of the reality television experience, this chapter aims to move beyond the discourses of Cartesian and postmodern subjectivity and look at the complex and sometimes contradictory facets of the reality television meta-narratives of self-help, personal empowerment and transformation. As some of the first-person accounts will demonstrate, and as Chapter 7 will elaborate upon in greater detail, ‘the personal is the political,’ and one cannot ignore the impact that personal stories and representation can have on the wider public sphere. Reality television, in spite of its emphasis on personal responsibility and individualism, can also help establish a sense of community and give a public voice to those who would never otherwise have had the chance. For individuals who participate on programs like The Biggest Loser, Australian Idol and Big Brother, the opportunity to publicly tell their stories and participate in experiences they may consider life changing cannot be dismissed as insignificant or the result of ‘false consciousness’.
‘The Biggest Loser changed my life’: the expanding community of reality TV

One hot summer’s night I embarked on a forty-minute journey into Croydon, a suburban mecca in Melbourne’s outer-east. It’s the sort of place where strip malls, megastores and giant shopping centres sit side by side and where fast-food restaurants reign supreme. It is simple, not glamorous, comfortable but a far cry from the fashionable inner-urban villages of St Kilda and South Yarra that Melbourne-based television personalities tend to favour. In many ways Croydon is the kind of suburb bearing most resemblance to a reality television participant - it’s average and ordinary, but with the potential to transform into something better courtesy of a new highway and a renovated shopping complex. It is also home to former Biggest Loser participant, Alex Tsao, and where he invited me to dinner at his Mongolian BBQ restaurant.

Those who watched the 2007 series of Loser know that Tsao’s experience was somewhat unfortunate. His perceived lack of physical strength and fitness by fellow contestants meant that he was the first contestant eliminated from the show despite having lost the most weight. He was also the one of Loser’s most earnest participants and, despite his bad luck, continues to be an unwavering advocate of the program. From the beginning, our interview was peppered with platitudes such as, ‘this show means a lot to me, it’s given me my life back;’ and while Tsao admits he was extremely disappointed with his premature elimination, unlike other Loser participants, such as Tracy Moores and Jo Cowling, who tended to be more critical about the lack of support they received once leaving the show, Tsao insists that the program, ‘armed us with everything we need, all the knowledge we require, things for weight loss,’ asserting that he did not expect any ‘handholding’ from the network producers or trainers once the series was complete. Tsao, in all his enthusiastic positivity, single-handedly seems to
contradict the numerous critics of reality television and self-help discourses in general, from those whose criticisms range from the economic exploitation of immaterial labour (Andrejevic 2004 p. 62; Hearn 2008), to those who perceive the discourse of self-help to be a subtle and insidious form of social control (Becker 2005; Salerno 2005; Shattuc 1997; Furedi 2004). As the following chapter will explore, scholars such as Hearn argue that reality television make-over programs and the message of self-branding that they perpetuate ‘ultimately exacerbates the very conditions of personal and material insecurity it claims to address’ (Hearn 2008 p. 495). According to Tsao, however, the overall outcome of his Loser experience was one of increased confidence and individual pride, not heightened insecurity and frustration. As the following statement indicates, Tsao entered The Biggest Loser house to lose weight and felt that that the program helped him learn ‘how to live again’:

I’d gone through a [marital] separation, it had been nearly 2 years. Basically, I was already overweight before my separation and going into the separation I became depressed and I turned to food for comfort and I just blew up. By the time I applied for the show I was about 160kgs. I was basically eating myself to death. My little nephew who watches the show said to me, ‘oh come on Alex why don’t you try it out? Fill out the application form and see what happens. What have you got to lose?’ I left it at that but that thought stayed in my mind for a little while and I was having difficulty doing things, getting in and out of cars. I wasn’t happy with the way I looked. I wasn’t happy with my life, quality of life and I said, what do I have to lose? So I opened up the email he sent me and started filling it all out. I had my cousin come over and take a photo, sent it in and didn’t hear much more about it. A month later I got a phone call saying I’d been chosen for auditions so I went to that and I met a couple of people there, I met a few of my customers there. I’m a very public person. Even before Loser I’ve always been a public person and I supported my customers and I said, you’ll be right, you’ll get in. One of my customers got as far as the last round but in the end she didn’t make
it. Basically I went through the audition process, made it to one-on-one and they said they'd call me in two weeks. That was a Friday and they rang me the next morning... For me, it was very much a journey not only about weight loss but also a reawakening of who I am and of what I want out of life. It's been different, everyone from the house had different expectations. For me, basically, it was learning how to live again.

Before *Loser*, Tsao saw himself as a ‘public’ person. In other words, Tsao’s public expressions of emotion supported and connected him to others, rather than working to ‘dismemper’ or isolate him. While he encouraged the customers he saw during the audition process, they also encouraged him. Tsao, for example, describes this community support he received following his eviction from the program.

I went for a walk in the street and it was a hot summers day, evening, then all of a sudden I heard people screaming and I went, oh my god, it wasn’t from the house, it was from all the street, then the next day basically people realized my journey and how badly I was treated [by fellow contestants who he felt unfairly eliminated him from the program] and basically when I used to go for a run on the road I’d have a convoy of cars going, ‘come on Alex, come on Alex.’

The rapidly changing nature of modern day communities is an issue explored both in the mainstream media and by academics alike. From the impact of globalisation, urban planning considerations surrounding isolated new housing estates on the outskirts of cities such as Melbourne to newspaper articles about the fact that many of us no longer know our neighbours, contemporary society is often lauded as being one of increasing individualism and isolation. As Furedi points out, ‘Trying to make sense of the problems that confront us in a complex modern society is a challenge fraught with difficulty. Many of the important
forces that shape our lives - globalisation, the workings of the market, political and cultural institutions - have an abstract, almost invisible character. Consequently, most of the time we are not aware of the forces that mould our behaviour and influence the decisions we make. Not surprisingly, we tend to believe that our actions and feelings are derived from something inside ourselves…Therefore, we often attribute our actions to the state of our emotions. We tend to think of social problems as emotional ones' (Furedi 2004 p. 24). The accounts of many of the reality TV participants interviewed for this study suggest that rather than isolate and individualise its citizens, the open discussion of personal emotion can in fact, create communities that connect individuals through common experience and emotion.

When Courtney Jackson was eliminated from *The Biggest Loser*, for example, he says he ‘hated’ returning to his previous job as a mobile phone salesman and decided to resign. Jackson says that while many of his friends were unsupportive and baffled by his decision to leave secure paid employment, his fellow *Loser* participants were the only ones to ‘understand.’

*We [The Biggest Loser contestants] all have that one thing in common. There are some things I try and tell my room mates and friends, they’re going, they say stuff and when I do things they don’t understand why I’m doing them. But when I tell Munnalita and Patty [his closest friends on the show] they’re like, ‘yeah, yeah, ok’. The get it. Like when I quit my job here I had no other thing to go to but I just had to quit, I hated it, I just couldn’t take it any more. All my friends were like, ‘no, you need money’, but Munnalita and Patty were like, ‘do it, do it’. It’s just something that I had to do. I’d done the show, I had a week of partying in Sydney after the show was finished and then I went straight from the show into the personal training course full time and working at the same time and that went for about three months and that meant I’d been going for about 8 or 9 months and I was just wrecked. I just needed to have time off. I explained that to my friends...*
and they were like, no you need money, you need money. But Munnalita and Patty completely got it. They understand what’s happened to each and every one of us. Like people watch the show and they’re like, yeah, they got run into the ground and lost weight. But because you were mentally smashed up and physically wrecked, people who haven’t been through The Biggest Loser don’t get it. They’re like, so you lost weight, so what? But you don’t understand what we went through. Everyone loses weight, but no one loses 50, 60, 70kgs or whatever you lost in 4 months. That is huge. And the amount of stress that goes through your mind and your body and everything, you just don’t get it.

In spite of the somewhat ruthless and competitive nature of the reality programs featured in this study, the common bond of shared experience and emotional expression work to forge friendships and create longstanding communities. Jackson, for example, met his fellow competitor and now close friend, Munnalita, when he found her crying during the first day of filming. Munnalita’s outward expression of emotion initiated their friendship and connected her to Jackson long after the show finished airing.

‘We [Munnalita and Jackson] talked for about two hours and that was the beginning of the axis of evil [the name given to their ‘alliance’ on the program], or so we’re called. So yeah, there was a really great friendship that evolved from there. We initially got Patty to join our alliance as an alliance but as time went by we became really good friends with Patty as well. So the three of us are really good friends now and we talk every day or every second day.’

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6 Forming an ‘alliance’ with fellow participants is a common Loser strategy used by contestants to help them remain in the game for longer. As participants must vote to eliminate a participant each week, being part of an alliance means that you will not be ‘voted out’ by your allies.
So while Jackson and Munnalita initially befriended Patty as a strategic move to improve their chances of staying in the competition for longer, a genuine friendship was formed in spite of the fact that they were all competing for the final prize as the ‘biggest loser.’ Like Jackson, Tsao asserts that connectivity with both his fellow participants and the general public was a motivating and supportive factor both during and after his *Loser* experience.

‘You realize that you’re not the only one that’s like that,’ Tsao reflects. ‘You realize that there are lots of people out there who are in a similar situation...you put yourself there basically to say, guys I’m like you, I’m like everyone of you out there. Imagine me as you guys and just learn from it.’ From this perspective, negative experiences, such as Tsao’s battle with obesity, can be in some way legitimated if they benefit others, and ‘confessing’ on television and the unique nature of the reality television experience can also work to create a community of participants that goes beyond seeing one another at promotional events and magazine shoots. As Tsao further explains:

‘The only time we really let loose is when all of us *Losers* are together, then we really let loose. I don’t drink until I see them. All of us are the same. We don’t be naughty until we meet up with each other. [It’s because of] acceptance. All of us understand what we’re going through and we all understand that we have made allowances to do what we do, not partying hard and only partying when we see each other. So it’s once in a blue moon.’

Many of the participants, even those who did not enjoy their reality TV experience, also referred to the sense of community created among their fellow participants. *Big Brother’s* Irena Bukhshtaber, for example, says that *Big Brother* Season 2 winner Peter Corbett helped her grapple with what she found to be a negative and disappointing experience:
I was the first out and it was like deer in the headlights, that sort of thing, peeled like an onion, all those sorts of analogies. I got, I can’t remember how I got, yeah I did a gig at Wollongong pub and that’s when Peter, he lived around there. And through the owner I got in touch with Peter as this weird kind of subterraneous network, and I spoke to him for about an hour and he really helped me out. He was like, this is how it goes afterwards, expect, I’m making the shape of a roller coaster, this is how it goes. Expect to be like this, these bits are weird, be prepared for that. And we also had a really good chat where he explained to me that all the producers had hearts of darkness and are evil…I realized what a crock of shit that all was. You just realize that they make something out of nothing and they really, really fabricate. [Before that] I didn’t realize I was going into a soap opera where I was an actor.

*Idol’s* Chanel Cole, who also experienced severe depression post-*Idol* started a band, *Spook*, with fellow participant, Daniel Belle, and says that she continues to keep in touch with other *Idol* participants. For her, auditioning for *Idol* was, at least in part, an attempt to meet other musicians. ‘I said I want to meet other musicians. Maybe I’ll find out if I can actually do this at all. I’d moved around a lot. I’d moved to Australia about three years prior. And, this is the thing, I’ve never lived anywhere for longer than 4 years and I’m not very good at introducing myself to other musicians.’ Even though Cole found the *Idol* process to be manufactured and ‘artificial’ she said that, over all, it did enable her to achieve her goal of expanding her musical community.

Although reality television emphasises the plight of the individual, it also paradoxically highlights the importance of mateship, teamwork and relationships. To put it simply, reality television participation fundamentally accentuates the paradox of individualism, as Bellah tells us, however much we extol the ‘autonomy and the self-reliance of the individual,’ few of us ever imagine that a good life can be lived alone (1996 p. 84). Unsurprisingly, there are
numerous and varied perspectives on the history of these discourses of individualism and identity and it is useful to briefly examine some of them here.

The right to an individual identity, something we take for granted in the west, is principally the product of the Enlightenment, according to Clippinger who argues that our need to connect with others is a biological imperative. Carl Linneus’ *Systema naturae* provides an example, asserts Clippinger, of the innate sociability of what makes us human. For Linneus, the feral children who he studied were not human and he classified them as a separate species: Homo ferus. These ‘feral children,’ Linneus declared, were confined and isolated, deprived of normal human interaction and social stimulation causing irreversible damage to the brain. ‘What it means to be human depends on an intensive and prolonged socialisation process. Without that process, the intelligence, language and social behaviour we associate with being human simply do not materialise…These examples of feral children illustrate unequivocally how personal identity is derived from a group identity, and hence, how the one and the crowd are inextricably linked’ (Clippinger 2007 p. 151). This need for community and socialisation is so important that it wasn’t until the Enlightenment that recognition of the role of the individual began to occur. In order to separate themselves from the ‘rigidity and communality of feudal social categories,’ Enlightenment thinkers had to over-state the importance of the role of the individual and this is an over-compensation that has carried on into the present (Clippinger 2007 p. 150). On the other end of the spectrum scholars such as Rose argue that human subjectification has its own history and that humans are not necessarily innately social and psychological beings. For Rose, the human being is not the ‘eternal basis of human history and human culture but a historical and cultural artifact’ (Rose 1996 p. 22). Rose suggests it is important to interrogate and
‘extend’ what we take to be inevitable and natural about our current ways of relating to ourselves.

Reality television is particularly interesting because it tends to simultaneously straddle the contradiction of both theories of individualism and socialisation. While most reality television programming celebrates the plight of the individual and draws strong connections to personal responsibility and happiness, we have seen here that it also emphasises the importance of friendship, team work and connectivity. Indeed, reality television is in many ways a textbook example of what Bauman refers to as ‘cloakroom communities,’ places where individuals can hang up their ‘troubles’ just as ‘theatregoers do with their coats’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 24). Bauman argues the changing nature of community is an inevitability in late modern society. Drawing on Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter, who once stated, ‘earthly riches should be worn like a light cloak ready to be taken off at any time’ (cited in: Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 30), Bauman goes further to say that it is not simply material possessions that should be worn like a cloak. ‘Patched together for the duration of the spectacle and promptly dismantled again once the spectators collect their coats from hooks in the cloakroom’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 31), citizens of late modernity are all somewhat privy to these temporary communities. By enabling participants to occupy a space that is the focus of thousands, or even millions, of viewers, reality television creates a kind of nation-wide, if not world-wide, community for both its participants and its audiences. While the experience of connectivity in which reality television participants and audiences partake might be fleeting, before the show ends and the participants disappear, they are temporarily, in the words of Bauman, ‘able to alleviate the pain of exclusion’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 97).
Bauman warns us of the fallibilities associated with these shifting, cloakroom-like communities by comparing them to ‘the way the mass copies on sale in a high-street department store differ from the haute couture originals…’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 31). But most of us cannot afford the ‘haute couture originals’ of which Bauman speaks, just like, for many of us, the old-fashioned traditional community that is so often idealised is not always accessible, or even coveted. And, as the above examples demonstrate, after the program the reality TV ‘cloak room’ community may shift into something more permanent. Accounts such as Tsao’s, Jacksons, Bukhshtaber’s and Cole’s demonstrate that reality television programs contribute in a small way to establishing micro communities or friendships. In this case, the therapeutic discourses of confession and open emotional talk work to create intimacy and community, not isolation and insecurity. As we have seen, not all the participants I interviewed found their reality television experience to be the positive, life-changing journey it is often represented to be. But, through these accounts, we can see, from the first-person perspective, that the reality TV ‘journey’ of self-discovery can, at least to some degree, provide support and a sense of community for the individuals involved.

Television and the born again citizen

The potential connectivity that reality television creates means that it would be problematic to argue that the confessional nature of reality television works to produce a group of citizens who are ultimately controlled by therapeutic discourses of personal responsibility and apolitical self-blame. At the same time, however, it is important to recognise the role that these discourses play in reality TV programming and the way in which various participants respond to such an environment. With this in mind, I think it is important to
further interrogate my experience interviewing Tsao, particularly because it was one of two face-to-face interviews I conducted. As a researcher, I felt that my interview with Tsao highlighted the complex and contradictory nature of the transformational aspect of most reality television narratives. For while Tsao sounded like a model contestant, the kind of participant on whom producers clearly rely for important emotive and confessional television moments, Tsao also, if somewhat unwittingly, poignantly emphasized the problematic aspects of the typical reality television quick-fix solution. Throughout our interview Tsao was unwaveringly friendly and courteous, keen to discuss the diet and fitness tips he had learnt from *The Biggest Loser* trainers. But, despite recently gaining a personal training accreditation, he was also visibly overweight and wincing in pain because he had continued to exercise in spite of a back injury. ‘*Like right now my back is just killing me but all I can think of is what will I do, I can’t train,*’ he told me. ‘*And you know, I went to the gym today even though I was in pain and when I lifted my weights up and brought the weight back down and all the instructors just looked at me like Alex you can’t do it. And I go, you can’t win. At the moment I can’t even move. I had to take pain killers to come out.*’ Throughout our interview Tsao periodically stopped talking because of the pain he was suffering, and although he had specifically invited me for dinner, he refused to eat, drinking only iced water. Tsao may have talked enthusiastically about his transformative *Loser* experience, but the apparent contradictions between what he said and what I believed I saw made it difficult not to be reminded of Hearn’s overriding argument of participant exploitation or Furedi’s theory of social control.

*The Biggest Loser* is not a program about failure. A large part of the appeal to viewers of programs like *The Biggest Loser* is the audience’s immersion in the lives of supposedly unhappy individuals and to watch them blossom into a shining example of health, happiness
and vitality. While I may consider myself an informed, educated and so-called ‘savvy’ viewer of reality television, it was difficult not to be a little disappointed by Tsao’s rather minor physical transformation when we met face-to-face. After all, in my eyes at least, Tsao, largely because he was still overweight, had failed to become the kind of promotional commodity that producers like to bring back to inspire others in future seasons of *Loser*. Instead, his apparent ongoing struggle with diet and exercise simply worked to highlight the messy ‘reality,’ or the flawed nature, of the personal empowerment and transformative discourses celebrated on *Loser*. Tsao’s life had not, from my initial impressions at least, changed as dramatically as promised. This is not to say that Tsao did not genuinely perceive himself to be a more confident and healthy individual because of his experience on *The Biggest Loser*. As I argued in Chapter Two, my interpretation of my interview with Tsao is as indicative of my expectations, ideologies and values as a researcher, as it is about Tsao and his *Loser* experience. Tsao clearly stated outright that he was happier, healthier and more confident than he had been before participating in *Loser*. Before the program he was, in his own words, ‘basically eating myself to death.’ Now he was a physically active gym-junkie. Yet, at the same time, I couldn’t shake the feeling that perhaps Tsao’s experience hadn’t been as overwhelmingly positive as he insisted it to have been.

As well as emphasizing difficulties of interpretation, my interview experience with Tsao also highlighted the inevitable ethical issues associated with qualitative research as discussed in Chapter Two. Overall, Tsao was a dream interviewee. He was generous with his time, engaged, and clearly interested in my research - he was the only participant who phoned (most simply emailed) after reading his interview transcript to let me know he approved of it. Tsao also helped me line up interviews with other *Loser* participants and enabled me to track
down some of the participants who were more difficult to contact. But, as helpful and
generous as Tsao was, he was also privy to anxieties about representation and the way in
which interview material can be manipulated by people like myself. As we were saying
goodbye, for instance, he said to me, ‘Please don’t let us down the way other reporters have,’
exemplifying the ethical issues associated with interviewing. As my interview diary indicates,
I was ambivalent about including Tsao’s eating habits, body shape and back injury in my
research. While he willingly gave permission for me to use our complete conversation in this
study, he had no control over the way I would interpret his appearance and behaviour.

When I got home I wrote in my interview diary:

‘Alex generously supplied me with a margarita, stir-fry and dessert, yet he himself had nothing but
iced water. He had just come back from the gym and was clearly in pain from exercising with a
back injury and had taken pain killers. Even though this seems to highlight the continuing anxiety
about food and body image that shows like Loser may perpetuate, I don’t think I will mention this
in my thesis because it might cause Alex embarrassment.’

Any research that involves qualitative interviewing is always a joint constructive process
between the researcher and participants. As Chapter Two discussed, there are many
advantages to telephone interviewing, including the fact that participants may be more
comfortable expressing personal feelings and experiences over the phone. Certainly,
compared to some of the telephone interviews I conducted, Tsao’s answers were often
shorter and less revealing than those of other participants. He tended to answer questions in
few words and was regularly distracted by other people in the restaurant. But at the same
time, the face-to-face interaction I had with Tsao also allowed for observations that would
have been impossible had we not been face-to-face.
Despite my reservations, I eventually decided to tell this story the way I am doing here for a number of reasons. Firstly, transparency and reflexivity are integral to qualitative research and while all researchers must contend with what to include and what to leave out, I ultimately decided that by not revealing what I believe to be significant details of Tsao’s interview I would be compromising the integrity of this research. Ultimately the transformative discourses of personal responsibility and self-improvement on which most reality television is based are contradictory, shifting and problematic - even the most unwavering supporters of reality TV did not perceive their experience to be as dramatically life-changing as such programs may have us believe.

Big Brother’s Tim Brunero, for instance, was arguably more positive than many of the other participants I interviewed about his reality TV experience. But even he talked about the anxiety and disappointment sometimes associated with returning to everyday life after his elimination from the show.

‘A lot of the time I’m thinking about it [Big Brother] or leveraging off it directly. I’m constantly thinking of it. I just hope I’ve done, I hope I’ve made the most of it. And of course that’s the eternal problem and that in itself is quite stressful. There’s quite a lot of stress associated with, I know I sometimes get quite pent up with, oh I’ve got to capitalize on this, what am I doing with this? How can I translate this into something better, how can I make it work for me?’

Reality television undoubtedly places Giddens’s ‘endless project of the self’ under a microscope by emphasizing the individual as a constant, ever changing work in progress,
ideally on the road to self-improvement (Giddens 1991). The flip-side to this, of course, is that it can also potentially work to reinforce, as Furedi suspects, insecurities and expectations of what constitutes a successful, self-governed citizen (Furedi 2004). These contradictions, both positive and negative, are strikingly apparent within the story of Alex Tsao. Despite Tsao’s gratefulness toward *The Biggest Loser*, his struggle with the issues that led him to apply for *Loser* in the first place appeared prevalent during our interview. However, Tsao’s *Loser* participation also enabled him to receive a qualification as a personal trainer and become part of a supportive community, while he continuously declared himself to be a happier, healthier human being. Overall, for individuals like Tsao, who could not financially afford to regularly visit a nutritionist and personal trainer, *The Biggest Loser* provided him with an opportunity to improve his health. His experience may have been more chain-store than haute couture (Bauman 2007), more Croydon than South Yarra, but it was an opportunity nonetheless. The *Biggest Loser* not only enabled Tsao a chance to learn how to better manage his personal health, but it gave an ‘ordinary’ man from Croydon the opportunity to tell his story within a public sphere traditionally limited to an elite group of individuals bearing little resemblance to himself. While obesity is being increasingly touted as a public health issue, *Loser* provides one of the few public forums that allows individuals struggling with weight issues to tell their own stories.

The understanding of any kind of phenomenon, as Bauman points out, is ‘only possible if you analyse the social, cultural and political context in which a particular phenomenon exists as well as the phenomenon itself’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 1). What makes the reality television ‘journey’ so fascinating is that it exists within the broader discourses of personal improvement, empowerment and responsibility that dominate a neoliberal late capitalist
society. The discourse of the self-belief has existed for much of modernity. One of many examples is the cinematic classic, The Wizard of Oz which implies that self-belief can be life-changing. It can give you a brain, a heart and courage, it can inspire others and it can give confidence to those whose voice, in the past, was rarely ever heard. The Wizard himself may have been an illusion, but the power of self-belief was not. Dorothy, for example, always had the ability to return home, she just had to believe. Self-belief can get you places that nothing else can according to this discursive construction. The reality television journey of transformation may be a kind of Emerald City mirage, as Australian Idol participant Chanel Cole wittily said about fellow Idol contestant Anthony Callea. ‘Anthony’s journey? The only thing that changed was his hair. [The producers would imply that...] he’s grown so much as a performer and it’s like, he’s not changed. It’s just his hair isn’t shiny.’ But illusion or not, what is interesting is that however manipulated and constructed such representations are, the very fact that producers and television executives feel the need to compose such stories in the first place is indicative of a bigger picture – of a culture that has increasingly embraced therapeutic discourse as a way of defining the self.

As many scholars have already argued, talk show psychologist, Dr Phil McGraw’s message of self-responsibility and personal accountability resides clearly at the core, not just of lifestyle programming and talk shows, but across the wide ranging nature of ‘reality television’ (Andrejevic 2004; Hearn 2008; Murray and Ouellette 2004; Ouellette and Hay 2008; Peck 1995; Shattuc 1995). As the previous chapter made clear, all three of the reality programs examined in this research project focus on a journey of personal transformation and growth while paradoxically defining each individual as an autonomous, distinct being. In other words, they both reflect and perpetuate the ethic of the autonomous self. As Rose observes,
'It is in the name of the kinds of persons that we really are, that we consume commodities, act out our tastes, fashion our bodies, display our distinctiveness’ (Rose 1991 p. 11). When Big Brother participants are evicted from the house, for example, they are presented with video footage of their ‘journey’ of self-discovery and asked what they learnt about themselves during their ‘time in the house.’ They are clearly defined by their haircut, their clothes, the way in which their interactions with others ‘represented’ them as an individual or character. As Big Brother 2006 runner up Tim Brunero put it:

‘I’m sort of proud of the way I treat people and the way I behave with other people, that’s like my politics, I’ve always tried to be very you know, emulating in a lot of ways my father, I’ve never seen my father leave an emotional deficit with anyone. He always pours energy and time into other people, even during exchanges at a service station or something. So I am actually very comfortable to showcase who I am and be me.’

Brunero understood the importance, not only of ‘showcasing’ who he is, but of the discourse of transformation to the reality television narrative. Brunero subsequently self-consciously staged his own physical metamorphosis in hope of remaining an interesting player in the game. He changed his hairstyle on a regular basis, worked out at the gym to alter his physique and developed a tan, ‘I remember lying in the sun the first few weeks going, I would usually have so much sunscreen on at the moment, but it’s not going to do me any harm to get more attractive. It was almost like a Biggest Loser strategy without even thinking about it – that physical transformation that people want to see.’

Such an example of personal transformation is in many ways simplistic. But while not all reality television participants deliberately stage a Brunero-esque transformation in order to
improve their status in the competition, Brunero’s awareness of the advantages of such transformation highlights the significance of self-care discourses within daily life. Just as I was disappointed by lack of superficial evidence of Tsao’s dramatic transformation, both reality television and everyday life in late modernity demand that we all take responsibility for ourselves as a constantly involving, and hopefully improving, ‘self-project’ (Giddens 1991; Rose 1996). Or, as Brunero put it, becoming ‘more attractive’ would not do him ‘any harm.’

In this neoliberal liquid modern setting, being ‘born again’ is a tempting proposition, argues Bauman. ‘Earmarked for the rubbish heap whenever the big players find them no longer profitable, (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 pp. 46-47)’ men and women are waging a constant battle to remain relevant. Tsao described his Loser experience, for example, not just as a ‘journey’ but as ‘a reawakening of who I am and of what I want out of life.’ While some participants, such as Cole, may remain a little more cynical, it is not surprising that reality television makes not only for compelling viewing, but it becomes, for participants, a desirable and legitimate way to potentially improve one’s life. If we are to believe Bauman, we are all trying to avoid ending up on the ‘rubbish heap,’ trying to find our way in an individualist society whose concept of community is fluid, changing and inconsistent. As Rose points out, living well is indeed a challenge (Rose 1991), one many of us have to come to assume we must take on each day.

**Reality TV and the government of the self**

While participants such as Alex Tsao may readily assert that his reality television experience changed his life, it is important to examine this in the light of the extensive scholarly criticism aimed at deconstructing and analyzing self-help discourse. At its worst, self-help
mantras are accused of as being far from empowering and simply another way of exerting a form of social control (Shattuc 1997; Rimke 2000; Salerno 2005; Furedi 2004). From this perspective, while self-help may appear to be voluntary, it is actually based upon the idea that ‘choice, autonomy and freedom…[rely] upon the principle of individuality and entails self-modification and improvement’ (Rimke 2000 p. 62). Hence, in order to be ‘free’ we have an obligation to be self-reliant, self-governing persons independent of external social factors (Rimke 2000). Social welfare systems, for example, would be redundant if only we could look after ourselves, such a perspective asserts. As Cruickshank argues, the rise and rise of reality television indicates that, ‘Self-fulfillment is no longer a personal or private goal. According to advocates, taking up the goal of self-esteem is something that we owe society, something that will defy the costs of social problems, something that will create a “true” democracy’ (cited in Ouellette and Hay 2008 pp. 75-76). This freedom and fulfillment is inevitably linked to the commodification of subjectivity, a subjectivity that thrives on insecurity, as Hearn points out, ‘before the self-brand can be produced, the insecurity of the participant must first be established’ (Hearn 2008 p. 498). Or as Biggest Loser participant Courtney Jackson put it when reflecting on the punishing and humiliating aspects of his Loser experience:

‘You’ve got to be cruel to be kind…Out of all the guys I had the biggest man boobs and that was my biggest embarrassment. But it made me not feel like a man, because you’re a man and you want to be a man right, but I felt like I had these massive tits that I absolutely hated. It was so embarrassing. Even when I sat down at the audition they asked me, what did you think of the challenges last year? And I said, well I didn’t really watch it that much but the challenges I thought would be fine. My biggest challenge would be standing up on those scales without a shirt on. And it was, I hated it. I was so nervous every time it happened. It was awful.
You just grin and bear it and get through it and go, this isn’t happening, this isn’t happening. Eventually you get used to it because you don’t see 3 or 4 million people watching it, you just see a camera here and a camera there and the other contestants. I think a big part of it is that you get so involved with the show that you feel like the show is happening like it is. You don’t see the production side, you just see the show going and going and going and the game and that. You just ignore the production side.’

Jackson says that one of his biggest weight loss motivators was achieving his ‘goal weight’ in order to avoid of further humiliation at the season finale. After being eliminated from the show he, ‘went and paid for a gym and I had a personal trainer. And I was working 30 hours a week and trying to do 2-3 hours of training as well. Oh God, I can tell you, it wasn’t pretty. [The finale] was the only thing that kept me going. If it wasn’t for that I would have been, screw this, I’ve had enough.’ Tsao agrees and says that it was ‘pride’ that made him continue to lose weight after being evicted from the program early on. ‘I didn’t want to look like a fool, come back on the show and not lose anything. And basically I had started something and I wanted to finish it.’

The humiliating aspects of reality television ultimately work to make each individual participant accountable for their behaviour. Nicolas Rose is particularly interested in the concept of ‘self government.’ Drawing on Foucault, Rose describes ‘government’ as a ‘certain way of striving to reach social and political ends by acting in a calculated manner upon the forces, activities and relations of the individuals that constitute a population’ (Rose 1991 pp. 4-5). Such is a government of subjectivity, rather than traditional government, whose contemporary form ‘operates through the delicate and minute infiltration of the ambitions of regulation into the very interior of our existence and experience as subjects’ (Rose 1991 p. 5). As Ouellette and Hay observe, because TV is so easily accessible within the
home, its capacity to govern is particularly effective. And such potential has not gone
unnoticed. In the US, the late 1990s saw funding cuts to ‘virtually every need based public
welfare program,’ but congress still voted to fund the pending transition to digital television
(Ouellette and Hay 2008 p. 73). In Australia, recent media hyperbole about the ‘obesity
epidemic’ is one of many examples of the way in which self-governance and personal
responsibility is emphasized. While public hospitals are under-resourced and overloaded,
expensive private health insurance is deemed an almost necessity for those who can afford it
while all citizens are urged to eat healthily and exercise so as not to add unnecessary pressure
to the struggling public health system. Although it is, of course, important not to reduce
such prevention messages to publicity for reality TV, it is also not surprising that programs
such as *The Biggest Loser* remain ratings winners, with thousands of hopefuls auditioning
yearly.

On the most basic level, what these relatively recent confessional programs are
fundamentally offering their participants is a path to happiness. We are, Bauman argues,
‘perhaps the only society in human history that promises happiness in earthly life’ (2007 p.
44). We are also, he suggests, the only society that ‘stubbornly refrains from justifying
and/or legitimizing any variety of unhappiness, except for criminals who “deserve”
punishment. So when the question – “are you happy?” is addressed to members of societies,
it is a very different question. In the society of consumers this question may be legitimately
viewed as the ultimate test of its success and failure’ (Bauman 2007 p. 44). Self-help dogma
has long asserted that knowing how to suffer is knowing how to grow, (Rimke 2000 p. 68)
and therefore be ‘happy.’ Such fulfillment is possible, *The Biggest Loser* tells us, if one is
prepared to face up to ‘reality’ and make the required dietary and lifestyle changes and, of
course, succumb to a degree of public humiliation. But as Bauman asserts, the subjective nature of happiness means that it is a very difficult thing to assess. Perhaps asking whether a particular society is able to live up to its own promise is one way to shed some light onto whether a society is a success (Bauman 2007 pp. 42-44). Of course, it is ultimately unhelpful and simplistic to argue that evaluating the experiences of reality television participants is a way to determine whether or not our society is able to make its citizens happy. As Ouellette and Hay argue, ‘We can’t understand TV as a technology of governing by comparing representation to ‘reality’ or evaluating the political effectivity of texts’ (2008 p. 38). But what we can do is see reality television as a representative of the dominant neoliberal values of late modernity, as an arena where certain techniques of the self are advocated and where transformative aspirations are clearly stated. It is from this perspective that we can, at least in a small way, interrogate individualist identity in an increasingly brutal post-welfare society, a society full of contradictions where, ‘the self accords humans all sorts of capacities, and endows all sorts of rights and privileges,’ but which, ‘also divides, imposes burdens and thrives upon the anxieties and disappointments generated by its own promises’ (Rose 1996 p. 3).

The care of the self

Even the most impassioned critic of reality television and self-help ideology would be unlikely to argue that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the discourse of the care of oneself. As Foucault argues, the practice of the self has been important in our societies since the Greco-Roman period. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, the care of the self was considered to be the mode in which individual freedom and civic liberty was reflected. Since the Enlightenment, however, there has been a profound transformation in the moral
principles of Western society. For a long time self love was considered suspect, rather than essential, associated not with freedom but with selfishness and self-interest. Foucault acknowledges that it would be too simplistic to put sole responsibility for this shift onto the rise of Christianity, but it is important to recognize that it occurred during this time, for in the Western Christian tradition, a confessional religion that imposes very strict obligations of truth, dogma and canon, self-renunciation is mandatory for salvation. (Foucault and Rabinow 1997 p. 224) One need only watch an episode of *Australian Idol, The Biggest Loser, or even Big Brother*, to believe that self renunciation has been overturned.

Tsao and Jackson willingly entered *Loser* with an awareness that, at times, the experience would be physically and emotionally painful. Following the neoliberal premise that, ‘discipline is the key to responsibility’ and that, ‘knowing oneself entails a kind of rule-governed conduct which advances the care of the self and which is intimately connected to the search for the ‘good life’ (Rimke 2000 pp. 68-69), these participants willingly decided that the punishing and oft-criticized nature of the program was worth subjecting themselves to. While nobody I interviewed mentioned Foucault, the diet and exercise regimes upon which they embarked utilized discourses of what Foucault refers to as ‘technologies of the self’. These ‘technologies’ focus on an individual’s relationship with his/her own body and thoughts, allowing the individual ‘to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality’ (Foucault and Rabinow 1997 p. 224). Along with technologies of the self, Foucault argues that there are a total of four ‘technologies’ that we humans use to understand ourselves. These technologies mostly function, at least in part, in unison and include technologies of production, sign systems, power and, of course, the self. The technologies of production permit humans to transform,
manipulate and produce things; technologies of sign systems enable us to use signs, symbols and meanings; technologies of power determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, often resulting in an objectification of the subject, a term which for Foucault has multiple meanings. While ‘subject’ can refer to being subject to someone else’s control, its meaning can also be tied to an individual’s conscience and self-knowledge (Foucault and Rabinow 1997 pp. 208, 212). Either way, being imbricated in relations of power is what makes individuals subjects in the first place and this is primarily what interested Foucault. Rather than starting out with a theory of the subject, Foucault wanted to know how the subject constitutes itself in specific forms, such as the mad subject or the healthy subject, through certain practices of power and what he referred to as ‘games of truth’. These games of truth are in effect practices of power that could take the form of a scientific model or as an institution such as psychiatry or the prison system (Foucault and Rabinow 1997 p. 224). The subject is therefore not a substance but a fluid form that is not always identical to itself. While reality television participants may be on a transformative journey, often stating, like Jackson, that the experience was the ‘best thing that ever happened to them’, from a Foucauldian point of view this is a position that is potentially fraught.

Health has become a ‘form of prestige display,’ where ‘fitness stands next to beauty’ (Baudrillard 1998 p. 139). Indeed, as Baudrillard points out, while there is, ‘no natural affinity between beauty and slimness (Baudrillard 1998 p. 140), Biggest Loser participants frequently assert the disadvantage they felt from being overweight. They have felt too ashamed to attend social gatherings because of their physiques, or feel unattractive and unhappy in their relationships and losing weight is presented, on the show, as a regaining of personal freedom, autonomy and, ultimately, control. As Biggest Loser participant, Greg Koutsovidis
demonstrates, ‘My body was a big source of arguments. Of discomfort. Avoiding dinner with people, avoiding family get-togethers. A big source of no social life.’ Despite having to be publicly weighed wearing nothing but revealing lycra bike-shorts and being filmed from unflattering angles while dramatic music played in the background, Koutsovidis reinforces Ouellette and Hay’s analogy of ‘voluntary torture.’ Maintaining that he was not bothered by the aspect of public humiliation famously associated with the program he says, ‘I knew that by the time the show aired I won’t be the same person.’ Tsao goes even further, implying that the humiliating aspects of Loser were ultimately empowering: ‘I look at it as a point of exposing a sensitive point about my body and desensitizing. You’re ashamed of it, but if you flaunt it, nothing else can bother you.’

Historically, being governed meant being subject to an overt form of policing. With the later development of modern democracy came the existence of ‘certain types of subjects who do not require continual, external policing. The external constraint of police was translated into an internal constraint upon the conduct of the self, the formation of subjects who were prepared to take responsibility for their actions and for whom the ethic of discipline was part of their very mental fabric’ (Rose 1991 p. 223). Although programs like The Biggest Loser are primarily concerned with ratings, they also emphasise the politics associated with creating successful ‘self-governing’ citizens who will no longer be a burden on the public health system due to their self-destructive over-eating. By losing weight participants are transformed from symbols of sloth and failure into representatives of success, happiness, self-discipline and fulfillment. When the Biggest Loser finale rolls around every year and participants stand on stage, many at half their original body weight, we are told that these now healthy individuals have ‘lost weight and a gained life’. They have become the
exemplary model citizens of late modernity – personally responsible, in control and in charge of their own destiny.

The neoliberal journey of self-discovery

We live in a society of credit cards, as Bauman points out, an era where the waiting has been conveniently taken out of the wanting (2004 p. 47). In just three months, participants on Australian Idol can transform themselves from ‘nobodies’ into celebrity musicians, Loser contestants can say goodbye to obesity and enter the ‘healthy’ weight range while Big Brother participants can, if they’re lucky, establish enough of a profile that they become a star with their own makeup line, book deal, or spot on a TV show. Although reality television stardom is notoriously fickle, the narrative of transformation is a central theme of it. Ultimately, though, it is up to the individual, these programs assert loud and clear, to ‘take responsibility’ for their fate’ (Murray and Ouellette 2004). Although there are an array of trainers, judges, mentors, producers and other experts on hand to provide guidance and assistance to reality show participants, once they leave the show very little support is offered by the television network. Not surprisingly, this ‘reality’ is problematic for many contestants who feel abandoned by a program from which they had certain expectations. Chapter 6 will examine the disappointments associated with reality television in more depth, but it is interesting to note here that, perhaps not surprisingly, it was those participants who most willingly accepted the neoliberal premise of personal responsibility who tended to be the most positive about their experience. As Tsao stated, ‘I believe that OK they’ve [The Biggest Loser producers and trainers] brought us this far and yes they’ve let us go, but they’ve not only given us…We cannot expect them to be holding our hands all the time. They’ve given us the training wheels and we’ve got to
go at the pace that we learn and take those training wheels off ourselves. So basically, they’ve armed us with everything we need, all the knowledge that we require, all the know-how, things for weight loss.’

Those who expected the television networks to take some responsibility for the welfare of participants post-show, or those who questioned the lack of ‘duty of care’ during filming, were inevitably disappointed. As, Loser’s Tracy Moores argues, she ultimately felt disappointed when she left Loser because, ‘there’s no duty of care afterwards. We’re just a number and when we’ve finished who gives a shit, nobody cares. And the thing is there’s so much out there, what they could be doing is promoting healthy eating, all that sort of stuff that they could do.’ In this sense, personal responsibility and the network’s duty of care are interconnected. From the network’s somewhat conveniently neoliberal point of view, a participant is responsible for their success or failure. Once they are evicted from the program, they must take care of themselves and not expect external support from the program on which they appeared. Each individual, this message tells us, is personally accountable for his or her own happiness.

Such a lack of personal responsibility was common amongst his fellow Loser participants according to Greg Koutsovidis. If fame is the ultimate brand, then the body is perhaps the ultimate commodity, providing an instant sign of success or failure, a representation of someone with self-discipline or of someone who is lazy and prone to making excuses. While Koutsovidis says that his Loser experience was positive in that it helped him lose weight, he says he felt frustrated being surrounded by a group of people who constantly ‘found excuses.’

‘The exercise was killing me. Then I started to find the excuses; fat people, one thing we’re really good at is of excusing ourselves, of getting ourselves excuses. I always found like, with a criminal, a murderer, somewhere
in his mind he’s finding excuses, same with a fat person. They lie to themselves. I was thinking it’s not me, it’s the house, trying to justify me leaving. But I couldn’t bear…what stuck in my mind was so many other people went through the audition process. After this you never have to worry about weight loss again. How humiliating is it going to be for my family. That kept me there.’

Lying to oneself, and to others, leads to a life of disappointment and failure, reality television tells us as it recounts this rather traditional moral message. Being on TV, Koutsovidis makes clear, forces one to be accountable. Such a message has become a part of daily life in late modernity as, ‘TV is being reinvented to make itself more useful as a resource for expanding one’s capabilities, fashioning a ‘better life’ and developing strategies for addressing problems or threats pertaining to one’s body, household, work, property and family’ (Ouellette and Hay 2008 p. 15). With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that many participants have certain expectations of what their reality television experience will do for them.

Irena Bukhshtaber was the most vocally critical former reality television participant I interviewed. Openly conceding that she regretted appearing on *Big Brother*, Bukhshtaber also admitted to having had ‘delusions of media grandeur’ and that she had hoped that her *Big Brother* appearance would lead to a career in the media. But ultimately, while she was disappointed that *Big Brother* did not change her life in the way she’d imagined, what Bukhshtaber is most critical of is the lack of ‘duty of care’ she feels such programs owe their participants. After being evicted from the house in week two, Bukhshtaber had no choice but to return to her previous job and continue with her everyday life. Financially she couldn’t afford to do otherwise and apart from a telephone conversation with the network’s psychologist, there was very little in the way of support. Interestingly, while Bukhshtaber never overtly discussed
the individualist nature of programs like *Big Brother*, or the neoliberal context in which such programs exist, a reading of her transcript suggests she instinctively came to understand the significance of the discourse of personal responsibility and control. In other words, it is up to the participant to take responsibility for their reality TV experience – it is not up to the networks to provide support and guidance.

‘My gut is, but I have no way of proving this, I think that the one common factor in the psych test is they choose people who blame themselves. I have a friend who’s a psychologist. I took a photocopy of all my psych tests and I took it to her and that was the vibe that I got. It’s not that they’re looking for extraverted big personality types. They’re looking for narcissistic neurotic types who will blame themselves if something goes wrong in their lives…What you want is those people to go, no, no, I did it myself. And that’s my gut on what that’s all about. And when you have, when you have your life, I’d say all of us are very controlling people. I certainly have been quite clear of how controlling I am and over time I think part of it is that sort of test, how in control are you? How much can you control yourself with others?’

From Bukhshtaber’s point of view this emphasis on personal responsibility is predominantly in the interests of television networks who do not want participants complaining about mistreatment once they leave the show. But while this perspective remains unsubstantiated, Bukhshtaber nonetheless has unwittingly identified the core of everyday citizenship in a neoliberal society – that while there is help available, both in everyday life and within a reality television context, it is ultimately up to the individual to decide how they want to utilize such assistance and ultimately determine whether or not they benefit. This emphasis on personal responsibility is so strong, argues Bukhshtaber, that she says it took her two years before she felt comfortable admitting to people that she did not enjoy her *Big Brother* experience.
According to Bukhshtaber, criticizing the show was often seen as ‘sour grapes… because you’re a whinger, you didn’t get anything, you didn’t win. So there’s a lot of quite shackled social mores that this show is feeding off that allows it.’ In other words, to criticize anyone other than yourself for your disappointments is a sign that one is unable to embrace the sense of personal responsibility required for a successful life. It is a sign of personal failure, an inability to use one’s means to their best advantage (Bauman 2007). Television networks and ratings-driven reality TV shows cannot be to blame for a participant’s frustrations and disappointments.

In the reality television landscape, a lack of personal responsibility can have ramifications beyond ‘sour grapes’ and the stress associated with making the most of one’s opportunities. *Australian Idol* winner Casey Donovan was often referred to by other reality participants I interviewed as an example of someone who has failed. Donovan, who entered the competition as an obese indigenous-Australian 16-year old with dreadlocks was an unlikely winner in that she was not your ‘typical’ svelte and glamorous popstar. In reality television terms, however, Donovan’s win is perhaps less surprising. Wearing an oversized hooded sweatshirt when she first auditioned for the program, Donovan clearly had the potential for transformation. And while Donovan did not consciously understand the need for reality television participants to emotionally appeal to an audience she had instinctively, ‘started teaching myself to put empathy in the song, to feel the lyrics and from a very young age I did that actually.’

Without even realizing it, Donovan had struck the perfect formula for reality television success – the ability to be depicted as embarking on a visibly and emotionally transformative ‘journey’ that would see her go from shy and awkward teenager to a confident young woman, complete with a stylist and the ability to emotionally connect with her audience through her music. When she sung the lyrics, ‘Here’s who I am, here’s where I stand,’ alone on
stage, overweight, shy and vulnerable, she had without doubt, earned her ‘money shot’ (Grindstaff 2002).

Unfortunately for Donovan, who hoped for a long-lived and credible musical career post-*Idol*, her success on *Australian Idol* was short-lived. After her first *Idol* album came out she was dropped by record label by Sony BMG and was ridiculed by the tabloid media for her weight. Ultimately, while Donovan’s ‘ordinariness’ had proved an advantage while on the reality television program, it became a hindrance when she entered the arguably more ‘real world’ of celebrity musician. During her interview she was unable to understand why the record label didn’t want to continue to represent her, citing, ‘It was just that constantly all the time, the one thing I got was, you’re not actively involved in your career...’ Interestingly, while Donovan asserts that she ultimately blamed herself, rather than the *Idol* franchise or the record company, for her ‘failures,’ she goes a step further, removing responsibility from herself by arguing that she is prone to ‘bad luck,’ and that her *Idol* victory and all that followed it, ‘happened because something in this universe made it like that and I believe things happen for a reason.’ In the eyes of Sony BMG, Donovan’s transformation was simply not potent enough. She had failed to become the kind of actively involved, personally responsible, neoliberal citizen that sells records. While her vulnerability and ‘ordinariness’ had made her the textbook reality TV star, it became clear to Donovan that when it comes to being a ‘star’ ordinariness must be combined with just the right amount of ‘extraordinariness’.

Despite the conflicting accounts of reality television participation, and the clear problems associated with the discourse of the transformative journey, for most of the reality show participants I interviewed, appearing on reality TV is considered an achievement and an
ultimately positive choice. Even the most skeptical contestants, like *Biggest Loser* winner, Chris Garling, conceded that, despite the pitfalls involved in the highly constructed, profit-driven nature of reality TV, such ‘transformation’ can result in a genuinely fulfilling outcome.

‘Initially I thought it [the journey] was crap. But towards the end I could see that it does change you a lot more than just the weight. Like you’re still same person inside, but it brings out a lot more confidence and you just get more confident in your abilities. So on the whole I think the show is great if it helps people lose the weight. I mean, there’s good and bad in everything.’

Koutsovidis agrees. In fact, he along with several other participants from various programs, argues that having little control over one’s life was actually liberating. ‘I needed an environment where I need to be told what I can do, what I can’t do. I’m also a very competitive person. Also, being in an environment like that, there’s nothing else to worry about. No bills, no orders to do, no gardening, no bins to take out. Just concentrating on that [losing weight].’ Once again, the reality television experience presents conflict and contradiction. In every day life, it is not always viable to concentrate solely on the needs of oneself. But in a reality television environment, where participants actually have very little control over their daily schedule, the perfect environment is created in which to practice and celebrate the neoliberal discourse of individualism, personal responsibility and the care of the self.

**Conclusion**

In an early 2009 newspaper article, talent scout Helen Stride lamented the largely homogenous nature of commercial television, stating, ‘When making television shows, you don’t want to offend anybody in any way. There is no room for risk-taking, particularly in...
the current climate [and this] turns everything bland’ (Munro 2009). That very same night Susan Boyle, an unassuming middle-aged Scottish woman sang *I Dreamed a Dream* on talent show, *Britain’s Got Talent*. With her frizzy grey hair and unfashionable calf-length skirt, her audience of bemused judges and snickering citizens made clear that Boyle was an unlikely star. Yet when she sang, even the harshest critic of reality television would have found it difficult not to feel moved. While a recent newspaper opinion piece argued that Boyle’s performance was moving predominantly because she does not look like someone who would possess such a talent (Elliot 2009), the impact of Boyle’s performance – which subsequently landed her hit albums, world-wide tours and a spot on the *Oprah* show, was about much more than superficial appearances.

The discourse that Boyle’s success on the program constructs is that anyone with ‘talent’, no matter how disadvantaged, unemployed, old or badly dressed, can make it if they are only given the chance. And what reality television does so well, in contrast to other forms of media, is provide the opportunity for a public voice to a much broader spectrum of the population. Of course, as this chapter has pointed out, there is a paradox to the reality television journey and there are times when successful participants, such as *Idol’s* Casey Donovan are at once applauded for their ordinariness, then subsequently consigned to oblivion because of it. But television is a powerful technology, one that enters most people’s living rooms on a daily basis. While most commercial television does lean towards blandness in that the majority of people represented fit a narrow range of stereotypes, reality television is one exception to the rule. When judge Simon Cowell asked Boyle why she had not yet established a singing career, she simply answered that she had never before been ‘given a chance.’ Reality television, then, is perhaps the one mainstream media format that will not
only accept, but embrace, some of those who feel they have never been ‘given a chance’. It provides a public space where an overweight, suburban restaurant owner like Alex Tsao can be given the opportunity to feel important and learn how to live a healthier life, where a left-wing journalist like Tim Brunero can discuss politics during prime time and where a young, gay man like Shane Janek can dress up in drag and be accepted and even celebrated. Reality television gives ordinary individuals the chance to cross the divide between everyday citizen to star, to feel, perhaps for the first time in their lives, extraordinary.

Reality television is ultimately a technology that embraces the conflicting nature of contemporary individualism. It represents itself as being about personal success and empowerment through self-governing techniques that place responsibility onto the individual. But, at the same time, it is also about connectivity and a sense of community, symptomatic of what Giddens describes as one of the key features of late modernity, ‘an increasing interconnection between the two ‘extremes’ of extensionality and intensionality: globalising influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other’ (Giddens 1991 p. 1).
Chapter 5

Brand new world: reality TV and the branded human

‘The truth of objects and products is their brand name.’
Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*

‘You become, you’re not so much a person as a concept. It’s like Paris Hilton.’
Chanel Cole, *Australian Idol*, Season 2

In the last days of December, 2008, Paris Hilton, along with her sister Nicky, embarked on a shopping spree in Melbourne’s designer-label ridden Chapel street. Visiting Australia in order to host a New Years Eve party in Sydney, the Hiltons’ expedition made front page news in the local tabloid press and also featured significantly in the broadsheet media. While media reports referred to some controversy over how many items the Hilton sisters had paid for and how many were gifts provided courtesy of store owners and designers seeking invaluable publicity, it was apparent that news of such gift giving simply helped flesh out the media story, rather than provide a hook, for a piece that was considered news worthy simply because of the individuals it involved. The Hiltons’ shopping spree was considered so topical, in fact, that then deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Victorian Premier John Brumby were asked to comment. ‘We're just two girls on vacation,’ said Nicky Hilton when quizzed by the media about the attention her shopping trip received, ‘and I can't understand what's wrong with going to a store’ (Byrne, Coster, and Mitchell 2008 p. 13).
Of course, the Hilton sisters were anything but two ordinary girls enjoying some leisurely shopping while on holiday. Paris, for instance, was in town to ‘host’ a New Years eve party – in other words, she was paid to enhance the party’s credibility and publicity through her brand. On her Wikipedia profile, Paris, undoubtedly the more mediatised of the two sisters, is described as a ‘celebutante, socialite, heiress, television personality, businesswoman, actress, author, singer and model;’ but more significantly, Paris, through brand management, epitomises a new breed of what Naomi Klein famously referred to as ‘the branded human…individuals who now mirror the corporate structure of corporations like Nike and Gap’ (Klein 2000 pp. 2 & 59). While on some level Nicky may have been genuinely baffled by the level of media interest she and her sister were able to attract simply by going shopping, there is little doubt that the pair have played a significant role in cultivating a level of ‘A-list’ celebrity that is associated not with a particular talent or ability, but with simply existing as ‘themselves,’ or at least as a very lucrative corporatised public version. The Hiltons, oft criticised for their seemingly vacuous, hedonistic lifestyle, are also living textbook examples of contemporary brand management – a concept which, in the words of Arvidsson, ‘presupposes that the value of brands does not primarily derive from the qualities of the products that wear their mark. It is something else. The brand resides at the 'social' and even 'spiritual' level. It embraces the whole relationship between a product and its consumer’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 81). Hence, the actual product is secondary. It’s the story behind it, its name, the way it makes the consumer feel that counts.

As many scholars have pointed out, the concept of branding is not as recent a phenomenon as is often assumed (Arvidsson 2006; Klein 2000; Lury 2004). As early as the late 1800s, the development of the brand was established by food companies as a way to speak directly to
the consumer. The traditional shop keeper, who served up unbranded goods in bulk, began to be replaced by Dr Brown, Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima (Lury 2004 p. 19). Even further back, an entire millennium ago, counterfeit Viking swords were manufactured bearing the famous Ulfberht name in order to convince consumers that they had purchased a product renowned for its quality (Kennedy 2008). But while branding may not be a particularly new concept, it was not until the 1980s that ‘the position of the brand as a central component of the social fabric was established. Brands now became something of an omnipresent tool by means of which identity, social relations and shared experiences could be constructed. They were spun into the social fabric as a ubiquitous medium for the construction of a common social world’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 3).

It is within this context of the brand as an ubiquitous ‘construction of a common social world’ that we can help make sense of the experience of the reality television participant-cum-media celebrity. Of course, when individuals are selected by producers to appear on a reality show, they are arguably initially more ‘typecast’ than branded. Each year, producers aim to select a diverse group of participants to fill a range of particular roles – the nerd, the ‘hottie’, the bad-boy, 'Aussie bloke,' lesbian and the battler, for example. However, it is also arguable that once participants appear on the program they move from being ‘type-cast’ to being ‘branded.’ Participant ‘portrayal’ (to use a Big Brother cliché) directly parallels the marketing and branding techniques used by advertising agencies and corporations to promote products. The self-marketing skills, whether calculated or unconscious, essential to succeed in the reality TV auditioning process and the way in which participants are presented during and after participating on the program are indicative of these similarities. While it may be tempting, and not entirely inaccurate, to view reality television as simply a form of
exploited, immaterial labour perpetuated by a capitalist cultural industry (Andrejevic 2004; Hearn 2006), if we examine the reality TV experience within the context of an era of the branded human, a far more complex and less easily definable picture emerges. This chapter will interrogate the experience of reality television participants from such a perspective.

You may! Not you must!

Celia Lury defines the brand as, ‘the organization of a set of multi-dimensional relations between products or services…The brand is thus a mechanism – or medium – for the co-construction of supply and demand. It is not an add-on, a mark to identify an origin that is fixed…it is an abstract machine for the reconfiguration of production’ (Lury 2004). The twenty-first century brand can thus almost be defined as a new kind of social structure. For instance, in the 1990s a British survey of Gen Xers, a generation renowned for having grown up in a world of media saturation amid the disintegration of modern communities, was conducted. While only 13% of those surveyed claimed to trust politicians, an astonishing 85% said that they trusted department store Marks and Spencer (Arvidsson 2006). As Arvidsson points out, one article commented that ‘as social structures are dismantled, why cannot brands like Marks and Spencer, Boots and Mars replace them?’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 83) Some ten years later, the concept of brands as representative, and part of, a particular lifestyle and personal philosophy continues. The aggressive branding of a Nike t-shirt may have been replaced by a more subtle organic-cotton Stella McCartney t-shirt from budget-conscious chain-store Target, but for many customers purchasing Aveda over Lancôme creates a sensation of ethically conscious consumerism, despite the fact that both are mega-corporations whose primary agenda is undoubtedly profit above all else. For marketers the brand still matters, as marketing expert John Grant argues, not necessarily as a way of
keeping up with the Joneses, but instead to help fill the 'great gaps of meaning that exist in people's lives and to propose brands as ideas that people can live by' (quoted in Lury 2004 p. 15). According to Grant consumers are believed to be more concerned with finding meaning in their lives than simply acquiring status from consuming particular brands.

The transmogrification of the brand into a familiar part of life sometimes considered more trustworthy than the Prime Minister evolved relatively slowly, beginning its revolution in 1960 when Theodor Levitt first argued the crucial distinction between marketing and selling. ‘Selling is preoccupied with the seller’s need to convert his product into cash,’ Levitt wrote, ‘marketing with the idea of satisfying the needs of the customer by means of the product and the whole cluster of things associated with creating, delivering and finally consuming it’ (quoted in Lury 2004 p. 22). It was during this time that consumer- rather than seller-driven life style advertising took hold, becoming a precursor to contemporary branding. Advertising was now primarily concerned with the needs and wants of the customer, rather than the preoccupations of the seller. But while this premise was highly influential during the 1970s and 80s, the heavy reliance on advertising became problematic in an increasingly diversified media environment and it was in the 1990s that marketing took another turn towards the uber-branding experience we know today (Arvidsson 2006 pp. 61 - 63).

Brands, Arvidsson points out, are now ‘part of the mundane context of action with which we become subjects (Arvidsson 2006 p. 5), they are as much about context as they are about product. From the oft-referred interactive Nike superstores (Arvidsson 2006; Klein 2000; Lury 2004) to the giant coffee corporation Starbucks, the concept of the brand as an ‘experience’ rather than a mere product has become almost an irreverent popular culture
cliché with corporations such as Starbucks proudly and openly declaring that, ‘the brand equity of the name Starbucks has supplied a level of trust and confidence, not only in the product…but in the experience of what Starbucks is about’ (Schulz, quoted in Lury 2004). Of course, this new importance of brands in social life is only on part of the equation, Arvidsson insightfully asserts. The economic power of the brand is not to be underestimated. For instance, estimates claim that during the mergers and acquisition wave of the 1980s about 20% of most bid prices were motivated by the value of brands. During the turn of the century dot-com boom, this figure was closer to 70% (Arvidsson 2006 p. 5).

But beyond these economic and social factors, perhaps the most significant shift in branding, marketing and advertising resides at the crux of neo-liberal capitalist ideology – the idea that choice equals freedom and empowerment. Not even Nike tells us to buy Nike runners over Reebok, nor Starbuck’s over Gloria Jeans. They do not come out and directly say, our product is superior to all others, you would be a fool not to buy us. As the iconic ‘Get a Mac’ campaign (2006-2009) famously told television audiences – the Apple guy is young, cool and hip, the Microsoft guy is middle-aged and frumpy. Both products are good, but it is up to you to decide which person you’d rather be. As the previous chapter suggests, the only choice we do not have is to not make a choice. In *Liquid Modernity* Zygmunt Bauman argues that shopping is not simply about the purchasing of goods and services but about ‘scanning the assortment of possibilities,’ and it is this ability to choose that signifies freedom and empowerment. The ‘activity of choosing matters more than what’s being chosen’ (Bauman 2000 p. 87). By capitalizing on the concept of consumer choice this contemporary attitude to brand management works through the freedom of the subject, argues Arvidsson, or paradoxically what Foucault called government.
Unlike other forms of direct power such as legal power which places very specific rules and regulations in place, government in this sense ‘works to program the freedom of consumers to evolve in particular directions’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 74). This is ultimately what Klein refers to in her book section, ‘No choice’ when she writes, ‘Dazzled by the array of consumer choices, we may first fail to notice the tremendous consolidation taking place in the boardrooms of the entertainment, media and retail industries…The real question is not “Where do you want to go today? [as the Microsoft ad campaign tells us]” but “How best can I steer you into the synergized maze of where I want you to go today”’ (Klein 2000 p. 129)? In other words, we are seeing, as Chapter Four pointed out, what Nicolas Rose calls ‘advanced liberal governance,’ or ‘neoliberalism,’ which is concerned with ‘designing a government that frees citizens of cycles of dependency on government’ (Ouellette and Hay 2008). The catchphrase of such a government is not, ‘You must!’ argues Rose, but rather, ‘You may!’ (quoted in Arvidsson 2006 p. 5) Under neoliberalism, the responsibility remains very much in the hands of the individual. George W Bush epitomized this individualist neoliberal ideology when, during his famous inaugural address, he stated, ‘What you do is as important as anything the government does’ (Ouellette and Hay 2008 p. 37).

Within this brand new world of choice and so-called empowerment lies the experience of the branded human. Many universities now offer courses in creating a ‘professional identity’ while women’s magazines constantly advise us how to create a ‘signature style.’ As bestselling author of several popular self-help marketing style books such as The Little Big Things: 163 Ways to Pursue Excellence (Peters 2009), Tom Peters writes, ‘A personal brand is your promise to the marketplace and the world. Since everyone makes a promise to the world,
one does not have a choice of having or not having a personal brand. Everyone has one.
The real question is whether someone’s personal brand is powerful enough to be meaningful
to the person and the marketplace.’ Peters goes so far as to say that creating a viable personal
brand for oneself is the only way to survive in this every changing marketplace (Peters 2006).

Examples of this popular version of personal branding are widely evident in all facets of the
mainstream media and especially within reality television itself. As Hearn points out in her
essay about reality shows *The Apprentice* and *The Jo Schmo Show*, a large part of participating in
a reality show is the development of a persona – the bad girl, the weirdo, the joker, the token
gay. In consequence comes the production of a branded self where participants often
become image-entrepreneurs, using their reality TV persona to make money (Hearn 2006).
This reflexive awareness of the branded human, both within reality television, mainstream
media culture and everyday life, indicates a significant shift in consumer culture where
branding now focuses on the immaterial rather than simply traditional commodities.
Celebrity endorsement, for example, attempts to construct a connection between products
and celebrities, inserted into the realm of everyday life (Lewis 2008 p. 141). Reality television
participation, then, takes this immaterial commodification a step further. It enables ‘ordinary
people’ to step into the shoes of celebrities, to literally become commodities, to relatively
quickly construct themselves into the kind of commercially viable ‘branded humans’ that
people like Peters believe to be a gateway to success.

When Anthony Sumbati auditioned for the first season of *Australian Idol* (2004), for example,
he did so not simply because he wanted to become a ‘working’ musician, but because he
wanted to launch himself as a ‘human brand’ and establish a career in the public eye.
‘Everything on Idol as far as image was concerned was premeditated, organized, pre-arranged,’ asserts twenty-something Sumbati, who made it to the Idol top 20. One of my own assignments while writing for NW magazine during this time was to write profiles about the Idol finalists and Sumbati was considered tabloid gold. Not only was he overweight, thereby shunning the stereotypical popstar mould, he also claimed to have quit a six-figure job in the financial sector to pursue his dream as an Australian Idol. To top it off, he also openly and emotionally declared that his traditional European father had subsequently disowned him in disappointment, leading to an emotional televised scene which featured Sumbati crying on the phone to his father, begging for his approval.

‘When I first went to the Idol audition I knew that I had to be different, the crying, the acting, the talking to my father, I was never on the phone to my father. The phone wasn’t even turned on for fear that it would ring. It was all manufactured. It was all fake. It was all there because how on earth would a 20+ year old, camp, overweight, Ethnic male have any chance of getting anywhere in a competition that is based on looks and popularity? My intention therefore was to emotionally hijack the Australian public and get them on my side. Therefore that is what I did.’

As well as inventing a marketable back-story, Sumbati also worked hard to construct a particular image, but just as the ordinariness of talk show guests can add value because they are people ‘as hapless and helpless as their watchers’ (Bauman 2000 p. 68). Sumbati’s new image was a far cry from the glamorous rock star. Instead he opted to wear ‘cheap and nasty rags from Target that had been sewn with different things like my postcode and a few other things by a friend of mine. I had intentionally not shaved so that I looked a little bit raggedy so
that they could look at it and go, “Wow. Look at this piece of shit. We can do something with him and the Australian public is going to fall in love with him.’

In 2004 reality television was a relatively recent phenomena in Australia, but it is clear that the importance of self-branding was already heavily ingrained within the genre. Sumbati claims that the producers were well aware of the orchestrated nature of Sumbati’s story, but it was of little importance to them. It’s unlikely that the editors of *NW* magazine, had they known, would have cared either – so long as the story they published was consistent with the image of Sumbati the program had constructed. Soon after his emotional phone call, Sumbati was evicted from the program for participating in a radio interview despite signing a contract that forbade participating in any media publicity while still in the competition. Sumbati, however, asserts that the interview was organised by one of the *Idol* publicists and was therefore given the green light – he was even chauffeured to the interview in a studio car. Soon after conducting the interview, Sumbati’s eviction was filmed live on camera.

‘Within 15 minutes of me leaving there was a phone call from Derryn Hinch in Melbourne asking for an interview. Then the phone calls started one after the other. Then I had a message from one of the publicists who actually gave me permission to do the interviews. He sent me a text saying, “If you want to do *Rove*, don’t do any of the interviews. Keep your mouth shut and keep the first interview for *Rove.*”’

Being evicted from the program may have come as a surprise, but Sumbati insists it was an ‘overwhelmingly positive’ event. Like Martha Stewart, who was eventually able to turn her jail sentence into a positive career move, or Paris Hilton who used her leaked sex tape to help establish her celebrity image, Sumbati argues that his initial misfortune turned out to be,
'great and ridiculously beneficial to myself,…I was then given all the prizes, all the Sony prizes that were then given to the top 12 contestants. I was also given other sponsorship items and was told that I was be paid to perform at the opera house like previously requested…It was well and truly worth it and it helped me start a good life.'

Being evicted from the show for breaking the rules achieved publicity Sumbati would have been unlikely to receive had he left the program in a more conventional way and since Idol, branding himself as a reality television participant has become a significant part of Sumbati’s career. Sumbati may not be a typical media personality but he has worked hard to use this marginalized persona to his advantage. He has appeared on programs such as the hypnosis show, Celebrity Superpowers (‘Again, it was fake, the whole hypnosis thing, I wasn’t hypnotised. I knew exactly what I was doing.’) and Celebrity Overhaul, where he went so far as to reveal on camera a so-called personal piece of information, clearly designed to shock audiences that he was unable to wipe himself after going to the toilet.

‘Once again that is the biggest crock of shit ever. I can wipe my ass, I always have, I always will. I used that, that was perfectly planned, if you actually see the footage it is orchestrated and planned. Because I paused to allow for sound effects to actually be dubbed in by channel 9, then I ended with, but I use a bidet. So I paused to allow something to go in there. Once again orchestrated. I knew it would create drama, I knew people would talk about it and that it would be on the radio, that Kyle and Jackie O’ would be talking about it the next day. And it was, all over the country.’

As Bauman states, ‘Becoming and remaining a sellable commodity is the most potent motive of consumer concerns, even if it is usually latent and seldom conscious, let alone explicitly

7 A commercial breakfast radio program.
declared…Making oneself a sellable commodity is a DIY job, an individual duty…making oneself, not just becoming, is the challenge and the task’ (Bauman 2007 p. 57). Sumbati, is perhaps an exaggerated example of what Bauman argues we are all trying to achieve to some degree – establishing ourselves as a sellable commodity, a duty to which we must all strive if we are to succeed in a neo-liberal consumer driven modernity. But Sumbati’s willingness to establish himself as a human brand by declaring false information about himself is perhaps not so far-fetched if we think about the lengths to which many of us have gone to in order to land a dream job, or to win an award, or to get a date. Brands, after all, ‘are a capitalist response to the hypermediatisation of the social that prevails in informational capitalism’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 136). Sumbati may not articulate his experience in such a way, but his clear attempt to enter a mediatised environment, an environment where diversity and difference have become a marketing tool, demonstrates that he understands both the power of the brand and the power of a mediatised identity. For the thousands who audition for reality programs every year, appearing on a reality television show, at least on the surface, appears to be a guaranteed way to achieve what Bauman argues we are all searching for in what he deems to be the society of consumers – a chance to lift ourselves, ‘out of that grey and flat invisibility and insubstantiality…[to] stand out from the mass of indistinguishable objects floating with equal specific gravity and so catching the eye of (blasé) consumers’ (Bauman 2007 pp. 11-12).

**Branding the ‘endless project of the self’**

‘We come to the world as individuals, achieve character and become persons’ (1959 p. 20),’ wrote Erving Goffman in 1959. Today, we might say, ‘We come to the world as individuals, achieve character and become a brand.’ For an ordinary individual to succeed in becoming a
reality television participant, she/he has to think not just about their person-hood, but about their market value. This market value is not only integral to establishing the audience appeal necessary to be successful on the program, but it also extends beyond the show, enabling successfully marketable participants access to a specific form of profitable work once the program finishes airing. Participants must therefore take care to present themselves accordingly, becoming simultaneously a promoter of a commodity as well as the commodity they promote. ‘They are, at the same time, the merchandise and their marketing agents, the goods and their travelling salespeople…Into whatever bracket they may be slotted by the composers of statistical tables, they all inhabit the same social space known under the name of the market’ (Bauman 2007 p. 6). This market, for Bauman, includes all members of the society of consumers whether they are taking a short course to help establish a professional identity or deciding which celebrity knock-off outfit suits them best at mass-market chain-store Supre. But when it comes to the establishment of a personal brand, the reality television audition process provides a particularly revealing lens through which to examine this process.

Nike CEO, Phil Knight once said that, 'we used to think that everything started in the lab. Now we realise that everything spins off the consumer. And while technology is still important, the consumer has led to innovation. We had to innovate for a specific reason, and that reason comes from the market’ (Lury 2004 p. 59). Knight was referring to the changing priorities of Nike, whose main aim had moved from the desire to produce practical high quality, high performance sports shoes to becoming a company that creates, and maintains, a powerful global brand. Just as Nike carefully and deliberately works to construct a lifestyle to which to aspire, when an individual auditions for a reality television program, whether it be
Big Brother, The Biggest Loser or Australian Idol, they too are attempting to sell themselves as a kind of lifestyle package to a market which, at least initially, consists primarily of network producers. When faced with a reality television audition, it is not enough to be a quality product, or an interesting person. Like the new Nike sneakers, a reality television participant is not a mere sports shoe but an emotionally charged commodity whose sole aim, from the point of view of network producers, is to help drive a narrative by making audiences care about them. And if audiences care enough, they will not only watch the program, but potentially buy products that are connected with that individual and their lifestyle. In other words, a successful reality television participant has the potential to become a ‘lifestyle expert’ whose role is to ‘naturalise consumption’ and work ‘to alert viewers of the existence of more products and services for their utility in the endless project of the self’ (Lewis 2008 p. 10).

Forty-something Tracy Moores says that participating on The Biggest Loser gave her the confidence and opportunity to do public speaking and use her profile to raise money for The Salvation Army. It also gave her the credibility to become one of Lewis’s ‘lifestyle experts’ who advises other women how to ‘lose weight and gain confidence.’ Previously a plus size model, Moores now works part-time as a motivational weight loss advisor at a women’s gym.

I am what they call a motivator. I talk about their weight and their food. I mean, I’m not an expert by any means, but I just go on my life experiences. And they have a health shake that I promote and I’m on myself, I believe in practice what you preach, and yeah I just talk to people. You know what, there’s a lot of very sad women out there, a lot of depression, that type of thing, and it just makes you feel good when they start to feel better about themselves.
Although Moores did not come close to winning *The Biggest Loser*, she was still able to use her own mediatised experience of personal growth and transformation to create a post-Loser career that would not have been possible without the public profile the program provided her. She says, for example, that she is ‘not an expert’ and that she just goes ‘on my life experiences,’ but these are experiences that would probably not afford her a great deal of credibility had she not appeared on television. By appearing on *Loser*, Moores was able to obtain ‘market value’ and appeal to a demographic of viewers similar to herself – middle aged women struggling with their weight and self-esteem.

Like Moores, Jamie McDonald’s success on *Big Brother 2007* can be attributed to his ability to appeal to a particular demographic. It took twenty-nine year old Jamie McDonald three attempts to realize that he would need to ‘brand’ himself in a particular way in order to be chosen to participate on *Big Brother*. By his third time around McDonald says that rather than simply ‘telling the story of my life…with a beginning, middle and an end…the producers don’t have time to listen to that. They just want headlines. [I] actually thought about it from the producer’s point of view and I really worked out a way to present myself in a truthful manner that would be appealing to the producers.’ This meant that McDonald emphasized certain parts of his personality over others, literally presenting himself as a saleable commodity, generating his own ‘rhetorically persuasive packaging,’ a ‘persona produced for public consumption’ (Hearn 2008 p. 497). While McDonald found it important to make clear to me that he believed that he had always presented his ‘authentic’ self, by his third audition it was also apparent that it was just as important that he present his marketable self. ‘I think that the producers are looking for simple characters that they can letterbox and just put in there,’ McDonald says, ‘so I presented myself as the nerd
character. I mean, that is the absolute truth, I certainly didn’t lie or even exaggerate the information, I just emphasized that point and I think that’s what got me in.’

By consistently playing, or being presented as the ‘nerd’ character, McDonald ended up coming second in his series of Big Brother, despite being nominated to be up for eviction several times by his fellow housemates.

‘The public kept voting me in. I think people could relate to me a lot more than they could to the others. I’m short, I’m not athletic, I’m a little overweight. I was one of the older ones, I was a fish out of water. I’m touching a lot of different demographics there. Firstly there are a lot of people who understand what it’s like not to have Internet. Then there’s the other people who know what it’s like to be the fattest person in the room and feel that. Then there’s the other people who know what it’s like to be at that age where you’re not cool anymore. So I think I touched a lot of demographics and that broad appeal kept me safe.’

McDonald may be adamant that he didn’t deliberately play a particular character on the show, but it is unsurprising that the network producers chose to present him as the nerd persona McDonald had highlighted from the first audition – it was a persona that obviously had market value. By talking about his Big Brother persona as appealing to a range of ‘demographics’ McDonald makes clear that such a persona extends beyond ‘typecasting.’ By stressing the connection between broad audience appeal and success on the program, McDonald had become a brand, albeit a limited one that he considered to be, at times, frustrating:
'There's so many things that I did that they didn't show because I was the nerd character so anything too interesting I think they didn't show it. There were lots of things, like afterwards I'd say to people, I made a complete poker set and we had a poker tournaments, did you see the poker set that I made? And they'd go, no. And I spent hours one day working on this, I collected bottle caps for a week and we had four suits and set up poker tournaments and we were having poker tournaments in the house...and that was just not shown at all and I think maybe, that's an example of something that I did that was too interesting that it didn't fit into the nerd persona they wanted to put forward.'

The very fact that one of the host's standard questions for evicted Big Brother contestants is, ‘how do you feel about your portrayal?’ demonstrates awareness that when an individual enters the Big Brother house they automatically become branded in a way that is not always in their control. McDonald’s account of playing the nerd is indicative of the conflict with which most reality television participants are faced once they inevitably become a mediatised branded human. On the one hand, McDonald’s nerd character of the nerd was reflexively constructed on his part, a strategy upon which he relied in order to achieve a place in the Big Brother house, as well as being a persona which served him well in terms maintaining audience popularity right to the very end. While he may not have deliberately played up this aspect of this character during the majority of his time in the house, he also asserts that he, ‘occasionally did mention the nerd thing hoping that there would be enough nerds out there to get me through to the next week.’ On the other hand, however, the nature of any form of branding, whether it be of a human or otherwise, must involve carefully constructed limitations. Lifestyle experts, for example, must embody an ‘idealised model of selfhood’(Lewis 2008 p. 138), and while reality contestants such as McDonald may be required to project a branded image that is ‘ordinary’ (the nerd) rather than idealized, it is similarly reliant on particular constraints of
representation. Just as wholesome homemaker/super-branded human Martha Stewart temporarily shattered her corporation and career when she was found guilty and subsequently imprisoned on charges of fraud, McDonald’s character needed to be portrayed in a very specific light if he was to play an effective role in the *Big Brother* narrative. A brand must be clear-cut and definable, not contradictory and complex. Peters, for example, advises potential branded humans to devise an eight word personal positioning statement (Lury 2004 p. 38). Effective branding, then, leaves little room to move, unless one wishes to rebrand of course.

Perhaps it is little wonder that someone like McDonald perceives self-branding as a problematic aspect of reality television participation, despite the limitations it can enforce upon an individual. As he points out, while many potential *Big Brother* participants, in fact he argues most, don’t deliberately play up a particular role in the auditions like he did, they ‘just happen to be whatever character the producers are looking for. Every year they’ve got a bogan kind of Aussie bloke. Every year they’ve got a hot female personal trainer. Every year they’ve got a bitch. People are these characters without even realizing it.’

*Idol*’s Chanel Cole agrees. Unlike in *The Biggest Loser* or *Big Brother*, where the overt emphasis is on a participant’s individual personality and the way in which they are portrayed, *Australian Idol* judges, particularly record industry executive Ian ‘Dicko’ Dickson, often discuss the kind of audience they believe would be willing to buy a particular contestant’s image and therefore their music. *Idol* runner-up Anthony Callea, for example, was often touted as being someone who would appeal to the three-Gs – ‘girlies, grannies and gays,’ while Shannon Knoll was marketed as the Aussie working class every-man, appealing to
Australia’s ‘battlers’, his first hit single being a cover of the downtrodden underdog Moving Pictures song, ‘What about me?’

For most Idol participants, this establishment of a persona is reluctantly seen as an inevitable side-effect of participating in a televised talent quest that is as much, if not more, about entertainment through personal narrative as it is about music. As Idol finalist Chanel Cole states, ‘I could see that they’d cast me as the quirky one, and I did court that a little bit initially because I thought, well, you’re not into subtleties, you don’t understand, I have to make myself into a cartoon version for you to actually see what I do, because I mean, I’m not stupid.’ Like McDonald, Cole clearly understood that her point of difference was also her brand, and if she wanted to participate in a program like Idol this was simply something that she would have to accept. Both McDonald and Cole present accounts that are not consistent with Hearn’s argument that reality television participants are willing, yet exploited victims of a factory reliant on immaterial labour. While reality television participants are not always rewarded financially, this does not mean that they are not rewarded by their mediatised experience.

**Fame: immaterial labour for the ultimate brand**

When participants enter the Big Brother house they sign a contract agreeing to be represented by the Harry M. Miller agency who will take 25% of the participants’ media-related earnings once they have finished on the show. During their first week out of the house participants are not paid at all. As industry standard is usually around 10-15%, former reality TV participants, from this perspective, are not considered to be in the same ‘league’ as most other celebrities and media professionals. From this point of view, it is not surprising that reality television has often been criticized as a social factory that exploits participants who
provide immaterial labour for a network that in return achieves big profit (Andrejevic 2004; Hearn 2006). A term coined by Maurizio Lazzarato in 1997, immaterial labour refers to those ‘employed to produce the increasingly important immaterial qualities of goods, or to produce and reproduce the flexible social conditions that allow for their production’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 10). This immaterial labour can be performed by salaried individuals who are part of an organization, but it can also refer to unpaid labour, such as that performed by Internet users, online gamers, consumers and, of course, reality television participants. As Andrejevic points out, reality television participants in particular are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to the way in which they sell their labour power, thereby undermining the concept of reality television as being a new kind of democratic public sphere. ‘The notion that collective participation in the creation of cultural commodities salvages their claim to authenticity implicitly invokes a critique of the top-down forms of control associated with the culture industry’ (Andrejevic 2004 p. 12).

Reality TV itself unsurprisingly presents reality television participation as such a coveted, unique and exclusive opportunity that individuals who make the cut should be so overjoyed just to be there that they will accept almost anything. For instance, Andrejevic cites an example where American Big Brother contestants were offered $50,000 by the producers if they were to leave the show voluntarily. No one accepted this offer because, they said, the very experience of being on the show is ‘priceless.’ Ironically, asserts Andrejevic, what the contestants were arguing as priceless was an experience of comprehensive surveillance, one typically associated with oppression and control. For what they perceived to be an experience of self-growth and betterment, contestants were prepared to enter ‘freely into a relationship in which most of them would receive less than minimum wage for their
participation in a show designed to earn the network millions of dollars’ (Andrejevic 2004 p.145).

For some reality TV participants such as Big Brother’s (2003) Irena Bukhshtaber arguments that reality TV participants are exploited for their immaterial labour ring particularly true. ‘Before I went in I didn’t understand how the process worked, after I came out I understood,’ Bukhshtaber explains. ‘Everybody made a lot of money off our backs, except us. I feel screwed over big time.’ While all participants in subsequent seasons of Big Brother received large prizes such as cars and overseas holidays, there was little in the way of compensation back in 2003. This in itself demonstrates just how undervalued reality television participants really are, Bukhshtaber argues. ‘We got a $500 stipend, the lowest paid gopher lackey gets $1000 a week. So if you’re looking at who’s valuable, [who receives] the least [amount of money], who is the least valuable to you, who is the most replaceable?’

It’s no secret that ‘media culture is commercial culture: its contents are commodified, its communications proceed in order to make money’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 13). Every reality television series is filled with blatant product placement and a synergy of sponsorship deals that encourage viewers to purchase products and services linked to the program. While Bukhshtaber, quite understandably, feels exploited, she also demonstrates an awareness of the artificiality associated with reality television as a-get-famous/rich/successful-quick scheme. ‘When I got the contract and I saw that it was 25% of your earnings I thought, 25%? That’s not standard. Industry standard is 15%. Basically that says you’re going to earn a lot in a very short time or you’re not going to earn anything at all, so we’re going to take as much as we can . 10-15% is standard because the notion is to build your career over time.’
Bukhshtaber’s account is an unwavering textbook example of Hearn’s exploitative factory of immaterial labour. Clearly bruised by the ruthless commodification dispensed by what she describes as the Big Brother ‘machine,’ whose producers have ‘hearts of darkness,’ Bukhshtaber describes herself as a, ‘prisoner of a committee who filtered my personality through a committee process,’ and goes on to say;

‘All I would want from them [the producers] is I’d want them to treat the cast financially with what was coming to them. They [the cast] should have had a lot more. They should have had more money, which they couldn’t do because it’s to do with the wages because they’re not an employee, so if you fall over and kill yourself or become a paraplegic you can’t sue the organization because you’re not an employee, you’re not a volunteer, you are a contestant, so you’re nothing. And also that first week [after eviction] everything you do you’re not paid for. So all your appearances, you’re not paid for. So you’re not paid, plus that first week. That first week is the only time that you’re anything. You’re king of the hill for that week, between the next person getting out and their week, you’re not paid for anything. So they’ve [the network] got it worked out, they’ve got it really worked out. So in that whole week where you’re doing back to back interviews from 6 in the morning to 6 at night you don’t get a cent…Oh and they tell you you can’t do promos on radio. Sometimes they ask you to go, “You’re listening to Nova have a great day,” or whatever and the publicist, he stops you because that’s not a deal that’s been worked out, you know.’

While resentment towards the reality television experience, like Bukhshtaber’s was surprisingly rare amongst the people I interviewed, it is tempting to argue that she is one of the few reality television participants shrewd (or brave) enough to admit to the exploitative nature of the program in which she participated. However, I believe this point of view, while
understandable, is problematic and does not get us very far. Firstly it undermines the account of reality television participants who did not feel exploited, or who have ambivalent feelings about the experience, and secondly it ignores Lury’s insightful analysis that, ‘the relationship between consumer expectations and producer performance is not now, and never has been, straightforward or direct’ (Lury 2004 p. 16). To argue that reality television is exploitative simply because people do not get paid very much for appearing on a reality show would be to argue that financial compensation is the only reward acceptable to individuals in a capitalist world. Lack of financial compensation is not unique to reality television participants – artists, writers, craftspeople, human-rights workers are amongst a long list of workers who often receive inadequate financial compensation for their labour. The relationship, then, between reality television participants and network producers is indeed complicated. Reality television participation is more complex than a simple exchange of fame for immaterial labour. As the previous chapter suggested, financial compensation is not the only incentive for people to participate in a reality television program. For many participants the reality television experience is seen as a positive one, not because they are brainwashed dupes unaware of alternate possibilities, but because their labour is rewarded in a way that is satisfying to them, whether this compensation is financial or not.

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The dog-eat-dog nature of reality television programs like _The Biggest Loser_ was apparent from the start for participants such as Greg Koutsouridis. ‘From day one the producer rings me up and says the show comes first, your weight loss comes second…There’s no way they tried to hide it from us.’ But as Koutsouridis points out, ‘The show wouldn’t happen otherwise… I didn’t expect anything, I didn’t want anything for free. I didn’t want nothing. I didn’t go out expecting one iota of anything, I didn’t expect any special treatment. I didn’t want any of that.’ For Koutsouridis, _The Biggest Loser_ was simply, ‘a
means to an end,’ a way to lose weight away from the responsibilities of everyday life and without the expense of visiting a weight loss clinic. Like Moores, Koutsouridis acknowledges that he was used by producers whose primary aim was to create a marketable show and while his labour may have been immaterial, it was not unrewarded. In fact, Koutsouridis deliberately turned down offers that were potentially lucrative. ‘I got offered a membership to this, to that, but I said, no, no, no. I didn’t need it. I didn’t want it. They offered me some memberships to a few gyms, I could have made a bit of money out of it, but I didn’t want to. I said don’t worry about it. I am extremely happy I went into the house. I’d do it again… because I lost the weight.’

This is not to say that Koutsouridis was not critical of his experience of the program. He says that the participants were physically and emotionally broken-down for the sake of good television and that he was often prompted to speak of personal things in front of the camera. Reality television is arguably a factory where participants are churned through a mediatised conveyor belt in the hope of some kind of reward. However, Koutsouridis argues that he used the experience just as much as network producers used him. His rewards may have been immaterial, but that does not mean they were any less valuable.

Not just a media whore: keeping the human brand alive

‘Interest in you dissipates very quickly… The new people start becoming the famous ones, not you. I was getting my haircut by Rob and a little kid came in and was like, oh, it’s Jamie, and freaking out. Rob [participant from Big Brother 2006] was standing right behind me, but I was still very fresh out of the house, so seeing Rob is like seeing someone famous for me because he was in it last year. Now people are
freaking out about me. It’s a funny thing because I guess you start to think about the whole concept of fame.’

- Jamie McDonald

The obvious problem for former reality television participants is inevitable disposability of the reality television produced human brand. As Turner points out, celebrity may be a profitable by-product, but producers of reality shows have a limited commitment to it once the program has gone to air. The possibility of celebrity may be important in attracting contestants, but the downside for contestants is that once the program is off-air, most participants have no other platform from which to reach their audience (Turner 2004 p. 62). Reality shows allow a person to be on TV just long enough to become famous, but as McDonald’s statement makes clear, such fame is often fleeting and as McDonald again points out, it is the kind of fame that is often more about the show than about the individual involved:

‘Thomas, who left the previous week, rang me up when I was evicted and told me something that had been handed down from person, to person, to person. That whatever happened in the house, whatever was shown or how people saw you or anything like that, it doesn’t matter because once you leave you’re just famous for being on the show and people can’t remember what you did or didn’t do while you were in there. And I really found that when I went into the public, some people knew because they were really big fans, but most people were excited to meet me just because I went on it, not because of what I did.’

When a reality television participant is on the show, they are branded by networks in a way that is consistent with the most successful form of branding – the kind that is ‘conceived as a
personality with emotional or even ethical dimensions’ (Arvidsson 2006 p. 68). Once the show is finished, however, and especially by the time a new season airs, simply having been on a reality show is usually not enough to maintain a strong human brand. Describing the experience of a post-reality television participant/commodity Bukhshtaber asserts:

‘What are you? You’re just a slut, a hooker. You’re a media whore. And I used to say that with a wry smile, but fuck off I’m not. Take your media whore and shove it up your ass. Yeah OK, so you get $50,000 to endorse some product? How is that great for your soul? How is that making any difference in your life? Money. Whoopdedoo.’

Interestingly, this statement from Bukhshtaber contradicts her claim that adequate financial compensation would have significantly altered her resentment towards her reality TV experience. It also confirms, as I have previously argued, that the commodification of the individual as a brand is only one aspect of reality television participation. It is just as important to acknowledge that not all reality television participants are interested in pursuing careers that demand a public profile, with material compensation considered by participants to be just one of many possible benefits associated with reality television participation. But for those who do view reality television participation as a human brand launching pad, how to avoid becoming just another ‘media whore’ is an especially salient question.

Paris Hilton would have been a young child when Leo Braudy wrote, ‘To be famous for yourself, for what you are without talent or premeditation, means you have come into your rightful inheritance’ (Quoted in: Turner 2004 p. 62). But this concept of fame as a form of self justification could quite easily be the socialite’s personal mantra. It is perhaps not surprising that the subject of Hilton, the ultimate twenty-first century ‘media whore’, was
raised by several former reality television participants I interviewed as an example of someone who has managed to achieve a level of fame without possessing any obvious talent or skill.

Journalist Tim Brunero cites several reasons for participating on *Big Brother*, one being the hope that the experience would help establish a public profile and therefore boost his media career. But Brunero is well aware of the pitfalls of such fame, the difficulties involved in maintaining it and the skill with which Hilton keeps her human brand alive.

‘Look at someone like Paris Hilton… The woman is incredibly wealthy but I actually think she’s a really interesting character in that she’s actually played it incredibly well. People think she’s an untalented dickhead, but actually she’s made two or three TV shows playing on her ditzy blonde image, she got a million dollars to come out here and flog beer at the Bondi Icebergs in Sydney. She wanders the world in that sort of fashion because she understands, even if she doesn’t understand it, someone around her understands how important celebrity is and how to perpetuate it.’

Brunero came second on *Big Brother* 2005 and cites it as an invaluable experience which offered the celebrity experience as an ultimate reward. Brunero, whose dream job would be to host his own TV show, understands the importance of maintaining the human brand.

‘You’ve got to keep doing things, you’ve got to keep feeding it, you’ve got to be, you can’t just be that guy that was on *Big Brother*, you’ve got to be participating in stuff. For me, it’s a limited palette. I can’t sing, I can’t act. What do I do? I’ve got this column which people read on my views, or I’ve got a *Chaser* column. You’ve got to have something.’
Just as Nike demonstrated when they changed their image to compete with Reebok, or when Starbucks invented the Frappacino and Kodak went into receivership, becoming a star isn’t the hard part, staying one is. Nowhere does this sentiment have more poignancy than for the reality television participant, branded by a profit-driven corporate network and spat out the other end. As Brunero concludes, ‘The thing is, you get it all served up to you, you are a star and you are actually treated differently. When it’s not there and, it’s not that you can’t work out why, but how to get it back is the big question. How to be that star again, how to have people running around doing things for you and organizing things for you.’

Conclusion

It has been almost half a century since Erving Goffman famously wrote, ‘We all act better than we know how’ (Goffman 1959 p. 74). Since then, Goffman’s analysis of ‘acting’ has been transformed into a more self-conscious paradigm in which individuals, including many of the reality television participants I interviewed, style their performances to meet the criteria they think the media want. Self-branding, or the self-conscious performance of a certain self in order to get ahead, has become a part of everyday life to the extent that it is now almost a cliché. From the lifestyle experts who advise us how to dress, how to eat, how to decorate our homes, to the range of short-courses designed to help establish a professional identity or even determine, ‘Who am I?’ personal branding, like reality television, coexists within both the private and public realms. It is perhaps no surprise that reality television programming, a genre that demands personal revelations alongside narrative-driven internal and external conflict, provides a magnified lens through which to examine the phenomenon of the personal brand.

8 The title of a course offered by the Council of Adult Education (CAE), Melbourne.
Self-branding on reality television, as in life, is difficult to avoid if one wants to ‘get ahead.’ Just as Jamie McDonald branded himself the ‘nerd’ in order to win a spot on Big Brother, the commodified self is an inevitable side-effect of a commodified world. But to be a successful human brand requires work. In Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’ nothing stays the same for long. Many jobs last months, maybe years, but certainly not a lifetime. Communities are no longer simply small and tight-knit, but globalised and interconnected by technology. Most goods for example, such as furniture, that used to be considered an ‘investment’ are now readily available in cheap and disposable versions. As Tim Brunero rightly pointed out, getting on a reality show and acquiring celebrity status is the easy bit, maintaining it is hard, particularly when it is of the infamously disposable reality star kind.

But, ‘in a society of consumers, turning into a desirable and desired commodity is the stuff of which dreams, and fairy tales, are made (Bauman 2007 p. 13).’ Reality television may be a kind of churn and burn fame factory, but it is also a place where these fairy tales about the ugly ducking transforming into the beautiful swan are regularly told, and promised. From the creation of the thin, ‘sexy’ and socially acceptable body on The Biggest Loser, to the making of a star on Australian Idol or Big Brother’s life changing ‘journey’, perhaps the greatest reward offered by reality television programming is not money, but the transformation of the self into an improved, more marketable and successful commodity. We may all act better than we know how. We may all self-brand. We may all consume. But what we all want most of all, at least in the eyes of reality television producers, women’s magazines, self-help books, talk show hosts and advertising agencies, is to become better versions of what we already are. As the following chapter will explore, reality television works to construct discourse of both
success and failure and while the reality television participant experience can be beneficial to a participant’s life, it can also be a source of great discomfort, regret and even depression. For, as Tim Brunero insightfully states, reality television ‘creates both heroes and villains,’ and it is almost completely out of participants’ control which representations of them will be created.
Chapter 6

Reality is a bitch: expectations and disappointments in reality TV participation

‘An individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated.’

- Erving Goffman (Goffman 1968 p. 15)

Like I’d be on panels with Delta Goodrem for God’s sake. I was on Rove with Dannii Minogue. There were all these amazing experiences but you’re like the guy that cut his own arm off and ate a Mars Bar. You’re that guy. You’re the freak show.

- Irena Bukhshtaber, Big Brother, Season 3

Like many of the Biggest Loser participants I interviewed, Courtney Jackson didn’t particularly enjoy his time in the Loser house. The tedious hours it took to shoot what would become a mere 30 second segment, the punishing exercise regime, the constant filming, lack of privacy, and the humiliation involved in being forced to repeatedly remove his shirt were all unwanted side-effects of his goal to lose weight on national television. But for Jackson, most of these side effects were anticipated and expected. At 21, Jackson ‘grew up’ watching reality TV. Having watched both Australian and US versions of Loser, Jackson knew the program was full of contestants who ‘cried all of the time. That’s what I remember from season one. All of them would just cry, over and over and over, so I thought, bloody hell.’ In other words, Jackson was prepared to suffer in order to lose weight. As a result, Jackson made it to the Loser final five, reached his goal weight and is now an accredited personal trainer. He even says that while he found
the program’s physical challenges painful, they were ultimately empowering and that he felt ‘proud about everything. You just think, this is worth more than money to be able to do this.’ But what Jackson wasn’t prepared for was the impact his newfound public profile would have on his life post-reality TV. All of a sudden Jackson found himself go from ‘one extreme to another,’ subsequently transformed from an individual who, only months before, felt ‘invisible’ and stigmatised as a fat person to a publicly recognisable ‘D-grade’ celebrity accosted by strangers whenever he went out. As Jackson explains:

The biggest problem is I still can't eat out in public at the moment because people just criticize you over what you're eating and that sort of thing. It's really embarrassing, actually. Like eating lunch at a food court is really uncomfortable and embarrassing with people watching what you eat. So even though I think I look [normal], people would still look and carry on. Back in the show days, before the finale, I bad people, there were articles saying, Courtney spotted at such and such shopping centre eating two ham burgers. I'm like, I don't even like ham burgers, I don't eat them. I was prepared for people carrying on, being recognized, people saying “Hi”, I thought that would be cool. I didn't really expect it on the level of what it was, but I did not expect the food side of it. Like I've had people taking photos of me eating food and stuff like that...It makes you really embarrassed and you don't want to go out or go to restaurants. When you go shopping you just want to keep in front of your trolley because people will look and see what you're looking at and what you've got in your trolley. If you've got one bad thing people jump to all of these conclusions. One day I bought a packet of chips and the cashier goes, “should you be eating that?” I was like, “excuse me!”...You go from one extreme to another. From one extreme, people don't really look at you, people don't give you the time of day because you're unattractive, or you're fat. Then you've got the other extreme where people are going, “Oh my God!”

9 Many of the reality TV participants I interviewed, including Jackson, referred to their newfound fame as ‘D-grade,’ self-consciously implying that it was a lower form of celebrity than that of a ‘true’ star.
‘The therapeutic narrative,’ argues Eva Illouz, ‘has significantly transformed autobiographical discourse in that it makes the public exposure of psychic suffering central to the account of oneself’ (Illouz 2008 p. 181). As a program whose narrative is driven by the ‘public exposure’ of both psychic and physical suffering, *The Biggest Loser*, as *Chapter 4* asserts, works to construct a community of support and understanding for both participants and audiences. But, at the same time, the more troubling ramifications of the kind of public confession and subsequent ‘instant’ fame that reality TV constructs must be acknowledged. As Jackson states, he wasn’t prepared for the intrusive nature of public attention he received, nor for the public scrutiny regarding what he ate and when. While the public display of emotion may be considered brave and virtuous (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008) it also exposes the individual to the publicly scrutinized life of contemporary celebrity. An almost instant fame which, in the case of most former reality participants, occurs without the financial perks usually associated with celebrity. As Jackson says, ‘I would only want to be famous if I was filthy rich because then I could buy a house and a big mansion and disappear in the house and people don’t see me for months and that would be fine. But no, not when you’re just a normal working person.’

In her analysis of talk-show guests, Patricia Priest argues that participants are motivated by a range of factors when making their decision to appear on a talk-show (Priest 1995), or, in this case, a reality program. But while these motivations vary, it is reasonable to argue that everyone who participates on a reality show dreams of leveraging something somewhat ‘life changing’ from their experience. Whether this be using their newfound celebrity to help establish a sustainable post-show media career, to winning the prize money or simply to achieve dramatic and permanent weight loss, all the participants I interviewed embarked on
their reality TV journey with the hope that it would benefit their future life in some way.

*Idol’s* Anthony Sumbati, for example, was motivated by career opportunity:

> I wanted to start a career with entertainment, I wanted to be in the business of the entertainment industry. I had not decided that there was a particular field that I had in mind, but obviously, with my personality being particularly outgoing, outspoken, larger than life, very loud, enjoying attention and just love being out there, it’s where I wanted to be. I had the opportunity of meeting a friend of mine who introduced me to his manager and we obviously became friends and he saw some potential in me and he said, “let me manage you,” and part of this, they had heard that a TV show called *Idol* was coming about and, I decided, no I didn’t decide, I was told, “here’s an opportunity for you to stand out and here’s how you’re going to do it.”

Others, such as *Loser’s* Jo Cowling, was interested in improving her personal health and well-being.

> I went to the doctors maybe 12 months before and he told me, Jo, if you don’t do something about your weight you’re going to be a diabetic. And I was sort of like, “yeah OK, whatever.” Then I went to see him again after 12 months and he said, “what part of me saying that you’re going to be a diabetic didn’t you understand?” And I’m absolutely, totally so scared of needles. That was just a couple of days after I think I saw *The Biggest Loser* for the first time and I saw the ad at the end of it and I thought, OK, I’ve got to admit I’ve got a problem and the only way of not turning back is getting up in front of the whole of Australia and saying, OK, I’m very unhealthy and I’m going to get very sick.

*Big Brother’s* Krystal Ince, on the other hand, was encouraged to participate by her mother who viewed *Big Brother* as an opportunity for Ince to launch an acting career:
It was my mother, as always. She’s very on top of me about things and I’d already previously done a reality TV show called Meet My Folks on Channel 7. That was just such a, I just fell into it. They [the producers] just approached me, I didn’t even know what the concept of the show was until 2 days prior. And then that happened and that was just one episode, it was a good time for a laugh and I was only 18 at the time so at 18 you do crazy things. And then, my mum, I was actually booked on a flight to go overseas because all I’d really wanted to do was travel. I’d been wanting to travel since I can remember and I was booked on a flight and I was meant to leave on a Tuesday and I got the phone call the Thursday before that I had made it to the second auditions. Again, I had put my video tape in because I had everybody around me telling me, do it, do it. And then I said, okay I will. Then my mum got the phone call that I got the second audition and she cancelled my flight and said, look you are not going overseas, overseas isn’t going anywhere. You can try this audition and give it a go. But I’m like, I want to go overseas. I’d already started to pack my suitcase. And she’s like, no, no, no, you never know what could eventuate from this. And so I thought, okay, I’ll give it a go.

Just as there are numerous reasons for auditioning for a reality show, there are also a variety of outcomes. There are, of course, several now high-profile former reality TV participants who have been publicly successful because of their reality TV stint. Guy Sebastian, Jessica Mauboy and Shannon Noll are well-known Idol success stories while Blair McDonough’s Big Brother stint landed him a role on TV soap Neighbours and former Loser contestants such as Alison Braun and Sam Rouen have received lucrative advertising work. It must also be recognised that celebrity or a media career are not the sole signs of post-reality TV success and that not all of the former reality TV participants I interviewed said they desired such a life. It must also be said that many, such as Jackson, have mixed feelings about their reality
TV experience, acknowledging both the satisfying and negative aspects of their experience. Hence, it is not the purpose of this chapter to suggest that reality television participation inevitably produces disgruntled D-grade celebrity wannabes desperately clinging to their 15 minutes of fame. Rather, I argue that by interrogating the expectations of reality TV participants before and after their televised journey, greater insight can be achieved not only into the reality TV experience itself, but into the nature of contemporary celebrity in general and, more broadly, the expectations and ramifications of life in a consumer-driven late modern society that emphasises the value of personal responsibility and the power of the individual.

**Reality TV celebrity: delegated to the D-list?**

As opportunities for ‘ordinary’ people to participate in mainstream media formats increase and Internet technologies such as YouTube and blogging make fame increasingly accessible, twenty-first century celebrity is of a completely different nature to earlier forms of renown which were primarily associated with social, economic, religious or cultural hierarchies (Turner 2004). There has been extensive scholarship produced on contemporary fame and celebrity and it is useful to look briefly at this work in order to contextualize the kind of fame experienced by reality TV participants. As Graeme Turner points out in his book, *Understanding Celebrity*, scholarly views of celebrity are contradictory and varied. From Leo Braudy who argues that the desire for fame has existed for centuries and has altered only by degree rather than substance (Braudy 1986); to Chris Rojek who links celebrity to the invention of PR and mass-circulation newspapers and television (Rojek 2001); or Richard Schickel who says there was no such thing as celebrity before the twentieth century. Schickel, for instance, argues that while there have always been successful people who
became ‘famous’ for their abilities, it wasn’t until actress Mary Pickford signed the first
million dollar film contract in 1916 that the concept of celebrity markedly changed and the
correlation between what an individual did, how well s/he did it and what s/he received for
doing it became tenuous (cited in: Turner 2004). But while Braudy suggests that the desire
for fame has long been a characteristic of humanity - seventeenth century poet Fulke
Greville reiterated the prestige of fame when he wrote of the despair associated with losing
it, writing, fame is ‘hard gotten, worse to keepe/Is never lost but with despaire and shame’
(Giles 1999) - it is also clear that since Pickford signed her contract over ninety years ago, the
ubiquitous nature of media technology has not only made it much easier for the capacity of
media to distribute the image of celebrity, but that the associations between celebrity and
merit and manufacture have blurred beyond recognition.

It is somewhere within this murky grey space between merit and manufacture that reality
television celebrity lies. Even ‘talent’ quests like Australian Idol straddle the boundaries
between discourses of natural ‘talent’ and ‘manufacture’ as we see contestants, in a few short
months, being strategically transformed by a team of ‘experts’ from unknowns off the street
into ‘stars.’ As Holmes reiterates, ‘Idol…pits the two major theories of fame against one
another and uses this contradiction as the basis of their success – the Marxist perspective
that a star is simply a manufactured product of capitalism, existing to manipulate the market
and hence the audience on one end and the idea that a star becomes a star because they are
special and extraordinary’ (Holmes 2004 p. 169). While Holmes argues that programs such as
Idol are particularly useful in examining the conceptualization of fame in reality television, the
three programs examined in this thesis all, at least to some degree, highlight the ‘trend of the
throwaway celebrity’ (Holmes 2004 p. 148), albeit in various ways. The Biggest Loser, for
instance, is constructed as a kind of self-help weight loss program, primarily concerned with health and well-being rather than fame and stardom. Even Big Brother, in spite of the various aspiring actors, models and TV presenters who appear on the program, is touted as being about the ‘experience’ of living under constant surveillance in a house full of strangers rather than as an opportunity to build a public profile. However, the very fact that all these programs appear on high-rating commercial television means that some form of celebrity, at least for a while, is an inevitable side-effect of appearing on such a program in the first place.

Biggest Loser participants may not be expected to become ‘stars’ but they are constructed as being public ‘role models’ who can inspire others to embark upon a ‘healthy lifestyle’ journey. As Loser’s Tracy Moore’s remarks ‘I had a girl that was in the Navy who came up to me when I first came off the show…and this girl came up to me, she had all these medals all over her shoulders, and she said, ‘you’re an inspiration. You made me lose 20kgs. I used to watch you on the show.’ And she presented me with her hat, which I still have to this day, and she’d written, you are an inspiration, thank you so much.’ Hence, appearing on a reality TV program inevitably makes one a ‘temporary’ celebrity or even ‘expert’, even if this is not the participant’s primary intention for participating in the first place. It is from this perspective that it is useful to further explore the nature of reality TV ‘fame.’

While all celebrities are arguably constructs of an industry fuelled by agents, publicists, producers and journalists (Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000), this construction is particularly apparent in reality television because it is an intrinsic part of the narrative, rather than a facet of stardom that is often kept hidden. Although celebrity blogs such as Perez Hilton and tabloid magazines such as NW, OK and Famous attempt to bring stars back ‘down
to earth’ by highlighting their physical and psychical imperfections, readers are never provided with interviews with Madonna’s publicists, stylists, song writers and personal assistants, for example. While audiences know that Madonna’s entourage exists, to see Madonna as a small part of a well-oiled media machine would detract from her star status as an exceptional individual, a woman born to be famous. In contrast, reality television celebrity ultimately implies that a participant’s newfound fame is as much a result of technique as it is merit. Big Brother participants may receive an instant media profile, for example, but as Irena Bukhshtaber points out, it is one that is often resented by established media professionals:

‘The industry resents you because they see you as jumping the gun. They’ve worked hard to get where they are, blah, blah, blah, so they see you as a usurper. You’re trying to get, you’re competing for jobs that they don’t think you deserve so it’s also in their interest to stop you from getting anywhere beyond a Ralph pinup girl or a few gigs in some nightclubs.’

Chris Rojek divides fame into three categories: ‘ascribed celebrity’ is the product of lineage, ‘achieved celebrity’ stems from the meritocratic concept that links fame to talent and accomplishment and ‘attributed celebrity’ is the product of concentrated media representation (cited in: Holmes 2005 p. 10). As Gareth Palmer argues, while it is possible for former reality TV participants to ascend beyond ‘D-list’ status, it is also very difficult. Palmer defines D-list as a form of celebrity that falls into the category of ‘attributed celebrity,’ a unique version of contemporary fame that would not be possible without a plethora of media technology, in particular the tabloid press (Palmer 2005 p. 38). As Palmer points out, several factors have led to the emergence of this new, D-list celebrity over the past twenty years. D-listers and their perceived desperation for publicity has proved economical for magazine editors who find that while ‘pictures of the ‘true’ stars are often at
a premium, or the subject of considerable negotiation,’ snaps of the lesser known are more obtainable. (Palmer 2005 p. 38). For tabloid journalists, whom Palmer describes as ‘architects of the D-list,’ the trials and tribulations of D-listers act as inspiration for the ‘colourful copy’ that, in the UK at least, forms the basis of a tabloid media industry that sells almost six million copies daily and has a combined readership of three times that amount (Palmer 2005 p. 40).

While in Australia these figures may be smaller, it is interesting to note that Australians are the heaviest consumers, per capita, of hardcopy magazines (Salamon 2009 p. 72). Reality TV publicists also forge connections with tabloid magazines such as *NW* who agree to feature weekly stories about reality participants while each particular program is airing. As Palmer, Turner and others make clear (Palmer 2005; Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000; Giles 1999), the celebrity divide between a ‘true’ celebrity such as Madonna and a ‘D-lister’ is apparent to anyone who has worked as a celebrity interviewer. For a journalist to interview a ‘real’ star, or A-lister, the one-on-one interview situation is a rare occurrence indeed. An A-list celebrity will most probably be surrounded by a team of assistants, publicists and producers. The questions asked of them during an interview will be closely guarded by a publicist who will readily cancel the interview at the mention of any ‘taboo’ topics while a strict time frame is likely. A D-lister, however, will be perceived by editors and journalists as someone who should be grateful for publicity. While they are not strictly an ‘ordinary’ person, they are not a ‘true’ star either, existing within the space between the ‘unknown mass of ordinary people and the celebrity’ (Palmer 2005). For the journalist, there will be no security to pass through, no managers to intervene and publicists are unlikely to be involved in the interview process. The D-list are constructed as individuals who are trying to ‘live the
life of the star,’ but by ‘organising and managing themselves, they risk ridicule by merging
the two orders of star and representation…not what a real star would do’ (Palmer 2005 p.
42). The D-lister is a ‘star’ who is not taken particularly seriously, not just as a celebrity, but
also in everyday life as an ‘ordinary’ individual. When I was researching this thesis, for
example, friends and acquaintances I spoke to about it would often reinforce this view of
reality TV celebrity as ‘D-list’ by saying things like, ‘How are you going interviewing those
reality TV losers?’ or ‘As if any ‘normal’ person would go on a reality TV show!’ or ‘I
watched Dr Phil the other day and they had all these wannabe celebrities on there and I
thought of you.’

As reality TV prepares to enter the second decade of the 21st century, the number of former
reality TV participants inevitably increases. At the same time, as a society becomes larger,
more heterogeneous and democratic, there will always be people willing and eager to live
their lives in the public eye, ‘aiming for the security of such a secular entity’ (Braudy 1986 p.
5). So because celebrities are constructed as individuals who have ‘made it,’ having crossed
the line to become objects of attention rather than a mere speck in a mass of attention
payers (Braudy 1986 p.6), it is not surprising that celebrity has become increasingly
covetable. While reality television is a genre that constructs itself as a provider of democratic
opportunity to those who normally find themselves on the outer edge of exclusion, the
opportunities it provides for public exposure are a mass-produced option, or, in light of the
previous chapter, not a particularly exclusive brand precisely because of its accessibility. Not
just anybody can become Madonna, the ‘myth of the gift’ tells us, but just about anyone can
land a part on a reality show, at least in theory. As Bauman suggests, ‘When the quality lets
you down or is not available, you tend to seek redemption in quantity…’ (Bauman 2007 p.
As the reality television genre continues to evolve and remain popular, the quantity of former reality television participants merely increases, while their post-reality show opportunities arguably do not. From Bauman’s perspective, identification is a ‘powerful factor in stratification’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 38). Hence, within late modern identity there is a hierarchy exemplified by the reality television experience where there are those who can ‘compose and decompose their identities more or less at will’ and those, such as the reality television participants featured in this chapter, whose access to identity choice, at least to some degree, ‘has been barred…who are burdened with identities imposed on them by others…Identities which they themselves resent but are not allowed to shed and cannot manage to get rid of’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 38). As this thesis has demonstrated, reality TV participants are often provided by producers and editors with an on-screen persona that suits the narrative of the program. Although they are told to ‘be themselves,’ the self featured on the small screen often contradicts the individual they perceive themselves to be. This, not surprisingly, often prompts feelings of frustration, insecurity and anxiety and are at least partially responsible for what many participants referred to as ‘post-reality TV depression.’

**Life after reality TV: living with post-reality TV depression**

Consumerism, argues Zygmunt Bauman, exists in sharp opposition to preceding forms of life. (Bauman 2007 pp. 29-30). ‘The human desire for security and dreams of an ultimate steady state are not suitable to be deployed in the service of a society of consumers’ (Bauman 2007 p.31), he asserts. Within a culture of consumerism, happiness is associated ‘not so much with the gratification of needs, as with an ever rising volume and intensity of desires’ (Bauman 2007 p.31). The relatively instantaneous fame associated with reality
television celebrity, must then be recognised as existing within the particular context of this liquid modern setting that Stephen Bertman refers to as ‘nowist’ or ‘hurried culture’ (cited in: Bauman 2007 p. 31), a culture whose members have understandably come to expect, at least to some degree, instant gratification. *Biggest Loser* participants are shown to lose over half their body weight during the three month series (although participants have around seven months in ‘real life’ to shed the weight), *Australian Idol* participants can potentially land a record deal after appearing on the program for 12 weeks and *Big Brother* contestants can boost their public profile almost instantly.

Within the context of this ‘nowist culture’ Bauman argues that within liquid modernity there needs to be a ‘renegotiation of the meaning of time’ (Bauman 2007 p. 32). Referring to Michel Maffesoli, who coined the term ‘pointillist time’ Bauman asserts that time in liquid modernity is ‘marked by the profusion of ruptures and discontinuities, by intervals separating successive spots and breaking the links between them, than by the specific content of spots…Pointillist time is more prominent for its inconsistency and lack of cohesion than for its elements of continuity and consistency’ (Bauman 2007 p. 32). It is time that is broken up into a multitude of ‘eternal instants’ such as events, incidents, accidents, adventures and episodes – much like a reality television show. Life within such a setting, argues Maffesoli, is about ‘a succession of presents, a collection of instants experienced with varying intensity,’ while each moment, such as being accepted to appear on a reality television, has the potential to be the ‘big bang’ (Cited in: Bauman 2007 p. 32), or standout moment with the ability to improve, or at least alter, one’s life.
From the moment of acceptance to the point of elimination, reality television participants experience a series of carefully constructed ‘big bang’ moments. They might find themselves abseiling down a cliff in New Zealand, meeting an established celebrity musician or just simply be forced to live off rice and lentils for a week. On a reality show, each moment, exhilarating, challenging or boring, is aimed to provide compelling viewing by showing the response of different people to the demands of the ‘journey’. Throughout the program’s duration, participants are living out what Bauman refers to as, ‘a map of a pointillist life’ (Bauman 2007 p. 33). But while the hurried nature of pointillist time means that it can offer instant rewards, it is a life that must also be played out without the benefit of hindsight and where ‘for each unique opportunity there is no second chance’ (Bauman 2007 p. 35). Each moment is fleeting and as Braudy states, ‘Fame gives and fame takes away’ (Braudy 1986 p. 5) and the type of fame offered by reality television programming is perhaps the most fickle of all. This is, of course, in part due to the fact that reality television participants are dependent on the program that made them famous because they have no other platform from which to reach their audience (Turner 2004). But it is also arguably because reality television participants opt to play out the pointillist life in the public sphere with the hope that they will benefit from the ‘big bang’ moments aspirational reality television has the potential to offer. This also means that participants must subject themselves to the repercussions of such an act, whether that involves being confronted about one’s eating habits by strangers or not being taken seriously as a media professional post-reality TV.

As the language of psychology infiltrates daily life, it is logical to expect former reality TV participants to discuss their post-reality experience using such language. ‘The therapeutic narrative emerges from the fact that the individual has become embedded in a culture saturated with the notion of rights,’ writes Illouz. ‘Like no other cultural language, the
language of psychology mixes together private emotionality and public norms. The language of psychology has codified the private self and made this private self ready for public scrutiny and exposure’ (Illouz 2008 p. 184) Bukhshtaber, for example, uses therapeutic terms such as ‘nervous breakdown,’ ‘depression’ and ‘emotional experience’ to explain the depression she experienced post-*Big Brother*. As Bukhshtaber makes clear, while she auditioned for *Big Brother* during a difficult time in her life, rather than improve her situation, it simply made things worse.

*I was working at RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology] union. I had a really boring job, I’d been there a long time, the money was rubbish… I’d just had a really long period of unemployment, my confidence was shot, I didn’t know what I was doing, I had this partner who wasn’t right for me, I was getting married but it was all messy and not right. I thought, yeah, I’ll just cut my life right here and start brand new on a television show. I think that’s why you have the hard emotional experience afterwards with drugs or anorexia or whatever it is, nervous breakdown or depression, because instead of dealing with your issue you take your fragile self and shove it here, have everyone wash all over you and you come out the other end.*

Feelings of being alone, let down and disappointed after a reality TV experience were shared by many of the participants I interviewed. Participants go from being part of a huge production they beat thousands of others to participate in, to being discarded, like a disposable consumer object, ‘rapidly losing’ their luster and attraction,’ (Bauman 2007 p. 31). For some, these feelings of disposability are exacerbated by the construction of public failure that sometimes follows reality TV success. At 16, *Australian Idol* 2004 winner Casey Donovan rapidly went from rising star to public failure, dropped by her record company due to lack of sales. Overweight and lacking in confidence, Donovan was already constructed as
someone residing outside the parameters of ‘normalcy’ (Rojek 2001), when she auditioned for *Idol,* often criticized because of her weight ‘since I was eight, being called fat and what have you.’ Although Donovan’s flawed vulnerability, her ‘ordinariness’ arguably helped her win *Idol* by providing the rags-to-riches narrative or Goffman’s cycle of disbelief to belief (Goffman 1959) upon which reality television relies, it also hindered her out in the life world where the commodification of the self is often a key to commercial success. As Donovan reflected during our interview, *Idol,* in spite of the meritocratic fame it appears to signify, will provide success only for a certain type of individual, ‘for the people that have that image and have that persona about them, they will go far. Or they may go far. That’s what people want, that’s what they look for. They don’t look for people like me. It’s sad, it’s really, really sad.’ If, as Rojek suggests, celebrities ‘humanize desire,’ (Rojek 2001 p. 44), Donovan’s *Idol* stint signified the oft-cited ability of reality television to offer celebrity status to those with neither cultural capital nor an elite role in the public sphere (Biressi 2004 p. 44). But, as an ‘ordinary’ individual not connected to the music or television industries in any professional way, Donovan had little knowledge about the experience she was embarking upon and was dependent on the decisions made on her behalf by the *Idol* producers and the agents they recruited to represent her.

*I didn’t know anything about the industry. Before the whole show finished the final three or four got given 150 CDs to listen to on your days off and just pick which ones you liked. And by the final two you had to have all your songs picked the week before so they could go into the studio and start recording so all the music was there, all the music was ready to go, all you had to do was put your vocal on it. And then I was like, would I be able to get one of my songs on there? So I ended up getting one of my songs on and they took half my royalties. I was like, are you serious? So I got a little bit ripped off there… The one thing that pissed me off was that when we got either to the top 30 or top 12, you got to pick your music lawyer so you got to pick*
your music lawyer who is going to look after all your contracts, but you weren’t allowed to pick your manager.

And I wish it could have been around the other way, so I thought that was a little bit weird.

When Donovan discusses the logistics of choosing her manager and lawyer, she is fundamentally explaining the lack of control she felt over her situation as the Idol competition progressed. From her point of view, while a lawyer deals with legalities, a manager controls the participant’s entire career, organizing appearances, publicity and artistic endeavors. Being unable to choose her manager, according to Donovan, meant being unable to have any input into the direction her career would go in. It is arguably for this reason, at least in part, that, as Australian Idol progresses into its seventh season, the winning prize which includes a recording contract with record label Sony BMG, has become somewhat stigmatized in itself. Chanel Cole, for example, says that when interviewed during her time on Idol she always took care ‘never to say I want to be the next Australian Idol because it would be an absolute lie,’ while 2006 finalist, Bobby Flynn turned down a ‘huge’ record deal with Sony BMG because he felt he would be ‘artistically compromised’ (Northover 2009 p. 24). Donovan’s experience recording her Idol album, For You, arguably reinforces Cole’s and Flynn’s reluctance to join the record label.

‘What happened after is they[Idol] just let you go. And then Sony take over or what have you. I was young, but I was so thankful that it happened to me at the age that it did because if it would have happened to me now my career would be nothing…From after winning that night I was supposed to go to bed at 10 o’clock, didn’t happen. Then the next day I had media from 5.30am breakfast radio all the way through to 8 o’clock at night with one lunch break. Then after that, the day after, straight into recording. So after that I was just bugged. I remember just lying on this white beanbag after laying down a vocal and going to sleep for an hour
while they clumped everything together then that would be it so I’d get back up, get back in the box, do another verse, have another sleep, so my body was just tired, it was just like let me have some sleep. It was an adrenaline high as well from coming down after three months to just, I think, coming to a stop. Then I had to do a national tour with Listen with Your Heart straight after doing that. My body was just so tired that my voice just gave up.’

When Donovan’s album was released, tabloid current affairs program Today Tonight ran a story about Donovan’s poor album sales while Sony BMG ended her recording contract satiating that Donovan did not fit the image they wished to promote. Two years later, Idol judge Ian Dickson described Donovan as a ‘horrible disaster’ (Telegraph 2006). When Idol and Sony BMG realized Donovan was no longer a profitable commodity she was undeniably ‘discarded’ only to be left with the identity of a public failure - That was pretty shithouse [being asked what she is doing after Idol]. I got a little bit depressed from that. Like, damn. But you know, I’d say I’m working on something or I’m just writing. As Palmer points out, ‘the distinctions made between the real and the bogus is connected to the machines of celebrity and the commodification of the self’ (Palmer 2005 p. 37). Clearly, Donovan was the ‘wrong kind of human brand’ who says she was repeatedly told by the Idol franchise that, ‘no one wants you to perform for them, you’re not the right person, we don’t think that you would be able to do it. Or, you’re not actively involved in your career so this isn’t going to happen for you… It was kind of like being dropped from that massive drop in Dreamworld. Yeah, it was a bit, I was a little bit lost. It’s only now that I’ve really found my feet.’

Ironically, while Donovan was dropped by Idol, never to be invited to appear as a guest on following seasons or asked to perform at Idol events, her identity as a so-called ‘horrible
disaster’ helped her maintain a public profile in spite of the fact that ‘I think I had about two years where I was nowhere to be seen.’ She even made the cover of NW magazine, a rare feat for a reality television participant, particularly one considered to be a redundant and ill-performing brand.

‘All that weight crisis or whatever. And still, the whole 2005, almost every second week I was in a magazine about something…I coped with it as best as I could have. I mean I’ve had it since I was eight, being called fat and what have you. But I mean, it’s not like I don’t know, it’s not like I don’t have a mirror in my house. It bothered me, but it didn’t bother me a lot. I think it bothered my family more than it bothered me. That’s one thing that I didn’t like about it. My mum always took it the worst way. She’d just go off her head and think, why? Why? She’d just go off her head basically. She was disappointed that they didn’t leave me alone.’

If we view reality TV within the context of a society in which individuals are expected to be on a constant journey of self-improvement, then the promise of a three month potentially life-changing journey filled with ‘big bang’ moments and inevitable personal transformation is undeniably appealing. From this perspective, it is not surprising that thousands of Australians audition for reality programs every year. Combine this with a society characterized by pointillist time, an era in which celebrity is often so heavily rewarded, a powerful indicator of prestige and success, it seems reasonable that many of us would covet a public profile. As Braudy writes, ‘not everyone can be famous. But much of our daily experience tells us that we should if we possibly can, because it is the best, perhaps the only way to be’ (Braudy 1986 p. 6). Fame is seen to open doors and create opportunities. It celebrates uniqueness and suggests that those who possess it are in some way special and deserving (Braudy 1986) – the term VIP when used to signify a celebrity, for example, is a
typical device ‘used to elevate celebrities above the general mass of humanity’ (Giles 1999 p. 46). In other words, celebritification can be seen as the ‘corollary of a reward culture in which individuals are differentiated from one another by monetary and status distinction’ (Rojek 2001 p. 198). The rise and continuing popularity of reality TV is then, arguably a logical extension of this neoliberal culture in which celebrities provide a public face for what can supposedly be achieved through hard work and making the most of one’s natural gifts.

It makes sense then, that reality TV participants embark on their ‘journey’ with certain expectations. *Idol’s* Shane Jenek says that for him, and many other reality participants, these expectations were often ‘unrealistic’ and the result of ‘the story we were sold’ by the reality TV ‘journey’ that suggests that reality TV can, in fact, be a springboard to success. As Jenek explains:

I probably had a little bit of self loathing [post-Idol], I was depressed generally and everything sucked. But what I expected wasn’t realistic. It was the story I had been sold, the story that I’d bought. And so, again, walking into BMG and seeing Justin Timberlake and Britney plastered all over the walls, you almost expect that. So I guess when I was depressed and not really working or doing anything, I don’t know if I ever thought that I wished I’d never gone on Idol, I don’t think I did think that. I kind of realized that although the depression that I was experiencing, I created that as a result of Idol, I don’t think I ever stopped seeing the benefits of all of that. I do recall saying to myself, I wish none of this had ever happened, but I went and saw a psychologist, read lots of books, never stopped asking questions, never stopped thinking about it. Finally, through all of that I managed to work out some answers and have some contentment and that sort of stuff.
By seeking out the help of experts – in Jenek’s case, a psychologist and an array of self-help books – Jenek now sees his post-Idol depression as a part of his ‘journey,’ even a positive. ‘There was a 6 month period [after Idol] where I was with no management and I didn’t really work at all and I was living in an expensive house and needed to pay bills and I was quite depressed during that time. That low time helped me to, you’ve got to have those low times to learn and experience the good times.’ At the same time, however, Jenek also had to reevaluate his belief in the ‘success myth’ that programs like Idol encourage – a myth which celebrates ordinariness while rewarding talent and ‘specialness,’ suggesting that lucky breaks can happen to anyone prepared to put in the hard work and professionalism required for stardom (Holmes 2004 p. 169). Of course, as reality television has matured, it would make sense to assume that aspiring reality TV participants are aware that more reality TV participants ‘fail’ rather than ‘succeed’. And while some participants such as Big Brother’s Krystal Ince pointed this out, stating, ‘I wasn’t expecting any high hopes after the show or anything like that because I’d never heard of many housemates actually making anything of themselves anyway so I never thought anything of it,’ others, such as Bukhshtaber, who appeared on Big Brother the year after Ince, feel they were duped into believing that their reality TV experience would lead to a career in the media.

And now people go into the experience quite frankly because they know they’re going to get money out of it. They go in, they’re loud, they’re 20 years old, they’re just going to show their dick around, fine. They get out and they do those 1900 sex ads in the middle of the night and they’re perfectly happy with that. But, the promise to us was a lot more. I had an interview with Peter Abbott [Big Brother producer], for 10 minutes, and he said something along the lines of, don’t think too much. And I said,’ when I get out can I have a job with you?’ because that was my intention. My entire intention was to break into this stupid industry. Not any more. And he looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘you won’t need one. You won’t need it.’ And that
was someone who had done two seasons before, was about to do a third one, and that was a complete, in my face, direct lie. He could have at that point said, ’it’s possible that you might get something out of this or I’m not going to employ you, or don’t get your hopes up, or anything.’ But I said, I’d like to work with you when I get out and he said you won’t need to. And that is one incident that I remember but there were several where I was completely lied to.

Although it’s tempting to argue that Bukhshtaber was naïve about the benefits that being a Big Brother participant would allow her, it is also reasonable to assume that thousands of individuals would not audition for reality shows every year if they did not expect to benefit from the experience in some way. Even Ince, who says that she understood that post-Big Brother success was unlikely, appeared on the program under duress due to pressure from her mother who perceived the experience as an opportunity that potentially offered more rewards than a trip overseas. Bukhshtaber and Ince’s mother did not, of course, construct this perception of reality TV opportunity on their own. As Illouz argues, ‘Narrative has become a key category to understand how selfhood is constituted through culture, how the self communicates with others, and how one makes sense of one’s place in a particular social environment. A biographical narrative selects and connects the significant events in one’s life, giving a person’s life meaning, direction and purpose’ (Illouz 2008 p. 172). Reality TV not only achieves ratings through its ability to construct a cohesive and powerful televised narrative of self-discovery and transformation, but this narrative is often expected by audiences and participants to translate to a participant’s daily life beyond the program. Bukhshtaber’s narrative included a future in which she would work in the media industry, Ince’s mother’s narrative was that Big Brother would launch an acting career for her daughter, while Jenek and Donovan aimed for careers as recording artists. In light of the reality TV
narrative, such expectations are a logical extension of appearing on a reality program. Unfortunately for many participants such expectations are not always met.

‘Fame is not something that interests me:’ the stigma of coveting (and experiencing) reality TV fame

Erving Goffman defined the ‘stigmatised identity’ as the possession of an ‘undesired differentness’ (Goffman 1968 p. 15) that becomes a hindrance, rather than a benefit, to an individual’s life. Stigma is a term whose definition has altered since it first originated from the ancient Greeks who used it in reference to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual or bad about the moral status of the signifier. Later, in Christian times, stigma alluded to bodily signs of holy grace that took the form of ‘eruptive blossoms on the skin’ (Goffman 1968 p. 11) as well as referring to bodily signs of physical disorder. Today, the ‘term is widely used in something like the original sense, but is applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it’ (Goffman 1968 p. 11). Much of Goffman’s work aimed to expose the link between power, status, performance and the self, providing an implicit critique of the exclusiveness of the world of ‘normals’ (Goffman, Lemert, and Branaman 1997 p. xxxii). Stigma, then, is fundamentally a deviation of what is considered ‘normal.’

Ironically, stigma is a term that can be applied not only to the somewhat ‘D-list’ nature of reality TV fame, but also to the very process of coveting such fame in the first place. Some participants, such as Big Brother’s Irena Bukhshtaber, Tim Brunero and Jamie McDonald did admit that they were hoping their reality television participation would help establish a public profile and lead to a career as an entertainer or media personality, but Idol’s
Anthony Sumbati was the only participant who stated outright that he wanted to be famous declaring, ‘Let’s face it, everyone wants attention. We all want to be noticed and recognized. Some do it through television, radio, writing, everybody does it. Regardless of saying they don’t want to be famous, everybody does. It is a given.’ Reconstructing Braudy’s notion of the discourse of fame as a ‘place where private dreams of recognition triumphantly appear in public’ (Braudy 1986 p. 6), Sumbati could be construed as being the only participant honest enough to declare his desire for fame. More relevant, however, is the question of why most ordinary people who appear as themselves on a commercial, highly rating television series argue that fame is a mere side-effect of their experience rather than a primary motivation? From Idol’s Chanel Cole who said, ‘I care about music. I have no interest in fame, it’s not something that excites me,’ to Big Brother’s Merlin Luck who argued, ‘I’ve no interest in being a b-grade reality TV celebrity and it’s actually a bit embarrassing to be famous for nothing,’ the kind of fame offered by reality TV was dismissed by many as unappealing, even embarrassing.

In part, this construction has something to do with fame’s increased accessibility – of Bauman’s theory of consumer-driven quantity over quality. As reality television becomes increasingly prevalent and the number of former reality television participants grows, so do the number of ‘wannabes who became neverweres’ in the cruel words of British gossip columnist, Dominic Mohan (Palmer 2005 p. 41). To admit to coveting fame through reality television participation is not only considered ‘vulgar’, as Giles puts it (Giles 1999 p. 33), but is also risky, in that achieving long-lasting fame through such means is unlikely. ‘Reality television fame is perceived as fame for fame’s sake, fame that is constructed by a media machine rather than something that is earned as a deserved reward for the possession of an
innate “gift” (Giles 1999 p. 33). Giles further signifies the lowly status of reality television fame when he writes:

‘Talk of wanting fame has declined in the twentieth century, since fame has acquired a vulgarity through the perceived low value of modern celebrity. If fame is represented by Maureen from Driving School, or a TV weather presenter, then it is a pretty poor ambition to own up to when you have a genuine talent for sport or music or writing. The myth of the ‘gift’ allows us to cling to the belief that we will, eventually, be recognised and awarded for our innate potential, without having to seek out cheap and nasty publicity’ (Giles 1999 pp. 33-34)

As a powerful discourse, the ‘myth of the gift’ follows the neoliberal premise that tells us that those with real talent will inevitably become recognised for their abilities, that the genuinely talented are not the kinds of people who need to desperately and publicly chase fame. This premise, of course, also suggests that those who don’t rise are somehow at fault, individualising reasons for failure rather than looking at structural causes of differentiation. Hence, while reality television has helped make some type of fame accessible to those who have neither cultural capital, an elite role in the public sphere, education, entrepreneurial skills or even obvious talent (Biressi 2004 p. 44-45), in what Giles refers to as the ‘taxonomy of fame’, celebrities associated with reality television participation reside somewhere near the bottom of the hierarchy precisely because such individuals are seen to have actively sought out ‘cheap and nasty publicity’ (Giles 1999 p. 110). From this perspective, it is understandable that most reality television participants are reluctant to construct a narrative where fame is perceived to be a desired side-effect of the reality television experience. Whether they consciously or subconsciously covet the celebrity experience, most reality television participants are aware of their position in the hierarchy and clearly know their place on the ‘D-list;’ as Idol’s Chanel Cole put it, ‘Look, I’m totally D-list and I’m quite happy about that!’ For an individual to assert that s/he participated on a reality show primarily to become a celebrity would clearly risk setting her or himself up for public failure and
stigmatization as the ‘wannabe’ who ‘neverwas’. It would also perhaps suggest that one is not particularly talented and therefore has nothing to become famous for beyond themselves. As Cole puts it:

*Everyone gets excited when they see their picture in the newspaper or something. But after a while, it depends on what people are saying and why your picture’s there really. It’s more fun to be in the social pages. Music is very important to me. I care about what I produce. I care about my output, I’m a bit of an art wanker that way and I’m not prepared to do just anything to succeed. I would rather work in a bakery and record material that I’m happy with and do it because I love it and not get paid a cent than do something that I’m not sincere about. Music to me is, it’s, ideally music is a shared moment that you have with people and you forget that it’s you, it’s not you. It’s like a transcendent moment, this is going to sound really wanky, but it’s a transcendent moment where everybody just forgets about the clutter in their lives and the shit day that they’ve had or the deadline that they’ve got coming up, and just for one beautiful moment everyone’s just there and they’re happy and you feel something.*

In the above passage, Cole can be viewed as directly opposing the discourse of disposability that consumerist culture perpetuates. For Cole coveting fame is stigmatised precisely because it means regarding her music as a product to be consumed by a ratings-driven commercial television network, rather than an ‘art’ form she is ‘sincere about.’ This point of view sits in sharp contrast to Sumbati who admitted that he auditioned for *Idol* primarily because he wanted to appear on television, not because he had any ambitions to be seen as a ‘credible’ musician. For Sumbati, the reality television format suited him because he was comfortable with the discourse of disposability that consumerism constructs. For participants such as Cole and Luck, however, reality television fame is stigmatised precisely because it exemplifies
the disposability of consumerism and subsequent ‘inauthenticity’ discussed in *Chapter Three*. For these participants, the paradox of reality television offering access to a ‘big bang’ moment is overshadowed by the stigma associated with the inevitable disposability of the pleasures associated with such a moment, such as appearing in the social pages. Fame, as a fickle and superficial construction of late modernity, is a conflicting discourse to the durable and meaningful music Cole wishes to create, an art form arguably more suited to the ‘society of producers’ where things were made to last. As Bauman asserts, ‘the motive to hurry is partly influenced by an urge to acquire and collect, but the most pressing need is the necessity to discard and replace. Upon failure, rather than try again, this time harder and with greater aptitude, as in the society of producers, in the society of consumers we abandon these tools’ (Bauman 2007 p. 36).

‘Identities float in the air,’ writes Bauman, ‘some of one’s own choice, but others inflated and launched by those around, and one needs to be constantly on alert to defend the first against the second; there is a heightened likelihood of misunderstanding, and the outcome of the negotiation forever hangs in the balance’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 13). As *Chapter Three* argued, the reality television identity is often ‘inflated and launched’ by television producers. So while participating on a reality television program involves a degree of performance, the agenda of the television network and the program’s producers arguably hold the greatest influence over an individual’s mediatised identity. For many former reality television participants, life after reality television involves being constantly trapped in the middle of the extraordinary/ordinary dichotomy, unable to fit into either category, a feeling that they have little control over their personal and individual identity. As Goffman writes:
'The figure the individual cuts in daily life before those with whom he has routine dealings is likely to be dwarfed and spoiled by virtual demands created by his public image… Especially when the individual is no longer engaged in newsworthy large events and must everywhere face being received as someone who is no longer what he once was. It seems also likely to occur when notoriety is acquired due to a brief uncharacteristic, accidental event which exposes the individual to public identification without providing him any compensating claim to desired attributes’ (Goffman 1968 p. 91)

Participants such as *Big Brother*'s Merlin Luck might declare a lack of interest in ‘b-grade celebrity; but, for a short while at least, the stigma often associated with the constructed reality television persona is almost impossible to avoid, and, as this chapter has so far demonstrated, many participants find themselves unwittingly experiencing the stigma of having appeared on a reality show. For Luck, whose *Big Brother* experience was particularly unusual in that he used it as an opportunity to stage a protest against Australian refugee policy, as the following chapter will further explore, being recognised and judged, often negatively, because of his onscreen persona, was an intensely difficult and frustrating side-effect of the experience that contributed to a period of depression after the show.

I think having people hate you. I mean, I sort of expected it but it’s like, I’ve never had that before, walking down the street and having people hating you…. It’s horrendous beyond words. You think, what have I done to deserve this type of opinion of me? I remember one incident just sitting in a bar with my friends and suddenly I get smacked in the head. Someone has just walked up behind me, decked me and then ran. I was just sitting there having a drink and I didn’t even see, they just walked up behind me and ran out. That type of experience, you can have hundreds of people come up and tell you you’re awesome, take a photo, tell you that they cried because of what you did and how it meant so much to them. Then it’s tainted by those negative experiences. And I guess also, the judging. Everyone thinks they know you. It’s just a small and biased window into who you are and that can be very frustrating.
Balancing both the pleasures and irritations of public recognition combined with the perpetual gaze of the media and the difficulties associated with having to manage the sudden intrusion of large numbers of new acquaintances is so problematic for most celebrities Giles argues, that there is a need for celebrities to be better prepared for coping with the psychological ramifications of fame (Giles 1999 p. 108). Although reality TV participants include those individuals who crave publicity, the difficulty for former reality television participants is that while they are forced to grapple with the issues associated with public recognition as described by Giles, they do so without the benefits usually associated with celebrity. The financial rewards that come with movie-star fame, for example, remain an elusive fantasy for former reality stars who often must return to their day jobs straight after being eliminated from the show. And, as many of the participants I interviewed made clear, television networks offer very little, if any, financial or emotional support once the participant has been eliminated from the program. As Big Brother's Bukhshtaber states, ‘I was so lost when I got out, I had to go back to my job. People are treating you like you’re a TV person but you don’t have any money, you don’t have any security, you don’t have any gigs, you’re not looked after at all, you don’t have any emotional or psychological support, you don’t see a counselor, they don’t ring you, nobody rings you.’ On the periphery of fame, reality television participants such as Bukhshtaber experience fame without the perks, being forced to face ‘being received as someone who is no longer what he [sic] once was’ (Goffman 1968 p. 91). Because of this, participants become stigmatised, defined by others, in some way set apart (Goffman 1968 p. 132). A public figure recognisable on the street, but as a disposable celebrity, a representative of what Turner describes as ‘the centre of false value. The excess expressed in [manufactured] celebrity is seen as success without the requisite association with work’ (Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000 p. 13).
Chanel Cole and fellow *Idol* participant, Daniel Belle had first-hand experience with the potentially stigmatised nature of reality TV fame when they released a post-Idol album under their new band name, Spook.

> When we sent our album through to JJJ [public youth radio station] they refused to play it. We got a phone call saying, a phone call or an email, I forget, saying, we’re not going to play your album because these people are from Australian Idol. Eventually they did play one track with a huge 15 minute rambling apology about how we were from Australian Idol. You didn’t have to actually mention it. We made it so you didn’t have to mention it. You could be, this is a track from Spook, full stop.’

If ‘selling out’ is the ‘worst crime’ that a serious band or artist can commit (Giles 1999 p. 80), then it is perhaps not surprising that a program whose ultimate prize is the experience of producing a manufactured pop album, has limited credibility amongst those who consider themselves serious artists. *Big Brother*’s Jamie McDonald, who worked as a performer for many years before his reality television stint, conveys a similar experience to Cole stating that the public profile *Big Brother* generated was not always helpful when auditioning for acting jobs.

> ‘I recently attended some auditions for some different things and there’s an attitude when you walk in it’s like, “Oh here we go. It’s a Big Brother housemate. They think they can act because they’ve been on a television show, or whatever.” It’s like I have to reprove my skills. I’ve been working professionally in the entertainment field for over 10 years and now I just feel I have to re-prove that I can do it because I’m just a Big Brother housemate. I’m not Jamie, performer, I’m Jamie ex-Big Brother housemate.’
But, just as Bauman says that he never questioned his ‘Polishness’ until he was deported from the country in 1968, ‘the thought of ‘having an identity’ will not occur to people as long as ‘belonging’ remains their fate, a condition with no alternative’ (Bauman and Vecchi 2004 p. 12). While it is a little far fetched to compare the experience of being evicted from a reality show to Bauman’s experience of being forced to leave his country of birth, the above examples are indicative of the profound impact the reality television experience can have on an individual’s identity, or at least on the way their identity is viewed by others. And although, as previously mentioned, it is important to recognise that there have been examples of reality participants who have managed to reconstruct their reality television identity into one that enables them to establish a public profile beyond the program, assuming this is what they want, this is no easy feat. For, as Goffman points out, ‘Stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two role social process in which every individual participates in both roles…the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives’ (Goffman 1968 pp. 163-164). The difference, then, between who the media consider to be ‘real stars’ and ‘D-listers’ is not necessarily about talent but about how we read them (Palmer 2005 p. 42).

**Conclusion**

As Goffman so clearly states, there are constructions of ‘normality’ that determine and define both the acceptable and stigmatised identity within late modernity. While many reality television participants feel that they have had an ‘extraordinary’ experience, they themselves are rarely interpellated by others to be extraordinary in the way a ‘true’ star might be. While
this thesis has made clear that not all reality television participants covet a celebrity identity, it is also apparent that they must all cope with the ramifications associated with a public profile even if it is not something that interests them. As a result, former reality television participants must, along with all members of late modernity who do not conform to the boundaries of ‘normality,’ learn what Goffman refers to as ‘stigma management’ (Goffman 1968 p. 153).

As Chapter Four discussed, the linear power relations which once existed in the traditional confessional have been challenged and rearranged, meaning that the act of confession need not result in the marginalization of the speaker and can in fact result in a kind of empowerment that is both personal and political (Dovey 2000 p. 107). However, it must be recognised that the act of public confession can also hinder one’s daily life. By confessing to his struggles with his weight, Jackson unintentionally became a public commodity vulnerable to comments and opinions about his personal experiences expressed by complete strangers, suffering the ‘indignity’ of wearing his ‘heart on his sleeve’ (Goffman 1968 p. 152). Like the confessor in Foucault’s analysis of the confession, Jackson, indeed, found himself marginalized as his public confession opened him up to the scrutiny of strangers well after the program finished airing. Hence, while the public image of all stars must arguably straddle the dichotomy of ordinary/extraordinary (Holmes 2005 p. 10), reality television participants are rarely constructed as extraordinary (their ordinariness being the point of reality television after all) so that their role as an ordinary individual on television becomes ‘inflated’, perhaps even ridiculed.
Thousands audition for reality programs each year, arguably with the expectation that appearing on such a program will enhance their life in some way. And while this is most certainly possible, reality TV may also involve grappling with feelings of insecurity, failure, disappointment and anxiety. Or as Big Brother's Tim Brunero puts it, ‘Reality TV fame is like a suitcase full of Iraqi dinar. You have a hard time exchanging it for something more valuable’ (Schwartzkoff 2010 p. 13). While this chapter has focused on feelings of disempowerment associated with reality television participation, there are also moments of empowerment, even subversion, existent within this complex and contradictory phenomenon. As the final chapter will assert, while reality television may work to maintain established constructions of ‘normality’ it can also be, often unwittingly, a forum for political and cultural subversion. Reality may be a bitch, but it is one that can be challenged, questioned and ultimately deconstructed.
Chapter 7

Hijacking the branded self: reality television and the politics of subversion

‘We live in a time when the very private experience of having a personal identity to discover, a personal destiny to fulfill, has become a subversive political force of major proportions.’


‘If you really want to imagine what it’s like living in BB reality, think in terms of being a prisoner of a corporation (Bukhstaber 2006),’ wrote Irena Bukhstaber in an article she penned for The Age newspaper three and a half years after being eliminated from the Big Brother house. ‘Finance isn’t talking to marketing,’ she continues, ‘and HR is butting heads with IT; customer service is fielding angry calls; no one is listening. You are in a state of sensory deprivation – no TV, music and often no sugar, oil or salt. And, definitely no news’ (Bukhstaber 2006). Just as Andrejevic described Big Brother participants as willingly and enthusiastically entering into a situation involving the kind of comprehensive surveillance normally associated with oppression and control (Andrejevic 2004), the Big Brother experience, for Bukhstaber at least, was one of powerlessness and loss of control. During our interview, Bukhstaber further described the Big Brother power dynamic when she talked about her attempts to stage a participant walk out:

When I finally got was going on [that the participants had very little control over their situation] and I decided to walk out it was basically like ‘guys, we’re on TV now, this is the most power we’re ever going to get, being on TV. Once you’re off TV, you’re off TV. You don’t have the power anymore. This is the best we’re ever going to get. If we all walk out we’ll be news all over the world, let’s all walk out in one big mass.
Let’s do it. This show is bullshit…it’s all rigged, it’s all completely rigged.’ Then people are saying, my
journey’s not over, and that’s just buying into it. Journey?

According to Bukhstaber, the only way in which participants could turn the top-down power
dynamic of reality TV on its head would be to walk out together and thus jeopardise the entire season of Big Brother. Her idea failed to be implemented, however, because the other Big Brother participants did not want to prematurely end their ‘journey’ in the house. The Biggest Loser’s Tracy Moores says that she and some of her fellow Loser participants had a similar idea to Bukhstaber, but they also failed to follow through because the producers, ‘put the contract in front of us and said, you walk, you owe us $50,000. So that’s the reason why we didn’t walk, no other reason, if it wasn’t for that we’d be gone.’ These examples suggest that the extent to which reality television democratizes the public sphere is limited, as Andrejevic points out (Andrejevic 2004), when participants are locked into contracts that bind them to the program with little control over the final product.

Yet reality television programming, as this thesis has also demonstrated, often creates real-life communities that continue long after the program finishes airing, while at the same time offering viewers and participants the opportunity to directly engage with ‘the politics of self-actualisation in a reflexively ordered environment’ (Giddens 1991 p. 214), or what Giddens famously refers to as ‘life politics’ – the politics of everyday life. As a counter public sphere, Alexander Kluge writes on exploiting commercial TV: ‘[T]he fence erected by corporations, by censorship, by authority does not reach all the way to the base but stops short – because the base is so complex – so that one can crawl under the fence at any time. Even television producers and board members can be examined in light of this calculation of marginal utility’
Negt and Kluge 1993 p. 206). This final chapter will examine the experiences of reality television participants who have attempted the difficult task of ‘craw[ling] under the fence’ (Negt and Kluge 1993 p. 206). By drawing on two particularly ‘subversive’ reality participants, Big Brother’s Merlin Luck and The Biggest Loser’s Chris Garling, this final chapter will look to Giddens theory of ‘life politics (Giddens 1991),’ to further problematise arguments that suggest that reality television programming is a mere by-product of an oppressive and capitalist culture industry, a place where there is no room for an alternative status quo, or even for the acknowledgement that the possibility of one exists (Adorno and Bernstein 1991 p. 9). Rather, through these case studies, I will assert that the politics of popular culture are the politics of everyday life. Gains made are progressive rather than radical, making do within the system rather than directly opposing it, (Fiske 1989) hacking into the ‘philosophical code’ rather than attempting to obliterate it. Nowhere is the need to work within limits more apparent than in the world of reality television. For a contestant to participate in a reality show with the aim of destroying a commercial television network as a protest against late capitalist consumerism is arguably impossible. But for a participant to appear on the show and highlight culturally constructed ideas of beauty and body image on The Biggest Loser, or to appear on Big Brother in order to protest against the Australian government’s refugee policy, has been proven not only possible, but even powerful.

The personal is the political: life politics and the project of the self

The new forms of self-regulation and self-governance manifest in late modernity make it tempting to agree with those who dismiss reality television as simply an example of those, ‘engineers of the human soul’ (Rose 1991 p. 3) whose advice simply helps create an apolitical subjectivity which is confined and carefully controlled. Becker, for example, warns us that,
‘These days, many women are being encouraged to believe that by taking care of their psychological ‘selves’ they are becoming ever more powerful. I believe we owe it to ourselves…to acknowledge that this is not so.’ She goes further to argue that this so-called ‘self-empowerment’ is actually dangerously apolitical, creating subjects who ultimately do little to challenge the status quo (Becker 2005 pp. xii-1). While Becker’s argument is a powerful one, it is somewhat problematic. There is little doubt that many reality TV participants are apolitical in the sense that they do not, for example, challenge existing discourses of body image and fat in the Biggest Loser or the ‘success myth’ that drives Australian Idol. However, this does not mean that such representations are entirely void of political implications. The self is not a passive entity determined solely by external influences, asserts Giddens, nor is it void of political and social power because, ‘no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications’ (Giddens 1991 pp. 2, 74).

As each individual embarks on his or her own ‘reflexive project of the self’ the notion of ‘lifestyle’ is particularly significant because, despite standardizing influences such as commodification within a capitalist system of production, the discourse of lifestyle choice plays an increasingly important role in the constitution of self-identity. Giddens warns against assuming that lifestyle refers simply to the pursuits of the more affluent groups and classes, arguing that the idea of lifestyle also includes the decisions and actions taken by members of low socio-economic groups (Giddens 1991 p. 5). Lifestyles are forced upon us, not merely for practical reasons, but because they give ‘material form to a particular narrative of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991 p. 81). These lifestyle choices inevitably raise moral issues that Giddens argues ‘cannot simply be pushed aside’ (Giddens 1991 p. 9). The advent of
feminism, for example, has created lifestyle choices for women that continue to be subject to moral debate. Childcare options, combining work and family, even the childhood obesity epidemic, are all given voice in mainstream politics, and even represented in the media as being linked to women making the lifestyle choice to enter the paid workplace in greater numbers than ever before. Although Becker argues that the focus on the individual is fundamentally apolitical, for Giddens, ‘life-politics’ emerged from ‘emancipatory politics’ (Giddens 1991 p. 9). ‘In struggling with intimate problems,’ Giddens writes, ‘individuals help actively to reconstruct the universe of social activity around them’ (Giddens 1991 p. 12). The social conditions of modernity therefore enforce on us all the idea of ‘finding oneself’ (Giddens 1991 p. 12).

Naomi Klein (Klein 2000) argues that representation has limited potential to create change, and in some ways she is right – representing overweight participants struggling to lose weight in a somewhat humiliating fashion cannot be applauded for destigmatising obesity, for example, but it has worked, albeit in a limited way, to highlight the complex psychological and physical factors associated with weight issues. As the participants tell their life stories, it becomes clear that there is more to being overweight than simply eating too many chocolate biscuits and being lazy. There is no doubting, therefore, that reality television broadened the cause of people who gain access to representation. Big Brother, The Biggest Loser and Idol have seen drag queens, overweight teenagers, left-wing political activists, right-wing grandmothers and a former-strip club manager all establish a powerful (at least temporarily powerful) voice in an arena that was once only accessible to an exclusive few. This new more democratic public sphere (Lumby 1999; Lunt and Stenner 2005; McKee 2003; McNair 2000) might be driven by the self-help jargon of neo-liberalism, commodified
and dependent on profits and ratings, valorised above the well-being of its participants, but it
is certainly not apolitical. While the impact of representation is limited, it has also worked to
raise issues such as homosexuality, racism, and gender while Merlin Luck’s *Big Brother* live-to-air protest even raised Australia’s problematic refugee policy. Very few contestants embark
on a reality television ‘journey’ under the premise that they want to ‘help others’ or connect
with the wider public over an issue such as living with obesity or coming out as gay, but this
does not mean their actions are without some positive socially-progressive ramifications. As
Giddens makes clear, traditional notions of what constitutes politics have become
increasingly limited and redundant.

Shane Janek, for example, participated on *Australian Idol* as an openly gay contestant. His
family knew he performed in drag for a living and there were no teary confessions in the
vein of Anthony Sumbati’s self-constructed family feud. In fact, the *Idol* reproduction of
Janek was unquestioningly accepting. His homosexuality and drag queen persona provided
an easy way for the programs producers to ‘brand’ him as a particular character, but rather
than be singled out as freakish or stigmatized, Janek was simply another contestant who
sung, danced and just so happened to dress as a woman. Janek did not participate in *Idol*
simply to raise awareness of gay rights, but he does acknowledge the political implications of
his participation:

*I think that when you’re young you kind of want to be rich and famous and but then, as the years went on, I
realized that entertaining is what I love doing. I guess secondary to entertaining is, I don’t know if teaching
people is the right word, or educating people, what I am is a man dressed up as a woman, it’s very different,
confronting for some people and helps to create an extreme of some of the key issues, the key human rights*
issues, that we have at the moment which is equality. So for me, one of my underlying reasons for doing this is the belief that everyone is equal and no one is greater than or less than. If I can show people that Courtney is as normal as, well not normal, but just as worthy as the next person, then that’s what I want to do…

I didn’t really have any negative experiences, even generally with the wider public. Everyone related to me really well. I remember being in Melbourne doing a photo shoot and the traffic kept coming and we were trying to get this shot. There was a construction worker who was like, boys! He blocked off the street so we could get the shot. I think one of the things that Dicko [Australian Idol judge] loved was that I was appealing to everyone, especially with the song chosen by ACDC. There were people who were kind of confused, but loved it. I think it was Dicko’s acceptance and Dicko’s support, I think because I was being supported and not laughed at, I think the country was really able to decide that they would do the same. I’m very thankful for Dicko’s support. I think he was part of that broader acceptance.

Giddens defines ‘emancipatory politics’ as a ‘generic outlook concerned above all with liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect their life chances’ (Giddens 1991 p. 210). While it would be simplistic to argue that life politics is what happens once an individual has achieved a certain degree of autonomy and ‘emancipation’ from certain traditions, this is nonetheless a useful way of thinking about life politics, at least to some degree. After all, ‘life politics,’ argues Giddens, ‘presumes (a certain level of) emancipation…from the fixities of tradition and from conditions of hierarchical domination’ (Giddens 1991 p. 214). However, unlike emancipatory politics which is primarily concerned with liberating individuals in order for them to make choices, life politics ‘is the politics of choice’ (Giddens 1991 p. 214). These politics of choice are exemplified by reality television programming. Ethical concerns, such as ‘how
should we live?’ (Giddens 1991 p. 215) are frequently addressed as Big Brother contestants discuss their views on sex and relationships, for example, or as Biggest Loser participants are encouraged to critically address their diet and exercise habits.

If we are to agree with Roszak’s quote at the beginning of this chapter, the emphasis that reality television programs place on the ‘personal journey’ (cited in: Giddens 1991 p. 207) makes reality television a rather subversive genre in itself. As Lumby succinctly points out, to confront this new, more personal public sphere, we must grasp the fundamental changes the mass media has wrought on the way we conceive of politics and culture. Politics can no longer be limited to traditional, Habermasian accounts of the divided public and private spheres. Reality television, with its manipulated narrative formulas and exaggerated character traits, may not be ‘reality’ in the everyday sense, but the Bardic (Hartley 1992, 1992) function that television plays means that it occupies the centre of our culture and perhaps inevitably, a much broader and inclusive political sphere that includes the life politics of the everyday. From this perspective, reality television can be read as a genre that to some extent subverts traditional politics.

Within this broader political context, it is essential to recognise the parallels between historical changes in first person media and society as a whole. As Griffen-Foley points out, first person confessional media first boomed during the late nineteenth century, a time when the traditional idea of community was starting to disintegrate. Reality television resides in a world that has never been so fragmented and where personal identity has never been so unsure. It is a world where choice is so abundant that the only choice we don’t have is not to choose (Bauman 2000 p. 73), and where experts become commodities on whom we rely for
advice on everything from weight loss to organising our wardrobes. So to argue that the rise of reality programming is purely economically based is to dismiss half of the equation, ignoring the parallels between historical changes in first-person media and society as a whole. Reality television may be relatively cheap to produce, but it is only profitable when people want to participate and to watch.

As this thesis has argued, the very nature of popular culture, and the varying roles played by both its consumers and producers is complex and layered. Popular culture, argues Fiske, is created by various formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the very social system that disempowers them. So while the people’s subordination means that they do not have the tools to produce their own popular culture, they do make their culture from these resources (Fiske 1989). At the same time, however, it would be more than a little naïve to believe a television producer who claims that *The Biggest Loser* has nothing to do with ratings and economics and is simply a show produced for the benefit of overweight individuals struggling to find an effective weight loss strategy. Just as it would be implausible to claim that *Australian Idol* is about nothing more than giving talented young singers the break they deserve, or that *Big Brother* was created to give exhibitionists the chance to experience their dream and appear on television. In late consumer society, any sellable product, whether it be an indigenous art work, a literary novel or a handmade wooden toy, is going to be produced with an economic outcome in mind. But this does not mean such intended outcomes cannot be challenged and subverted. Mark Dery defines culture jamming as an intensely political act, ‘directed against an ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture whose operant mode is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols’ (Dery 2008). Ultimately, culture jammers
seek to ‘disrupt and subvert the intentions of the corporate producers’ (Wilson 2004 p. 324),
which in the case of Pamela Wilson’s Big Brother culture jammers, for example, involved a
series of attempts by viewers to infiltrate the first season of US Big Brother by delivering the
participants clandestine messages that would encourage them to stage a group walk out.
While Wilson’s participants, in spite of these messages, decided not to leave the show,
Wilson argues that what resulted was a kind of ‘narrative activism’ that proved that it is in
fact possible for both audience members and reality show participants to challenge ‘the
hegemonic control of the media giants by throwing small rocks with their slingshots’ (Wilson

As Ang also makes clear in her study about the viewing practices and experiences of Dallas
viewers, from the point of view of production, the product may be a commodity, but from
the point of view of the consumer, the product features a particular use value (Ang 1985 p.
23). The nature of this use value from the point of view of a reality television participant is
particularly unique because it sits somewhere between the role of a producer and that of a
consumer. It may be obvious that reality television participants are not simply consumers, or
even interactive audience members, because they play a significant role in the production of
the program, but they are not professional actors or producers either. Some, like Big Brother’s
Krystal Ince and Tim Brunero, played the game to their own advantage, while others, such
as The Biggest Loser’s Tracy Moores and Big Brother’s Irena Bukhstaber complained of what
Andrejevic describes as exploitation (Andrejevic 2004). And then there are those, like Big
Brother’s Merlin Luck and The Biggest Loser’s, Chris Garling, who failed to follow the explicit,
or implicit, rules inherent in reality television programming, thereby practising a game of
subversion with the potential to turn the ‘tolls of mass media against the corporate forces themselves’ (Wilson 2004 p. 324).

**Zero drag: subverting the drag coefficient**

The term ‘zero drag’ was coined during the late nineties by the dot-com entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley. It was a concept used to refer to employees whose lack of external everyday life obligations meant they were able to take on extra assignments, respond to emergency calls in an instant, and move cities, or even countries, when and if required. For a while, this term was so prevalent, so acceptable, perhaps even expected, that potential employees found themselves jokingly asked about their ‘drag coefficient’ during job interviews. As Zygmunt Bauman points out:

‘Zero drag’ wasn’t simply about having no life outside work, it was about what constitutes an ideal employee, an individual ‘ready to take on any task that comes by and is prepared to instantly readjust and refocus their own inclinations, embracing new priorities and abandoning those previously acquired in short order; a person used to a setting where getting used to such a job, or a skill, or a way of doing things – is unwelcome and so imprudent; last, but not least, a person who will leave the company when they are no longer needed, without complaint or litigation. A person, too, who considers long-term prospects, career tracks carved in stone, and any kind of stability even more off-putting and frightening than their absence.’

For Bauman, the concept of the ‘drag coefficient’ is indicative of the experience of life in late modernity – uncertain, constantly changing, consumer driven; a world where individuals are simultaneously ‘both promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote’ (Bauman 2007 p. 6). While Bauman’s focus remains on the consumer-driven culture he refers to as ‘liquid modernity’, as *Chapter Five* indicated, the concept of a potential participant’s ‘drag coefficient’ is integral to being selected to appear on one of these reality television programs.
While the life politics that dominate reality television means that it is a somewhat subversive genre in itself, it is also a tightly controlled environment over which contestants, generally, have very little control. Big Brother’s Tim Brunero, for example, states that when he initially applied for Big Brother he wanted to ‘subvert the whole reality TV paradigm. I wanted to sort of go on there and make some kind of satirical statement about the show, like attack it from the inside. The year before Merlin had gone on there and done his free the refugees thing and it was a very earnest political statement. I wanted to go on there and do something that was a little less earnest, but also quite punchy and political.’ Unfortunately and much to his ‘shame’ Brunero admits that when it came down to it, he ‘couldn’t actually think of anything…We [Brunero and his friend, comedian and member of The Chaser, Chas Licciardello] spent all this time trying to figure out how to make a joke of it, and he [Licciardello] just said, we talked about it and he said, “I think that once you’re in there you’re so deeply ensconced in the process.”’

While Licciardello had little experience with reality television, he perhaps instinctively understood the restrictive and highly controlled nature of reality television programming that, albeit implicitly, depends on participants conforming to their ‘drag coefficient.’ Just as employees sometimes fail to live up to their employers’ expectations, network producers don’t always get it right. Thousands of hopefuls audition for Australian versions of Big Brother, The Biggest Loser and Australian Idol every year, with many returning year after year in hope of making the cut. Those chosen are successful because of an implicit expectation that they will play out a particular role in the series. And, as Brunero demonstrates, usually they do – even if, like Brunero, they would prefer not to.
Indeed it is likely that the 2004 *Big Brother* producers would have initially been particularly pleased when they stumbled upon Merlin Luck. A quirky university student raised on a New South Wales hippy commune, Luck provided an interesting contrast to the muscle flexing Anglo-Saxon footballer that tended to dominate the Australian version of the series. Of course, such producers had no concept that Luck was planning to stage an act of political subversion that was to become one of the best known moments of the program’s eight year history. Never having seen an episode of the reality show, Luck auditioned specifically with the intention of staging a political protest and subverting what he describes as ‘mindless entertainment.’

_I auditioned because I was basically frustrated by reality television. I just see it as being pretty base. I think it’s fine that it exists…but having said that, I felt that it [should be] more reflective and more representative of [the general population], not just a bunch of middle-class white kids sitting around getting drunk and calling that reality television. I saw it as an opportunity, to I guess, culture jam. Hijacking a mainstream medium to deliver my own message. The message was partly about refugee rights…But more broadly speaking it was also about making a statement against reality television, saying this isn’t reality. If you want some reality here’s reality. Just catching people off-guard and making them question a little bit, dig a little deeper._

On one level Luck adopts Ang’s ‘ideology of mass culture’ as a guideline for talking about *Big Brother*. For Ang, the ‘ideology of mass culture’ is an ideology that labels mass culture as bad, with high culture as good. It is much easier, argues Ang, to talk about mass culture in this way, especially when the lines between individual experience and social ideology are blurred, as was obviously the case for Luck. The ‘ideology of mass culture’, Ang argues, ‘makes a search for more detailed and personal explanations superfluous’ providing, ‘a
finished explanatory model that convinces, sounds logical and radiates legitimacy.' (Ang 1985 p. 114) When Luck refers to reality television as ‘being pretty base,’ or when he says his aim was to make audiences ‘dig a little deeper’ he is ultimately talking about a program he has never actually experienced as an audience member, but that he can discuss legitimately by using the ‘ideology of mass culture’ as a tool. But despite his disdain for Big Brother, Luck also recognized its potential as a ‘political platform’ for raising audience awareness of Australian refugee policy.

"It’s an opportunity to voice an opinion. It’s basically like, you think of public space, whether it’s billboards or advertisements in magazines or on TV, it’s public domain. If you go to a urinal in a bar these days they have an advertisement in front of you on the urinal. It’s just stepping back and saying what gives this multinational company a right to this public space? And the answer is clearly money. They buy the right to that public space. So why should money determine who is allowed to deliver their message? To me, that doesn’t make sense. Why should someone be allowed to deliver their message just because they have money? So I chose to deliver my message and unfortunately I couldn’t buy a minute of air time to tell Australia what I think of that issue, so I hijacked a popular Australian television show to do it.

When Fiske wrote that, ‘The people make popular culture at the interface between everyday life and the consumption of the products of the cultural industries’ (Fiske 1989 p. 6) he was writing in the days before MySpace and Facebook, before You Tube and Internet blogging made it possible for individuals who would normally have very little or no involvement with the creation of media products, to be able to cheaply produce written and visual work with an audience potential of millions (or, of course, very few!). Of course Luck could have recorded himself sitting on his couch with tape over his mouth and a sign saying, ‘Free the refugees’, and posted it on YouTube in
the hope that people would see it, but it would have likely been lost amongst the endless footage of drugged out celebrities, or of teenagers dancing in their bedrooms. But to commit an unexpected act during his eviction night that involved covering his mouth with tape and holding a sign that said ‘Free The Refugees’ meant that Luck was able to turn Andrejevic’s top-down model of reality television on its head and subvert it. As all ‘housemates’ have their luggage checked before entering the house, Luck’s act was even more unexpected as he worked hard to hide his sign and tape from producers during his time ‘in the house’. In a program where ‘reality’ is edited and manufactured, the eviction night interview, between Luck and host, Gretel Killeen was awkward and clumsy. Killeen was obviously unsure how to handle such a situation as Luck remained silent and gagged throughout the entire segment. No longer was Luck simply a commodity created by the *Big Brother* franchise, but an ‘ordinary person’-cum-media-producer, controlling a domain that, unlike Internet culture, cannot operate without industry professionals. Luck may not have had the finances to legitimately run his message on prime-time television, but if popular culture is structured within the opposition between the power-bloc and the people, as Hall and Fiske both assert (Fiske 1989), then Luck suddenly found himself with his foot in both camps and he did his utmost to utilize the unique kind of power that potentially results from such a position.

For Luck, the personal was indeed the political. Giddens’ describes emancipatory politics as ‘essentially the politics of others’ (Giddens 1991 p. 211). By this he means that the objective of emancipatory politics is to release underprivileged groups from their unhappy condition, to eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression. But Luck’s ‘culture jam’ was also deeply personal, a part of his own ‘personal journey’ of ‘soul searching’, of, ‘growing as a person, having a better understanding of myself as a person, it’s clear that there is also a part of me that liked the idea of
having stood up for something I believe in on a public stage and having the status that comes with that.’ As Luck points out, his act was not simply about drawing attention to Australian refugee policy. It was about demonstrating that the personal actions of a single individual can, in fact, help influence state and media power.

As he said during my interview with him:

*For a young person to stand up for them in the media in such a rebellious way was a real coup for them and it meant a lot to the kids as well. So I think it was very effective that way and it was also effective in terms of getting school kids, a lot of kids thinking about the issue. I wouldn’t be able to count the number of schools across the country that I did appearances at. Again, it wasn’t so much about making people agree with my point of view, but about engaging young people in things that are deeper than which people hooked up on that TV show or which celebrity has got cellulite, but making them think about the fact that the world is a pretty messed up place. So I think it was effective in that way. And finally, just in drawing media attention to the issue, every little bit helps. I mean, I would never want to take credit for more than I’m due, like I said, lots of people have worked extremely hard, but I feel that I was a unique part of that, in fighting for that change.*

Luck never considered himself to be a ‘typical’ *Big Brother* participant. He grew up on a hippy commune, was proud of his left-wing politics and says that he never would have auditioned for the show had he not been planning to stage his ‘culture jamming’ prank from the outset. But while Luck was no *Big Brother* expert, like any media savvy member of late modernity, he knew his protest would come with a price. As Bauman points out, the society of consumers has the capacity to absorb all and any dissent it inevitably breeds, ‘then to recycle it as a major resource of its own reproduction, reinvigoration and expansion’ (Bauman 2007 pp.
drawing from Thomas Mathisen, Bauman refers to ‘silent silencing’ as a stratagem used by consumerist society to ‘nip in the bud the dissent and protest generated and spread by the system, the attitudes and actions which in origin are transcendent and integrated in the prevailing order in such a way that dominant interests continue to be served. This way, they are made unthreatening to the prevailing order.’ (Bauman 2007) Bauman argues that this dissent is also converted into a major resource in the reinforcement and continuous reproduction of that order.

There is no doubt that the television network attempted to absorb and appropriate Luck’s subversive behaviour to its own advantage. While Luck claims to have had daily political discussions during his six weeks ‘in the house’, not a single one was aired. Unlike Brunero, a year later, who was constructed as a politically active ‘character,’ Luck came across more bohemian ladies man than political activist during the on-air show. So when Luck taped his mouth and held his ‘free the refugee sign’ on the eviction stage, he compromised the entire narrative of the program, presenting a character in stark contrast to the one depicted on the daily show. For audiences, Luck’s protest did not make sense because it was inconsistent with what had been represented as his ‘drag coefficient’. Who knew he even cared about politics? Ultimately, while Luck’s protest may have helped draw mainstream attention to Australia’s refugee policy, particularly amongst younger audiences, his actions did not do Big Brother any harm either. In fact, it is probably no coincidence that in the following year Brunero, another left-wing politically active ‘bohemian’ was cast as a housemate. In creating an opportunity to make an en-masse political statement, Luck had also helped revive the flagging ratings of a program that, after four years, was becoming stale – in fact 1.8 million
people watched Luck’s elimination and his post-elimination interview the following night attracted an additional 150,000 viewers (Braun 2004).

As Luck states:

_For weeks they had several publicists working the media circuit for me. It was a really interesting dynamic because on one hand they were really angry that I’d undermined them, but on the other hand it was getting massive publicity and media attention for the show. The ratings got a massive boost out of it…It was sort of an implicit agreement that they would continue to arrange media for me through their publicist, manage my touring the country on that media circuit, so long as I didn’t say anything explicitly negative about the show._

In spite of his criticisms of reality television as ‘base’ Luck is adamant that his protest was not about _Big Brother_, or even reality television, but about Australian refugee policy. Post-_Big Brother_ he spent nine months using his newfound media profile to help him publicly campaign for refugee rights. Australia was preparing for an election and Luck was passionate about the need for a change from a conservative to a more progressive government. But while Luck received overwhelming support for his actions, his gains were progressive, not radical (Fiske 1989). But although a conservative government still won the election the following series of Big Brother aired three political discussions about the Iraq war, a first political discussions ever shown in Australian _Big Brother_ history. Luck’s culture jam did not change the world. Arguably it did not even have a huge impact on the nature of reality television. But what Luck did demonstrate was the potential for ‘ordinary’ individuals to ‘crawl under the fence’ and make strategic use of dominant cultural forms such as commercial TV to articulate counter messages.
Chris Garling: Subverting the body politic

As questions of self-identity become increasingly important, the body has arguably become more immediately relevant to identity than ever before. As Giddens writes, ‘In conditions of high modernity, the body is actually far less docile than ever before in relation to the self, since the two became intimately coordinated within the reflexive project of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991). From this perspective, it makes sense then that the body has become a potential source of political subversion. From ‘plus-sized’ models on the catwalks, to overweight celebrities such as Gossip singer Beth Ditto wearing revealing lycra bodysuits and posing for men’s magazines, public displays of bodies that do not conform to mainstream conventions of beauty have become a way of subverting powerful constructions of physical attractiveness, status, health and success.

As I argued in Chapter Four, television is central to the role of the ‘lifestyle guru.’ 'In TV shows such as The Biggest Loser,’ writes Tania Lewis, ‘lifestyle media and expertise can be seen to promote self-governance in highly moralised and overt ways through the “scopic regimes” of reality-style fly-on-the-wall formats, through the use of strongly didactic modes of expertise, and through techniques of shaming and humiliation’ (Lewis 2008 p. 14). Issues such as obesity are increasingly privatised and psychologised, but at the same time, personal responsibility and responsible self-government, such programs make clear, affect the well being of us all (Lewis 2008 p. 15). Indeed, while The Biggest Loser gives voice to those normally denied access to the public sphere, it also presents its participants as individuals who need to change their bodily appearance in order to conform to particular standards of health, beauty and ultimately happiness. As Popenoe’s experience of life in a Nigerian village
where obesity is considered beautiful signified in *Chapter Four*, such a construction is difficult not to be influenced by. But, while the *Biggest Loser*’s Chris Garling had no intention of making any kind of political statement when he auditioned for the program, he proved the power and significance of life politics.

Like Luck, Garling was not a fan of the program for which he auditioned, but at 23 years old Garling weighed 149.5kg and genuinely wanted to lose weight. On the face of it, he was a model competitor. Once on the show he watched his food intake and exercised obsessively - up to 10-12 hours per day. Unlike many of his fellow participants, he did not react to stress by lashing out and abusing those around him and he made a conscious effort to avoid the petty politics that tend to consume *Loser* contestants thanks to the physically demanding, isolated, competitive and highly stressful environment the program creates. In this respect Garling unwaveringly conformed to the *Biggest Loser* drag coefficient. He simply did what the show asked him to, at least on the face of it: lose weight. But the problem for *The Biggest Loser* production team was that Garling lost too much, dropping 70.1kgs to reach a BMI of 20.1, with 20 being medically considered underweight, according to Australian Government health guidelines (Channel 2008). From the point of view of the production team, Garling failed to promote the program’s health conscious image because his transformation saw him evolve from fat and unhealthy to thin and seemingly malnourished. Garling admits that, in order to win the competition, he trained so obsessively and ate so little that he even had trouble walking during the season finale. While he may not have set out, as Luck did, to deliberately culture jam *The Biggest Loser*, by taking the program’s logic to the extreme he managed, in the words of Naomi Klein, to ‘hack into a corporation’s own method of
communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended (cited in Wilson 2004 p. 324).’

With the body as the ultimate symbol of a successful self identity, *The Biggest Loser* makes clear that there are strict guidelines outlining what this ‘born again’ body should look like (Bauman 2007 p. 49). The program’s uber-fit and toned personal trainers act not only as health, fitness and ‘well being’ counselors, but as examples (Bauman 2000 pp. 66) of what constitutes a beautiful body. But while Bauman argues that ‘Everything in consumer society is a matter of choice, except the compulsion to choose,’ (Bauman 2000 p. 73) *The Biggest Loser* fundamentally asserts that if one wishes to live a healthy, happy and productive life, then being fat is not a choice. And, as Garling’s dramatic weight loss indicated, being too thin is not one either. ‘Shopping is not just about food, shoes, cars or furniture items,’ writes Bauman. ‘The avid, never-ending search for new and improved examples and recipes for life is also a variety of shopping’ (Bauman 2000 p. 74). In many ways, participating in *The Biggest Loser* is like shopping for a new body, a new and improved version of the old self.

Participants enter *The Biggest Loser* compound, or at least, this is what the program encourages, with the expectation that they are about to embark on the reflexive project of the self with the intention of actively constructing and controlling the body (Giddens 1991 p. 7). By making the lifestyle choice of participating in a weight loss reality show, participants are looking for a life-changing transformation.

For *Loser* to be successful, a certain amount of spectacle is involved. Participants must be willing to parade their bodies in unflattering outfits, be filmed exercising to the point of complete exhaustion and participate in a range of humiliating tasks that emphasize just how
out of shape they really are. In order to make ‘good’ television, *Loser* is reliant on the appeal of the thin aesthetic that dominates late capitalist culture. As Peter Stearns points out, ‘Dieting, weight consciousness and widespread hostility to obesity form one of the fundamental themes in modern life… Fighting fat goes beyond fashion and even health’ (Stearns 1997 p. ix). While *Loser* may advocate the kind of extreme dieting frowned upon by most health professionals, it also reflects, and exploits, the anxieties about weight that many, arguably most, individuals residing in late modernity take for granted as an everyday part of life. Part of the *Loser* spectacle is the transformation from the flabby, unfit body into the slim, fit and toned physique admired in late modernity. The very nature of *Loser* is structured to disadvantage those who do not conform. Set up as a weight loss competition to see who can lose the most weight, participants who look as though they may not be able to comply and achieve this dramatic and transformative weight loss spectacle are likely to be evicted early on.

In this sense *Loser* follows Adorno’s view of television as reliant on clichéd and predictable formulas that work to identify with the status quo rather than challenge it. While *Loser* unarguably gives a mediatised voice to a particular experience of obesity, a rare occurrence in mainstream television programming, the effectiveness of the culture industry, or in this case *Loser*, ‘depends not on its parading an ideology, on disguising the true nature of things, but in removing the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo’ (Adorno and Bernstein 1991 p. 9). For *Loser* to be a successful program, participants and audiences must accept the dominant discourse of fat as problematic and weight loss as an achievement, an example of Giddens reflexive project of the self at work. They must believe that all the humiliation, the physical and emotional pain the program inflicts on its participants, is worth it. By the end of
the series the program must present the previously overweight contestants, made over and glowing, in a better state than they were before. It is clear from the outset that being fat is not an alternative if one wishes to reach the ultimate goal of consumer culture and become a saleable commodity (Bauman 2007).

Despite Bauman’s argument that consumer culture is responsible for the creation of reality television programming, therefore attempting to absorb the dissidence it inevitably breeds (Bauman 2007 p. 48), this does not mean that such attempts are always entirely successful. Garling was selected to participate on Loser as an ‘intruder,’ meaning that he exercised independently with a trainer for the first six weeks of taping, not entering the program until week seven.

*What happened is I got through the first round of interviews but when it came to the second round they said, oh sorry, we’ve got you in a reserve so if someone pulls out because of injuries. …Then they called me and said, you’re in, can you come in as an outsider? Basically they said, you’ll come in, you’ll be in there for probably a week, everyone will hate you and they’ll kick you out after a week first chance they get… I was training as hard as I could 24/7 and they didn’t get a chance to kick me out because I stayed over the line every time. If the line wasn’t there I think it would have been a different issue because I wasn’t really playing the political game in there. I was purely putting the hours in and that was it.*

- Chris Garling

Producers made very clear to Garling what was expected of him. Ironically, it was the very fact that he played the game by the rules, staying above the ‘line’ that indicates whether or not a contestant can potentially be evicted, that made him impossible to ‘absorb’ (Bauman
2007). Which is not to say that the producers did not try. Although Garling continued to lose enough weight to remain in the ‘game’, he was constructed on the program as a character who was obsessed, humourless, overly competitive and unliked by the other participants. For a program that relies on emotionally open individuals whom producers can present as having life-changing experiences as a result of participating on the reality show, Garling’s role in the narrative, according to producers, was to come in, shake things up and then leave. He was not the kind of character who makes a suitable winner. As Garling points out:

"Everyone on the show had a sob story going and I didn’t really buy into it. Like some people you felt generally sorry for, but some people thought that the more sob story they made up, the better chance they had of getting in it. I thought, at the end of the day, you put on weight, you put on weight. That’s pretty much it. The buck stops there. So I pretty much told the producers, I’m not big on sob stories, I don’t have one. I put on the weight because I was eating junk and not training. And that’s pretty much how I took it.

- Chris Garling"

As Garling continued to challenge the direction in which the producers wanted the show to go, it was made clear to him that his dramatic weight loss, his refusal to play the role to which he was assigned, was unacceptable.

"It was almost like, towards the end they were saying, if you go underweight we will kick you off. I said, you can’t kick me off the final three, you’ve got no chance. But they were like, well, we’ll find something. So I made sure I stayed just about that 20 BMI… I made sure I was absolutely focused, I didn’t want to leave
any doubts, the whole of Australia could see on the TV that I definitely looked the skinniest out of anyone else there. That was my rationale for going so hard…

The 1985 documentary, *Pumping Iron 2: The Women* (Butler 1985) follows the journey of power lifter turned body builder, Bev Francis, as she competes in the Los Vegas based body building competition, Miss Olympia. In spite of being the most muscular contestant, Francis only received eighth place. Although logic would suggest that Francis have won on the size of her muscles alone, her hyper-masculine physique caused controversy within the female body building community and raised issues of what constitutes physical femininity. The film depicts much discussion amongst the male judges as they ponder the ramifications of Francis winning the competition – would it set a precedent that women entering body building competitions should look like ‘men’ in order to be successful? In other words, the judges tell us, it is important for judges of such competitions to set boundaries in order to define what is ‘beautiful,’ ‘athletic,’ and of course, ‘feminine,’ and what is merely ‘freakish.’ Interestingly, after receiving such a disappointing result, Francis attempted to alter her appearance to appear more womanly. But after lightening her hair and slimming down with limited success, she eventually returned to her original look and came second in the 1991 Miss Olympia contest, a testament to the constantly changing parameters of what is and isn’t considered beautiful. In a somewhat similar light, Garling’s final weight loss results were skipped over at the *Loser* season finale, a hyped and supposedly ‘inspirational’ event where winners are usually celebrated and portrayed as ‘role models’. According to Garling this was because, he, like Francis, didn’t conform to what the network producers felt was an acceptable image to be celebrating. ‘They didn’t want to show me beating them by that much because it wasn’t what they were after…They didn’t want to go from obese to anorexic. And I was pushing the fine line
pretty closely. But I had the impression that if I didn’t win by a lot, I’m not saying they would, but you never know, it could have been cooked a little bit.’

Of course, it is not surprising the program’s producers were confronted by Garling’s victory. Firstly he had discarded his drag coefficient. And secondly, as he stood on the finale stage, his cheek bones prominent and his arms thin, Garling did not exemplify the picture of good health that *The Biggest Loser*, despite its extreme weight loss techniques, is supposed to represent. Instead, he looked like he had been exposed to something insidious, a self-help mantra that went too far (Salerno 2005). For Garling, he left with $200,000, a new career in the health and fitness industry and, after a few months, he had regained 20kgs. But perhaps most significantly of all, Garling had demonstrated by working hard to subvert his drag coefficient, it was relatively easy for a participant to jeopardise the entire premise of a program like *The Biggest Loser*.

**Conclusion**

Culture jamming, Klein argues, ‘badly rejects the idea that marketing – because it buys its way into our public spaces – must be passively accepted as a one-way information flow (Klein 2000 p. 281).’ While neither Luck nor Garling managed to make much of a dent in the traditional political sphere, like Wilson’s *Big Brother* jammers, they did remind us that within corporate controlled media entities, producers need not have the final say in the outcome of a product. Like Dery, who argues that, ‘the intertwined histories of feminism, the civil rights moment, multiculturalism and gay and transgender activism remind us that hacking the philosophical code that runs the hardware of political and economic power is crucially important (Dery 2008),’ Luck and Garling made clear that the personal can indeed
become the political. By challenging the tightly controlled reality television genre, a place where rules are not made to be broken, Luck and Garling made clear that subversion is not only possible, but also potentially powerful. While Luck’s carefully constructed culture jam drew attention to a political issue that Big Brother producers, we can reasonably assume, would much prefer to sweep under the carpet, Garling’s narrative activism challenged not only the entire philosophy of The Biggest Loser, but also mainstream conventions of health and beauty.

It would be problematic not to acknowledge that Andrejevic’s model of reality television as a financially driven and exploitative medium has at least some truth to it. The fact is, the financial benefit for television networks undoubtedly exceeds any financial rewards a participant can hope to receive. And perhaps individuals in our culture of consumers are, at least in part, driven to audition for reality television programs because of a desire, as Bauman puts it, to ‘lift ‘themselves out of that grey and flat invisibility and insubstantiality, making themselves stand out from the mass of indistinguishable objects…” (Bauman 2007 pp. 11 - 12) But it is also clear that not all, in fact, I would argue most, reality television contestants do not enter into the reality television experience a blank slate unable to comprehend what they are getting themselves into. The experiences of Luck and Garling, in particular, clearly demonstrate that sometimes there is a fine line between exploitation, empowerment and subversion. Somehow, many reality television participants have managed to gain a toehold in all three camps.
Conclusion

I have officially been asked to appear on television twice. The first time was as a guest on the SBS program, *Insight*, to discuss the experiences of young women and feminism. The second time was as a panelist on a barely heard of community television breakfast show. Neither program demanded especially high ratings and my roles were both very small, to say the least. In fact, I didn’t even make it to the *Insight* program because I gave birth to my daughter two days later. And I was obviously no TV natural because I was never asked back for the breakfast show slot. But such facts were almost secondary because, more importantly, I’d been invited to appear in the exclusive world of broadcast television. When I told people about it, they were impressed.

As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, Descartes’ *cogito*, ‘I think therefore I am’, would be more appropriate today if it instead said, ‘I am talked about, therefore I am’ (Bauman 2001 p. 133). Appearing on television, a technology that plays a significant role in most family homes, is certainly a way to become talked about. Since I began researching this thesis in 2006 the Internet has expanded rapidly to the point where anyone with the required knowledge and access to technology can share their views, experiences and their image with a potentially international audience. In other words ‘ordinary’ individuals no longer need to rely on more traditional mediums such as television and the print media in order to feel they have a public voice, to potentially be ‘talked about’ by strangers. But in spite of this growing access to the public sphere, the prestige associated with being selected to appear on a television program, for example, often outweighs the status of even the most successful blog or YouTube video.
While the Internet is considered ‘democratic’ media, television arguably is less so. Of course, the daily news has long been a forum for stories about ‘ordinary’ people and game shows, documentaries and talk shows have provided opportunities for media amateurs to appear on TV. Reality TV, however, has further contributed to the broadening of the public sphere both by giving voice to individuals who usually have little access to the mainstream media and by raising life political issues in an accessible, comparatively in-depth and intimate way. From Merlin Luck who used Big Brother as a platform to protest against Australian refugee policy to Chris Garling who, albeit unwittingly, raised questions of what constitutes an acceptable body shape, reality TV constantly examines the choices and decisions that most late modern individuals make in daily life. Of course, as this thesis has discussed, celebrity is hierarchical and most reality TV participants find themselves near the bottom of the celebrity food chain. Yet, as Biggest Loser’s Alex Tsao pointed out, being on The Biggest Loser none the less allowed him to ‘shine.’

This thesis has made clear that there is no uniform way of describing the reality TV experience. While some participants considered it to be a positively life changing experience, others wished they had never auditioned in the first place. There was, however, a definite tendency for most of the participants I interviewed to view reality television as a kind of lens into the ‘authentic self.’ While I have suggested that the very notion of authenticity is a problematic concept in itself, a successful reality television program must include contestants who at the very least, appear to be ‘authentic’. In other words, in spite of the manipulated and artificial nature of reality TV programming, the dominant discourses surrounding identity and the self that run through such programming parallel the same discourses that dominate theories of the self in everyday popular culture and day to day life. On reality TV we see individuals grappling with tensions that affect
most late modern individuals such as the paradox between the essential ‘core’ self and that of the fluid postmodern being. At the same time, as we watch individuals betray one another, form friendships and voice opinions, audiences may question their own moral and ethical position on issues that range from body image to sexuality to career choices, even conventional politics such as Australia’s refugee policy.

Furthermore, while reality TV represents itself as being about personal success and empowerment through self-governing techniques that place responsibility onto the individual, it is also about connectivity and a sense of community. It provides a public space where an overweight, suburban restaurant owner like Alex Tsao can be given the opportunity to feel important and learn how to live a healthier life, where a left-wing journalist like Big Brother’s Tim Brunero can discuss politics during prime time and where a young, gay man like Shane Janek can dress up in drag and be accepted and even celebrated. This thesis therefore views reality television as a technology that embraces and exposes the conflicting nature of contemporary individualism.

To return to Bauman once again, the only choice individuals residing in late modernity don’t have is the choice not to choose (Bauman 2000 p. 73). In many ways, this thesis is about choice. About the kinds of choices most individuals living within a late modern western capitalist society must make: the choice about what kind of life one wants to live and the kind of person one wants to be. In spite of the varying motivations and outcomes experienced by the reality TV participants I interviewed, all 15 made the choice to participate on their chosen program with the idea that their television experience would, in some way, have a positive impact on their post-reality TV everyday life.
Giddens’ reflexive project of the self, for example, takes place in the context of a somewhat overwhelming array of choices. While commodification provides a standardising influence, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of ‘authorities’ means that lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity. Reflexively organised life-planning, which normally presumes a consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity (Giddens 1991 p. 5).

This view of identity and the self, which Giddens applies to everyday life in late modern times, is of course recognisable to anyone familiar with the reality television programs investigated in this study, a type of television programming that involves participants actively seeking to reconstruct a ‘better’ version of themselves as they undergo various tasks, often under expert guidance. In late modernity, ‘the question ‘How shall I live?’ has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat…as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991 p. 14). In reality television, the question, ‘how can I live to demonstrate the best version of myself?’ becomes the fundamental premise of such programs. These choices concerning late modern identity and subjectivity are magnified and dramatized for the sake of entertaining television.

There’s little doubt that it’s not simply reality television participants who value being listened to, recognised and respected for their achievements and experiences. Beyond the thrill of appearing on TV, reality television participants, despite their differences, have one thing in common: the
desire to make the most of their ‘life journey’ and to live the best life they possibly can. While most of us are never likely to confess our deep, dark secrets on television, reality TV participants publicly embark on their ‘endless project of the self,’ a journey accompanied by both the prestige and stigma associated with appearing on a reality show. Of course, the reality TV environment is one that is highly manipulated and controlled. But at the same time, such exaggerated and artificial circumstances not only highlight the increasingly blurred boundaries between what is and isn’t considered private, but also of the everyday dilemmas of what it means to be human. At the very least, the coveted nature of reality TV participation emphasises the commodification of the individual within capitalist society and the need many of us feel to ‘stand out’ in the crowd in order to be considered successful.

This study has consciously and deliberately relied heavily on the first-person accounts of reality TV participants themselves. As I have shown, this in-depth one-on-one approach to participant interviewing can help broaden reality TV research by moving beyond text and audience analysis, just as scholars such as Grindstaff (Grindstaff 2002) and Priest (Priest 1995) did for research about television talk shows. And as first person media expands, particularly in the form of Internet blogging, applying a philosophy that allows participants to speak for themselves can further enhance our understanding, not only of what motivates individuals to share personal and in-depth information about themselves with strangers worldwide, but also about why this confessional style has come to dominate many facets of contemporary media. By looking at reality TV participation as a lens through which to examine 21st century identity and subjectivity, I have attempted, at least in part, to begin to answer this question.
Shortly before reality TV became the phenomenon it is today, Bauman wrote that ‘Needing to become what one is is the feature of modern living’ (Bauman 2000 p. 34). Such a sentiment rings uncannily true for reality TV participants who attempt to discover and reveal their ‘authentic’ selves in front of a large and judgmental audience, potentially of millions. From *Biggest Loser* participants determined to showcase the ‘real’ (read ‘thin’) versions of themselves on national television to *Idol* contestants on a ‘journey’ to brand themselves as a particular kind of artist/personality, reality TV is about nothing if not the struggle to ‘become what one is,’ at least in part, through the confessional process. As Alex Tsao so aptly puts it, *‘I always knew I liked the spotlight, but I never realized how much courage and strength I [would] gain from putting myself in that position. Rather than back away, I could step into it. [The program] showed me where my weaknesses lie. It showed me where my strengths lie. Everything was very intensified and magnified.’* 

Reality TV is not real life. And it would be unrealistic to expect the fifteen participants I interviewed to speak for an entire population. But, as Tsao says, what my interview transcripts can provide is an intensified version of the everyday self – a self that is conflicted, yet wants to improve. A self intent on living the best life possible. A reality TV self that is both postmodern and Cartesian. In other words, a self that in some way resonates with most, if not all, of us.
Appendix 1

The interviewees

**Big Brother**

*Tim Brunero*: was the runner-up in *Big Brother* season 5 (2005). The politically vocal union journalist was the first participant to be aired openly discussing politics in the *Big Brother* house. He is now said to be writing a book on his *Big Brother* experience and he also offers a reality TV ‘coaching service.’

*Irena Bukhshtaber*: was 29 when she appeared in the third season of *Big Brother* in 2003. She was the first participant evicted from the show. Following her stint on the show she published an article in *The Age* in 2006. The article talked about her portrayal as an ‘opinionated bitch’ and the downside to life after reality television including, the ‘tales of depression, addictions, breakdowns, break-ups, backlash and trying to find meaningful work when a prospective employer calls you in to meet you, not hire you.’

*Krystal Ince*: a former stripper, 19 year old Krystal was portrayed as busty, blonde and flirtatious when she entered the *Big Brother* house in 2004 (season 4). She was the fourth participant to be evicted from the house and became a covergirl for men’s magazine, *Ralph*, soon after leaving the house.

*Merlin Luck*: Merlin’s eviction night protest against Australian refugee policy is arguably *Big Brother* Australia’s most memorable moment. The sixth participant to be evicted from *Big
Brother season 4 (2004), Luck was portrayed as a sensitive, artistic ladies man. Interestingly, he was never aired discussing his political views during his time in the house.

Jamie McDonald: typecast as Big Brother's resident ‘nerd,’ Ballarat resident Jamie was evicted from the Big Brother season 7 (2007) house in week 11. Jamie was positioned as an ‘outsider’ who ‘flew under the radar’ for much of his time in the house. A karaoke DJ, sometimes actor and co-host of a community television computer game show Level 3, Jamie continues his work on the periphery of the entertainment business.

Australian Idol

Chanel Cole: added an ‘alternative’ flavour to Australian Idol by wearing vintage inspired dresses and ‘eccentric’ hair accessories while singing a cover of Portishead’s ‘Glory Box’. She finished in the top 5 in the second season of Idol (2004) and went on to join trip-hop group Spook.

Casey Donovan: at only 16, Casey won Australian Idol, season 2 (2004). Overweight and dreadlocked, Donovan was not the typical ‘cookie cutter’ pop star, but her emotional performances helped her beat runner up and entertainment veteran Anthony Callea. Sadly, post-Idol Donovan became a kind of pin up girl for reality television failure and several cruel articles about her weight appeared in the weekly tabloids.

Shane Jenek: openly gay Jenek always performed as drag character Courtney Act. While Jenek didn’t make it past the semi-finals to the 2003 Idol top ten, his stand-out performance of
ACDC's *You Shook Me All Night Long* landed him a recording contract with Sony BMG after his eviction.

*Anthony Sumbati:* was evicted from the semi-finals of first season of *Idol* for giving publicity interviews that went against the rules of his contract. Sumbati presented himself as a 'larger than life' character who gave up his high-paying job in finance to audition for *Idol* while longing for the approval of his father. He has since appeared on several reality television shows including *Celebrity Overhaul* and *Celebrity Superpowers*.

**The Biggest Loser**

*Alex Tsao:* in spite of losing around 11kgs in the first week, separated father of 2, Tsao was the first participant eliminated from *Loser*, season 2 (2007). His eviction was presented as sad and unfair, but Tsao’s severe lack of fitness meant that he needed oxygen during a task. His team mates therefore saw him as the ‘weak link.’

*Greg Koutsovidis:* the ‘Greek Adonis,’ Koutsovidis was a former ‘fit and good looking’ Grid Iron player who had two children and began overeating his way to obesity. While Koutsovidis was eliminated in Week 7, season 2 (2007) he was seen to be a fit and strong player who performed well in the ‘challenges’. By the finale he had lost a total of 48.9kgs.

*Tracy Moores:* 40-something plus-sized model and mother of 3, Tracy Moores was the eliminated from *The Biggest Loser*, season 1 (2006). She was eliminated in week 5 and says that she was presented as a ‘bitchy Alpha female.’ By the finale she had lost 23.8kgs.
Jo Cowling: at 108kgs, real-estate agent, Jo Cowling entered The Biggest Loser season 1 (2006) as one of the lighter participants. She was eliminated in the second week, but still managed to lose 31.3kgs by the season finale.

Chris Garling: the controversial winner of The Biggest Loser season 2 (2007). Garling lost 70.1kgs, or 49% of his body weight and was considered to be ‘too thin’ by many when he appeared at the finale with a BMI of 20.3. He entered the house in week 7 as an ‘outsider’ and was presented as being resented by his fellow contestants.

Courtney Jackson: openly gay Courtney Jackson came third in The Biggest Loser season 2 (2007). Courtney was presented as an unhappy, bitchy young man with low-self esteem to gained confidence, health and fitness as the series progressed. He is now working as a personal trainer and appears to be one of the few participants who has managed to maintain his weight loss of 40.9kgs.
Appendix 2

Interview questions

The decision

Why did you apply to participate in a reality show?

Have you previously applied for any other shows (including the show on which you participated)?

Have you appeared on any other shows?

What did you consider to be the pros and cons of appearing on the show?

Was it a difficult decision to decide whether or not to participate?

Did you have any particular concerns about appearing on the show?

Did you tell friends and family about your decision to apply to be on the show - Why? Why not?

Did people encourage you to appear on the show? Who were they? Why do you think they were encouraging?

Did anyone try and discourage you from appearing on the show? Who were they? Why do you think they didn’t want you to appear on the show?

Overall, what did you initially expect from the experience?

Did you think about how you would be perceived by the audience? How did you think they would see you? Did you have any concerns?

Did you think about how you would be perceived by the media? How did you think they would see you? Did you have any concerns?

Did you picture who would be watching? What kind of audience did you anticipate?
Were there certain people who you felt uneasy about seeing you on television? Who were they? Why did you have concerns about them watching you?

Were there certain people who you wanted to see you on television? Why did you want them to see you?

Did your decision to participate impact your personal relationships in any way?

How was your life going when you decided to apply to be on the show? Were you hoping/expecting the show to change/improve your life in some way?

**Reality television viewing**

How much television do you watch, approximately, each week?

What kind of shows do you enjoy?

Were you a regular viewer of the show in which you participated before applying?

Would you be interested in appearing on other reality shows?

How would you describe your relationship with television growing up? E.g. Would you say you watched often, less often? Did you ever fantasise about being on television as a child?

What do you think about people who reveal personal information on reality television shows?

**Prior opinion of the show on which you appeared**

Would you describe yourself as a fan of the show?

What positive things would you say about the show?

What criticisms would you make?

What did you think of the shows host?
What did you think about other people who have appeared on the show? E.g. Were they the kind of people you would like to be friends with? Why? Why not?

Was there any one in particular you hoped to meet through the show – past contestant, host? Why?

Was there anyone who would have hoped to avoid? Why?

The experience

Overall, what did you expect from your experience? Did participating in the show live up to those expectations?

Did you achieve what you’d hoped to achieve?

Did you watch the show when it aired or after you left the show?

Who was with you when you watched it?

Was it difficult to continue watching the show when you weren’t a part of it any more?

Did you let many people know you were going to be on the show so they could watch you?

Do you still have taped copies of the show? Would you show them to people in the future?

To whom?

What was it like to see yourself on the show?

Do you feel that you were presented fairly and accurately by producers? Why? Why not?

Do you feel that you were presented fairly and accurately by the host/judges?

Do you feel that you were presented fairly and accurately by the media?

Is there anything you would have liked to have changed about the way you were presented?

Is there anything you regret doing or saying while on the show? Why?

How has your life changed since you appeared on the reality show?

Would you say that you have changed as a person since participating in the show?
Have you been treated differently by people after appearing on the show? If so, by whom?
What changes have you noticed? Were you surprised or disappointed by these changes?
Do you get recognized in public? How do you feel about this?
Do you feel pressure to live up to certain expectations since leaving the show? How has this impacted you?
How did you cope when the show ended and the media attention waned?
How do you feel when you watch current seasons of the show after having been on it?
Has your professional life changed since appearing on the show? How do you feel about this?
Did you expect the show to have more/less impact on your career? Personal life?
Do you feel that by appearing on a reality show has presented you with more opportunities than you would have had otherwise?
Have you continued to watch later series of the show? Do you feel differently about the show after having been on it?
Overall, would you consider your reality TV experience to be positive or negative?
Would you recommend the experience to others? Why? Why not?
Is there anything you would do differently if you had the chance?
If the opportunity arose, would you consider being on another reality show?
Appendix 3

Establishing coding categories

While there are numerous books outlining the coding process, I felt it would be useful to provide a somewhat brief personal account of my practical experiences of coding a large amount of data that was often contradictory and complex.

Ultimately, coding is one way to make material more manageable and it is a process that begins at the beginning of data collection – I was coding, at least in my mind, throughout the laborious task of transcribing data for example – and continues to some degree, right through to the final product. For example, I read and reread my interview transcripts from my first to final draft and was always looking for ways to expand upon and enrich the way in which I used my data. The process of coding began, in a more concrete way, however, after I had finished transcribing the 15 interviews that comprised the primary data of this project. Using Nvivo, I went through each transcript individually and highlighted comments that seemed interesting and relevant to my overriding theme of identity. At the same time, I created one or more broad categories in which to place each quote. For example when Idol’s Casey Donovan said:

*I coped with [media scrutiny post Idol] it as best as I could have. I mean I’ve had it since I was 8, being called fat and what have you. But I mean, it’s not like I don’t know, it’s not like I don’t have a mirror in my house. It bothered me, but it didn’t bother me a lot. I think it bothered my family more than it bothered me. That’s one thing that I didn’t like about it. My mum always took it the worst way.*
I coded this quote into several categories including ‘post show depression,’ ‘body image’ and ‘stigmatised identity.’ In the end, I used part of this quote in Chapter 6, a section which explores how participants expectations are not always met when they embark on the reality TV journey. This chapter also incorporated themes such as body image and coping with the instant, sometimes stigmatised fame that reality TV often brings. Hence, this quote, at least to some degree, embodies several of the themes examined in Chapter 6.

Of course, I ended up with many more Nvivo categories than were actually used in this thesis. However, all 21 categories were somehow linked to my overriding theme of the reality TV experience and identity. These categories were included:

- Celebrity
- Experience with the media
- Honesty and integrity
- Impact on show on life after...
- Interviewing process
- Manipulation by participants
- Manipulation by producers, networks
- Motivations
- Never watched
- Playing a role
- Portrayal
- Post-show depression
Reality television
Self-branding
Stigma
Stigmatised identity
Subversion
The journey
The mask
Transformation
Body image

Some of these categories became huge – ‘the mask’ comprised of 473 quotes from all 15 interviewees, whereas a category entitled ‘experience with the media’ included only eight quotes. The larger categories which included ‘the mask,’ ‘transformation’, ‘self branding’ and ‘celebrity’ helped me pinpoint the themes that were important to the participants I interviewed and, along with the theoretical reading I was doing in conjunction, helped me put together a series of potential chapter outlines. In other words, I tried to use the words of my interviewees to help construct themes that were relevant not only to issues surrounding identity and subjectivity from an academic perspective, but that were also deemed important by the participants themselves.

It must be said that in the beginning, the coding process produces categories that are broad and not particularly refined. While I knew I wanted to use reality television participation to further explore the theme of ‘identity’ I was overwhelmed by the hundreds of pages of interview data that had taken me three months to transcribe. However, the more I read
through the transcripts, the more patterns began to emerge and while these patterns never became neat or clear-cut, I was able to notice the kinds of issues that were important to the participants I interviewed. For example, several participants used the quote ‘there’s no reality in reality TV’ to describe the contrast between the actual experience of being on a reality show as compared to the final product viewed by audiences. This became the overriding theme of Chapter 3 and enabled me to further explore broader issues such as the role of authenticity as a currency of the self.
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