“This is it. This should be enough”: negotiations of Neoliberal Performative Empowerment in selected contemporary women-centric television series.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores gendered performative empowerment through the main women protagonists in three women-centric American comedy series: *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015); *Kevin can F*ck Himself* (Armstrong 2021) and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017). Gendered performative empowerment is analysed through the dominant intersecting themes of labour, class and gender, all of which emerge from the three selected series. The study also specifically engages with women protagonists in comedy therefore it offers insight into the development of women protagonist characters in comedy television series.

The written argument of the study conceptualises, and frames gendered performative empowerment within neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism. In addition to this conceptualisation, the study draws on scholarship surrounding fourth-wave feminism to assist in framing the problematic ideology surrounding gendered performative empowerment.

The analysis of each series comprises of how gendered performative empowerment is embraced and subverted by each main woman protagonist through labour, class and gender. This analysis is a combination of a thematic and textual analysis. To assist in the understanding of gendered performative empowerment, I use two broad themes: the individual versus neoliberal society and the neoliberal individual versus themselves. These broad themes use labour, class and gender to strengthen their argument as well as problematize gendered performative empowerment. Each series places a different amount of emphasis on each theme therefore certain themes are more prevalent and engaged with more heavily than others. *SuperStore* (Spitzer 2015) showed the gradual shift in Amy from embracing performative empowerment to actively resisting it. In *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) Allison shifts from murdering her husband, Kevin, to 'murdering' her former neoliberal self. Midge, in *The Marvellous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017), comes to terms with the façade created by the American Dream and abandons her pursuit of it for her own dream, stand-up comedy.

The written aspect of the study is complemented by three audio-visual essays that highlight a particular aspect or focal point of the problematized idea of gendered performative empowerment in each show. The audio-visual essays also demonstrate

how each woman protagonist is able to find empowerment within the ruling ideology of neoliberalism that is not gender performative. This study therefore demonstrates through its written argument and audio-visual component that a non-gendered performative empowerment is possible within a neoliberal society.

Key words: Gendered performative empowerment; comedy; neoliberalism; neoliberal feminism; fourth-wave feminism; women-centric series.

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"It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow, we're always doing it wrong.

You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas.

You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men's bad behaviour, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood.

But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So, find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful. You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line.

It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault. I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know."

- Gloria (America Ferrera) in *Barbie* (Gerwig 2023)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Introduction

In the season one finale of the television series *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), the main character Allison McRoberts is told by her friend Sam Park that she could "be more". Allison responds, "That's not a compliment. God, I used to think it was, but I am so done with trying to be more. This is it. This should be enough" (Armstrong 2021). As a young, emerging female scholar coming to terms with televisual representations of other young women making their way through life and its challenges, Allison's response to Sam made me question what 'being enough' actually means for each woman protagonist in the selected women-centric comedy television series.

Following *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) I then watched the first seasons of *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017), which both once again foregrounded the contentiousness of 'being enough'. Amy, Allison and Midge, the women protagonists in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015)*, Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021)*,* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) grapple with this idea of 'being enough' in different areas of their lives. Upon further examination, 'being enough' can be interrogated in opposition to the socio-economic lens of performative empowerment which appears in neoliberal feminism.

This study aims to critically discuss the notion of neoliberal performative empowerment in the selected women-centric series, *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015)*, Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021)*,* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). In each of these series, the idea of 'being enough' (primarily in a fiscal or labour capacity) is foregrounded. 'Being enough' can appear as a form of empowerment in the different spheres of one's life; for this study, the focus is specifically on the complementary and intersecting dimensions of labour, class, and gender.

Superstore (Spitzer 2015) is a comedy series available on the streaming platform Amazon Prime Video. The show's premise focuses on the employees of Cloud 9, a big retail store in St Louis, Missouri (Spitzer 2015). Season one follows the new employee Jonah (Ben Feldman), who is a young good-looking, well-educated man who decides to work at Cloud 9. Jonah and the floor supervisor Amy (America Ferrera) attempt to navigate their personal and work lives while attending to customers and corporate

managers throughout the season. Another employee at the store, Cheyenne (Nichole Sakura), is a pregnant teenager whom Amy befriends. When it is brought to the attention of the employees that Cloud 9 does not offer its store staff maternity leave, Amy, Jonah, and the other employees, discuss forming a union in order to get Cheyenne maternity leave (Spitzer 2015).

Amazon Prime's original comedy-drama *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) is about Allison McRoberts (Annie Murphy), a literal 'sitcom wife' who has married the stereotypical 'sitcom husband' Kevin (Eric Peterson). Allison's aspiration is for her and Kevin to eventually leave their small town and start their lives anew. The couple created a weekly savings account to ensure that they achieve this aspiration. Allison is informed by her neighbour, Patti O'Connor, that the weekly savings account Allison and Kevin set up is empty. This destroys Allison's dreams for their future, and she decides it is time to regain control over her life. The easiest way to accomplish this, Allison believes, is by killing her husband, Kevin (Armstrong 2021).

The third comedy series that I analyse in this study is *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). This show is set in the 1950s, unlike *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) and *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), which are set in the twenty-first century. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) follows the life of a Jewish housewife, Miriam Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan), also known as Midge. She lives the 'perfect' life with her husband, Joel Maisel (Michael Zegen), and their two children. They live in a luxurious apartment in the Upper West Side of New York. Her husband has a well-paying job, and, in the evenings, he performs a stand-up comedy sketch. This 'perfect' life that Midge has is shattered when her husband tells her he is having an affair with his secretary, for whom he leaves Midge (Sherman-Palladino 2017). In response to this information, a drunken Midge performs at her husband's stand-up comedy club. Her performance is well received, much more so than that of her husband's. She is then arrested for indecent exposure (showing the crowd her breasts) and using crude language. The manager of the club, Susie Myerson (Alex Borstein), posts Midge's bail at the jailhouse and becomes her manager. The rest of season one follows Midge as she navigates her new imperfect life as a single mother, while working at a retail store and performing stand-up comedy shows at night (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

Performative empowerment arises from a notion of feminist identity, in which women achieve independence and success through having a job. Their jobs allow the women to have an excess of wealth that is theirs and theirs alone; therefore, they have not relied on a man to provide such resources for them (Morris & Korobov 2020:1). However, their proclaimed financial 'independence' and supposed empowerment are deeply rooted in a neoliberal capitalist idea where women are merely subjects that work to produce capital (Rottenberg 2018:3). The false empowerment of women occurs through both their social and economic achievements by attaching their value to their accomplishments (Morris & Korobov 2020:1). In this limited view, a woman is therefore only empowered if she is achieving her social and economic goals.

1.2 Problem Statement

At the time of researching neoliberal feminism and performative empowerment, there were only women-centric comedy television series with women protagonists that were continuously cited in literature: *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) and *Girls* (Dunham 2012). Scholarship on the television series *Girls* (Dunham 2012) discusses how the series conforms to neoliberalism and does not offer ways in which the characters could potentially subvert the ideology (Genz 2017:17-30). The scholarship on *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) offers insights into how 'Fleabag', the main woman protagonist, subverts neoliberal feminism while her sister Claire, the second woman protagonist, is the ideal neoliberal feminist (Darling 2022:132-147).

Darling's article (2022:132-147) on *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) offers ways in which neoliberalism can be subverted, whereas Genz's article (2017:17-30) on *Girls* (Dunham 2012) focuses on how the characters conform to neoliberal ideology. This opens up an area of inquiry: how do current American comedy television series undermine and embrace neoliberal performative empowerment. Therefore, there is a gap in scholarship on the subversion of neoliberal ideology, specifically performative empowerment.

All three selected comedy series, *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) explore the idea of female empowerment. Whether it is in terms of bettering their careers, which moves them into a different social class, or finding independence without the need for a husband, all three female protagonists voice their desire to 'be enough' without having to become more successful in society-sanctioned ways. However, they appear to be in

conflict with barriers regarding class status, labour, and gender roles, which, once again, leaves them questioning their worth.

Performative empowerment creates the illusion of female success while ensuring women's incorporation into neoliberalism. For this reason, the women protagonists in each series will never feel or be 'enough' while they either accidentally or deliberately continue to engage in performative empowerment. Therefore, this study aims to critically discuss the notion of performative empowerment and how it is alternately embraced and undermined in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

As clarified above, *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are women-centric comedy television series available on the same streaming platform, Amazon Prime Video. Each series features a lead woman protagonist. Although this "visibility" (Banet-Weiser & Rottenberg 2020:9) of female lead characters is something previous feminist movements fought for,[1] visibility cannot be where the representation of women on television ends. As this study argues, each of the selected women-centric comedy television series has a woman protagonist who simultaneously embraces and subverts performative empowerment.

This research study therefore aims to interrogate the ways in which the main women protagonists in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) simultaneously embrace and undermine performative empowerment through their gender, class, and labour. In addition, this study aims to establish to what end each of these characters, respectively, negotiate performative empowerment.

[1] Griselda Pollock (2010:96) discusses how the representation of women on screen first emerged through documentary films and photography for a previously "alienated women spectator". One of these documentary films is *The Nightcleaners* directed by Mary Kelly in 1975. The documentary focuses on women who are low-income earning office cleaners. In the 1960s and 1970s a different type of "empowered" (Waters 2011:11) woman appeared in the Bond film franchise, "the bad women". These "bad women" (Waters 2011:11) were represented as "powerful" and "sexually liberated" women who were punished for being bad. These "bad women" (Waters 2011:11) then became villains in the later Bond films of the 1990s and 2000s. The progression of women protagonists in comedy is discussed later in section 3.2.3, Women in American Comedy Television.

1.3 Introduction to Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study requires an understanding of two subsections of the main theoretical framework of neoliberalism: neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal feminism. As I will contextualise neoliberal feminism in the current wave of feminism, I have also included fourth wave feminism as an additional subsection.

1.3.1 Key Concepts

Before the study can continue, it is vital to define important key concepts that are referred to heavily throughout the study. The following six key concepts and the study are interconnected. Without one, the other cannot come to fruition. The first two concepts, i-ii, are the main umbrella concepts that the remaining concepts, iii-vi, appear within. These six concepts are defined as follows:

i. **Neoliberalism**: Neoliberalism is an ideology that originally focused on the political economy. However, it has also seeped into the socio-cultural sphere (McGuigan 2014:224). As such, neoliberalism is a mode of governance that is not restricted to the economic sphere, but one that infiltrates socialisation (Rottenberg 2014:420). David Graeber (2018:xiii) describes neoliberalism as an ideology that is actually a political ideal disguised as an economic one, as it concerns itself with a more political agenda than an economic one. Neoliberalism promotes entrepreneurship and the free individual with little government intervention; however, this freedom can only be sustained by authoritarianism (Harvey 2007:70). This 'freedom' that neoliberalism promotes is only available to certain upper-class individuals while 'freedom' for the lower classes is restricted. Individuals under neoliberal rule are dissuaded from joining trade unions (Harvey 2007:70) and other organizations that could become associated with political ideologies that threaten neoliberalism.

ii. **Neoliberal Feminism**: Neoliberal feminism is, amongst other things, the striving for a 'work-life balance' among working middle-class women (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 2020:8). This 'work-life balance' creates an ideal in which women equate their value with their socio-economic roles, which turns them into human capital (Rottenberg 2018:2-3). These understandings provided by Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020:8) and earlier by Rottenberg (2018:2-3), create the misconception a woman can achieve value if she works harder. According to Banet-Weiser, Gill,

and Rottenberg (2020:8), 'work-life balance' is non-existent, because even if a woman believes she has achieved success, neoliberal feminism will still argue that she should aspire to do more, to become even more successful.

iii. **Performative Empowerment**: Empowerment is an important aspect of neoliberalism as it allows members of society to believe that they are in control of their circumstances and can, therefore, change them with hard work and determination (Rutherford 2018:623). The performative aspect of performative empowerment is a conscious and strategic adaptation to empowerment. It is deliberately intertwined with neoliberal feminism, which continues to reinforce capitalist gender roles while appearing to subvert them (Byatt 2018:404). Performative empowerment is therefore the feeling of empowerment that neoliberalism presents to women, rather than the actual, tangible (often material) empowerment of women.

iv. **Gender**: Sex refers to biological anatomical differences between men and women (Pryzgoda & Chrisler 2000:553-554). These differences cannot be used to designate women the 'inferior' sex as both sexes anatomical differences play an important role in reproduction (De Beauvoir 2011:28-29) and cannot procreate without the other. Gender is where this notion of women being the 'inferior' sex arises as it stems from male "biological privilege" (De Beauvoir 2011:85-86) awarded by patriarchal rule.Gender notes how the categories of "men" and "women" depend on social factors such as an individual's social role, position, behaviour, or identity (Mikkola 2022; Pryzgoda & Chrisler 2000:554; Corredor 2019:616) The identification of gender as a separate concept from sex stemmed from feminist and LGBTQIA+ advocates who fought for gender and sexual equality (Corredor 2019:616).

v. **Female Labour**: Female labour is when all social and economic "activities and practices" become human capital (Rottenberg 2018:2-3). Women subsequently equate their value to these affective and physical forms of labour.

vi. **Class**: Neilson (2015:187) defines class as "a group of people who have a shared set of everyday material and social circumstances, as well as a shared subjectivity including habitus, solidarity and consciousness". Following Neilson, class is a

structure in which individuals have similar socio-economic circumstances. With its drive towards privatisation, neoliberalism accelerates class inequality by causing long term socio-economic damage to the lower classes by situating them in predicaments where they cannot change their class status (Harvey 2007:164).

1.3.2 Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Capitalism

In its present dominant form, neoliberalism is an ideology rooted within the Republican right wing of American politics, which reforms the socio-economic spheres of American society by "labour-market deregulation, tax-cutting, privatisation and union repression" (Gilbert 2013:7-11). While this description may seem economic specific, it seeps into the social sphere by promoting an idea of the individual self. The individual self is created through a free market that ebbs and flows between "deliberate government intervention" and the "inner-workings" of individuals, which creates an entrepreneurial identity within society (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9). Rottenberg (2014:421) emphasises that this ebb and flow creates an entrepreneurial identity that is not only economic specific, but also creates an identity where every individual endeavour becomes a form of entrepreneurship. This entrepreneurial identity also has a central goal, which is to ensure that individuals are empowered and have complete control over the outcomes of their lives. This creates the belief that people are capable of changing their circumstances through hard work (Rutherford 2018:623). This belief assists the entrepreneurial identity by appearing through this desire for individualism, which is presented as completely natural, as if it is not strategically implemented through government reinforcement (Gilbert 2013:9).

Class Structure

Neoliberalism strengthens its ideology through the idea of empowerment by using the notion that class is a "temporary social category" that can be changed through hard work (Jon 2020:162). It moves away from an essentialist idea of class, where similar identities are grouped and then assigned a permanent label. Subscribing to the idea of class as a temporary category allows for class divisions to be categorised by the different types of employees and the different challenges that they face (Jon 2020:164). All individuals who choose to work, regardless of their social class, become forms of human capital.

Human Capital

Neoliberalism allows individuals to (willingly) become human capital. It requires reproduction and care work in order to "reproduce and maintain this human capital" (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020:8). The ability to reproduce human capital then falls onto women, which maintains the attachment of their value to their childbearing capacity (Rottenberg 2017:340). While neoliberalism targets and 'empowers' middle-class women to achieve work-life balance, reproduction must remain a priority, whereas middle-class men must focus on their "professional advancement" (Rottenberg 2017:339). It is this understanding of work-life balance and reproductive and care work that constitutes neoliberal feminism.

1.3.3 Neoliberal Feminism

Neoliberal feminism creates a labour-centred ideal for middle-class women to work hard and earn a living. However, these workers remain a form of human capital that must take part in the reproduction of human capital and care work (Banet-Weiser *et al* 2020:8). This ideal is a responsibility that they must bear alone. On top of creating human capital, women must also conform to the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity in order to become empowered members of society (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9). Neoliberal identity dictates that for women to become empowered, they have to continuously be ambitious both within the workforce and within their home lives. Female labour is more layered and dynamic than 'workforce labour' suggested.

Female Labour

The focus of female labour is on "professional advancement" (Rottenberg 2017:339) as well as achieving a work-life balance, because creating a family is also crucial. The responsibility of reproduction and care work is directed to women because they are still seen as the pillars of familial life. Neoliberalism proposes and alternative, or a cynical 'solution', work-life balance: women can achieve this balance by freezing their eggs and delaying motherhood (Rottenberg 2017:341). This 'empowerment' of working women is "non-threatening to the status quo", as it allows women to *feel* empowered instead of truly being empowered (Rutherford 2018:624).

Performative Empowerment

As already mentioned in this section, empowerment is an important aspect of neoliberalism, as it allows individuals to feel as though they are in control of their own lives socially and economically (Rutherford 2018:623). This 'empowerment' allows

women, specifically, to achieve their professional goals by maintaining their work-life balance. This notion of empowerment simply ends at the feeling of empowerment, because women become vessels for profit and capital gain (Rutherford 2018:622). This ideal of empowerment is known in neoliberal feminist scholarship as performative empowerment, because women hold no actual power; they are only made to feel as though they do through certain neoliberal ideals.

As this study concerns itself with a critical discussion of performative empowerment for women protagonists in selected women-centric series, it is important to situate the discussion in both fourth wave feminism and neoliberal feminism. Fourth wave feminism is complemented by neoliberal feminism.

1.3.4 Fourth Wave Feminism

Fourth wave feminism is a wave of feminism that has emerged within academic discourse that emerged in the 2010s that I will be using to understand the contemporary representations of women in television. In fourth wave feminism scholarship it also appears alongside neoliberalism as a critique of the continued patriarchal[2] state control (Olufemi 2020:13). Fourth wave feminism comprises "consciousness-raising groups" (Blevins 2018:101) that engage in digital feminist activism. One of fourth wave feminism's core focuses is authentic empowerment (Cabrera, Belloso and Prieto 2021:417-420). It therefore critiques the pretences of neoliberal performative empowerment and aims to denounce the ideals upheld by the neoliberal state.

Understanding these two complementary theoretical frameworks and their subsections will allow for an in-depth exploration of how selected characters embrace and undermine performative empowerment in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

1.4 Research Question

In light of the above, the following research question to be posed:

[2] Patriarchy is defined by Ortner (2022: 308) as "social formation of male-gendered power with a particular structure" that attaches itself to other forms of power such as neoliberalism, "white supremacy, normative heterosexuality and normative able-bodiedness". It is much more complex form of male power as its ideologies align with "mass political control and domination".

How do the main women protagonists in the American women-centric comedy television series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) negotiate neoliberal performative empowerment?

In the research question above, I used the word 'negotiate'. Negotiate is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster 2023) as "to confer with another so as to arrive at the settlement of some matter". In this study, I aim to demonstrate how the women protagonists in the selected three series arrive at a particular socio-economic and personal status through simultaneously embracing and undermining neoliberal performative empowerment throughout each series. The following sub-questions will aid in answering the main research question:

1. What is neoliberal performative empowerment?
    a. What is neoliberalism?
    b. Where does performative empowerment emerge in neoliberalism?
2. What is performative empowerment in American comedy television?
    a. What is feminist American comedy television?
    b. What does performative empowerment look like in feminist American comedy television?
3. How is neoliberal capitalism configured in American comedy television?
    a. What is neoliberal capitalism?
    b. How does performative empowerment appear in neoliberal capitalist narratives of American comedy television?
4. How is performative empowerment represented in *SuperStore*?
    a. How does performative empowerment appear through labour in *SuperStore*?
5. Where is performative empowerment represented in *Kevin can F**k Himself*?
    a. How does performative empowerment appear through gender in *Kevin can F**k Himself*?
6. How is performative empowerment represented in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*?
    a. How does performative empowerment link to class in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*?

1.5 Research Approach

This research is broadly located in qualitative research and television studies. Qualitative research and televisual studies both incorporate research into visual texts (Aspers &

Corte 2019:142; Casey, Casey, Calvert, French & Lewis 2008: viii). Television studies does not focus on the quality of television but rather the elements of popular culture it may embrace or resist (Casey *et al* 2008: ix). These are the broad research contexts in which I perform my thematic analysis and textual analysis, accompanied by an audio-visual component. This study draws on an extensive and comprehensive review of scholarship, which enables me to create an appropriate theoretical conceptual framework through which I conduct my textual and thematic analyses. The audio-visual component comprises three distinct audio-visual essays (discussed in more detail, below) that accompany the textual analyses on each of the selected series, *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

Thematic Analysis

My critical engagement with the visual texts for this study is located in qualitative research. Qualitative research is a form of interpretive research that requires the use of empirical sources (Aspers & Corte 2019:142). Empirical sources are sources such as "case stud[ies], personal experience[s] … interview[s] … and visual texts" (Aspers & Corte 2019:142). For this specific research study, the visual texts are the three women-centric comedy television series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative research methodology. Lawless and Chen (2019:93) describe thematic analysis as qualitative research that is "thematically driven", that is, the identification of specific themes in a specific context, which are analysed within the specific context (Joffe & Yardley 2004:57). A theme is understood by Braun and Clark (2021:229) as a recurring pattern of meaning. This pattern of meaning is determined by a "central idea" (Braun & Clark 2021:229) that can be expressed explicitly or implicitly. The patterns identified in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are of performative empowerment through gender, labour, and class. These patterns are the focus of the textual analyses.

Textual Analysis

The textual analysis aspect of study will consider how performative empowerment is embraced or undermined in each series by its main woman protagonist and second

woman protagonist. Each series also has its own specific lens through which performative empowerment is analysed. Performative empowerment in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) is analysed through *labour* under the neoliberal capitalist framework. Gender under the neoliberal capitalist framework is the focus of analysis in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021). Performative empowerment in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) is analysed with a focus on class in the neoliberal capitalist framework. In order to show the various ways in which performative empowerment can be undermined or embraced, multiple episodes in the first season of each series are analysed.

The Audio-Visual Essay

Türkgeldi (2021:814) states that there is a gap between what people know and how they express it linguistically. Words can contribute greatly to expression, however, they are limited in expressing the artistic experience of the individual (Türkgeldi 2021:814). In order to overcome the language limitations of an academic register, an audio-visual essay can bring new and engaging information to research (McWhirter 2015:370). Audio-visual essays have commonly been used to enhance information about films, yet, there is a lack of audio-visual essays that discuss women-centric comedy television series (Grant & Kooijman 2019:293). This scarcity of audio-visual essays on television series also comes as a surprise to scholars such as Mittell (2015:1) and Grant (2014:49), as television is frequently described as more “culturally important” than cinema. The audio-visual essay is an academically informed creative interrogation in visual and aural format (Grant 2014:49**;** Grant 2016:255) that can be classed as a performative approach to film and television scholarship. The audio-visual essay serves as an audio-visual crystallisation of a research problem or statement. The audio-visual essay is a medium that bridges the personal experience and understanding of audio-visual texts with research scholarship (Suher 2024:2).

An audio-visual essay is often accompanied by a written component, which work concomitantly to explore research in new dimensions (Grant 2016:257). The moving image content in audio-visual essays can be harnessed and edited by the researcher into an audio-visual essay through screen capture technology, which allows for the moving image and its accompanying audio (Grant 2016:258). The captured content can be manipulated through various editing techniques and be supplemented by voiceover

narration, to produce a product that is no longer than fifteen minutes (Grant 2016:255-257).

1.6 Envisioned Contribution of Audio-Visual Essays

Chapters	Chapter Focus	Focus of Written Text	Audio-Visual Essay's Focus and Demonstration
Chapter Four	How is Performative Empowerment represented in *SuperStore*?	How does Performative Empowerment appear through labour in *SuperStore*?	• The audio-visual essay's focus is on visualising performative empowerment through labour. • This could be demonstrated through shots of Amy just working, not talking, edited together.
Chapter Five	How is Performative Empowerment represented in *Kevin can F**k Himself*?	How does Performative Empowerment appear through labour in *Kevin can F**k Himself*?	• The focus of this audio-visual essay is performative empowerment and gender. • In *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) the audio-visual essay demonstrates how gender and performative empowerment appears in Allison's character arc. The series has different diegetic spaces that Allison moves between. Performative Empowerment can be illustrated by placing the different diegetic spaces in Allison's character arc side-by-side in the audio-visual essay.

Chapter Six	How is Performative Empowerment represented in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*?	How is Performative Empowerment depicted through class in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*?	• The audio-visual essay's focus is on visualising performative empowerment through class representation. • This audio-visual essay demonstrates its focus through the key plot events that happen 'downtown' that change Midge's life. The focus on key plot events that happen downtown highlights class and performative empowerment, since Midge is representative of upper-class society, but starts her stand-up career in a lower-class pub.

While one can use an accompanied voice-over or additional research text (Grant 2016:255- 257), I opt not to. I want to interrogate how much of the footage and diegesis of the shows I can use to provide a crystallisation of the main women protagonists' attempt to subvert performative empowerment and achieve actual empowerment. I envision that simultaneously working on the audio-visual essays and their respective written components may allow for a deeper understanding and closer reading of each series to occur. The written analyses' grounding in scholarship may also help develop a much clearer point of entry for each audio-visual essay

Superstore (Spitzer 2015) is the subject of the first analysis chapter, Chapter Four. The analysis focuses on selected episodes from the first season of *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015). The textual analysis around performative empowerment and labour provides insight into Amy's character and how she negotiates her relationship with labour under neoliberal capitalism. The purpose of the audio-visual essay component is to demonstrate an informed audio-visual understanding of the textual analysis of Amy, performative empowerment, and labour in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015). This audio-visual essay also serves the textual analysis by visually crystallizing the arguments of the textual analysis.

In the next chapter, *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) is analysed in terms of performative empowerment through the lens of gender representation in selected

episodes form the first and only season of the series. The insights of the textual analysis will give an in-depth finding on gender and its relationship to performative empowerment through Allison's character arc in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021). The audio-visual essay accompaniment is a crystallised demonstration of the textual analysis on gender and performative empowerment in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021).

The final textual analysis and audio-visual essay on performative empowerment interrogates *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). This textual analysis focuses specifically on performative empowerment and class in the series. The audio-visual essay demonstrates an informed, narrated audio-visual interrogation of performative empowerment and class in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

1.7 Chapter Outline

The chapter outline is as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter will introduce and contextualise the problem statement and study in an academic context.

Chapter Two: " I am Not Enough" - Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Feminism

This chapter will critically discuss the notion of performative empowerment and links it to complementary theoretical feminist frameworks. These notions and links are situated in the context of American comedy television.

Chapter Three: "Becoming Enough" - Women and American Comedy Television

This chapter will critically discuss the notion of fourth wave feminism and links it to complimentary women and comedy television frameworks. These notions and links are situated in the context of women-centric American comedy television.

Chapter Four: Amy versus Corporate: The Battleground of Performative Empowerment in *SuperStore* (S1)

This chapter analyses labour and performative empowerment through the frameworks discussed in chapter two and three. Selected episodes in the first season of *Superstore*

(Spitzer 2015) are analysed. This chapter is accompanied by an audio-visual essay that crystallizes the findings in the textual analysis on labour in *SuperStore* (Spitzer 2015).

Chapter Five: Performative Empowerment can F**k Itself: The Analysis of Allison and Performative Empowerment in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (S1)

This chapter will discuss gender and performative empowerment in season one of *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) using the theoretical frameworks established in chapters two and three. The analysis of *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) is conducted over selected episodes. This chapter includes an audio-visual essay component to visualize the textual research findings on gender and performative empowerment in the show.

Chapter Six: Midge Stands Up to Performative Empowerment: The Analysis of Performative Empowerment in *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* (S1)

This chapter will analyse class and performative empowerment in the comedy series *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) using the second and third chapters' theoretical framework. Similar to chapters Four and Five, this chapter also uses an audio-visual essay demonstration informed by the textual analysis of the series. The analysis considers multiple episodes from the first season of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

Chapter Seven: "This is Enough" - Conclusion

This chapter is a critical academic summary of the entire research study. This summary will argue how performative empowerment and feminist comedy make 'being enough' possible within *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). It also offers possibilities for further research.

In Chapter One, I have outlined the trajectory of this research study. In the following chapter, I address the theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations of neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism. Chapter Two guides arguments against a critical review of scholarship pertaining to neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism.

CHAPTER TWO: "I AM NOT ENOUGH" – NEOLIBERALISM AND NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This study requires an understanding of two subsections of the main theoretical framework of neoliberalism: neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal feminism. I contextualise neoliberal feminism in the current (fourth) wave of feminism. *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are women-centric comedy series that engage with ideas underpinning neoliberal ideology within the United States. It is vital that the tenets of neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal feminism of this framework are contextualised as a specifically North American conceptualisation.

2.2 The American Dream

The American Dream is the "guiding mythology" of the American nation (Samuel 2012:1) which permeates mainstream American culture. It has specific socio-economic goals associated with it, such as private property ownership, class mobility for those who work hard, and the ideal family image. The term 'American Dream' was first used in 1931, has since adapted, and remains integral to American culture (Samuel 2012:1-2). The Dream is therefore a resilient "guiding mythology" (Samuel 2012:1) that has endured multiple economic depressions and financial recessions, alongside the numerous "civil rights, women's rights and gender equality" movements (White & Hanson 2011:1) that often occurred simultaneously.

The American Dream is broadly described as "a way of life in which positive outcomes are linked to inherent virtue" (Arnold 2013:2). Following this logic, negative outcomes are linked to inherent vice, or weakness; some kind of personal failure. The American Dream is a utopian mindset where every member of society is offered infinite opportunities (Samuel 2012:6), individual freedom, and socioeconomic mobility (Graham 2017:2). While the Dream is commonly associated with politics, it is deeply rooted in the American identity (Arnold 2013:4), as it promotes a "prevailing optimism" (White & Hanson 2011:3) that gives individuals the confidence to overcome any challenges they may encounter.

The American Dream also promises class mobility to the middle and working classes through "betterment" and hard work (Samuel 2012:7), thus strengthening the utopian

concept of individual freedom and limitless possibilities as rewards for working hard (Graham 2017:2; Samuel 2012:6). This pursuit of the American Dream is passed down through generations (Graham 2017:3), ingraining it into an American identity. This moral utopian character (Arnold 2013:3; Samuel 2012:6) and its attachment to the American identity is what leads many Americans astray. The Dream and its promises' function as a myth (Samuel 2012:7) that fails to take into account the different socioeconomic backgrounds of the different classes and, subsequently, their differences in opportunities (Graham 2017:3) and access to class fluidity (Samuel 2012:7). The American Dream has also excluded people of colour and women from its promises, only adapting to include these minorities after the 2008 presidential election, when America had its first African American president (White & Hanson 2011:1).

The power of the American Dream is so deeply embedded in American identity (Arnold 2013:4) to the extent that, if it were to fail, it would be seen as individual failure, rather than a state failure (White & Hanson 2011:5). The failure of the American Dream would be considered as such due to wasted, the seemingly limitless possibilities available to excel in the socioeconomic sphere. The Dream is powerful because it is not a human right that can be removed by a ruling governance, it is a "state of mind" (White & Hanson 2011:8) which is solidified through propaganda. This fear of individual failure (White & Hanson 2011:5) is exploited by politicians who use the American Dream as a form of propaganda (Samuel 2012:7). These politicians understand how this mindset is intertwined with the American identity that promotes individuality. The American Dream, while appearing to be an ideal for the people, strategically creates a "buffer" against government (Wolak & Peterson 2020:968), placing the responsibility for achieving the Dream on the individual with minimal government responsibility. This "buffer" between the individual and the government (Wolak & Peterson 2020:968) also emerges with neoliberal scholarship as neoliberal "self-governance" (Chen 2013:443) and the individual self (Harvey 2007:5). This individual responsibility appears in the American Dream through home ownership and the concept of the nuclear family.

2.2.1 Home Ownership and the American Dream

The American Dream is an ideology that allows individuals to believe that, if they engage in hard work, they will be afforded equal and limitless opportunities, an optimistic future, home ownership, and socioeconomic prosperity (Samuel 2012:6). Home ownership functions as a form of "financial security" (Goodman & Mayer 2018:32) and proof that the

American Dream has been attained (Arnold 2013:12). If the American Dream is tangible, it not only strengthens conceptually among individuals, but also strengthens societal belief in the United States government (Arnold 2013:12). Acquiring home ownership is possible through the Dream itself and through the governing system. Home ownership is a tangible way in which individuals obtain the American Dream while also strengthening their American identity. This tangibility also supports the belief that the American government is the "superior system" (Arnold 2013:12) as it affords American citizens the opportunity to obtain home ownership. Beyond home ownership, the nuclear family is at the centre of the American Dream.

2.2.2 The Nuclear Family

From within the American Dream emerges the ideal of the nuclear family. The nuclear family originally comprised a white family (Cantor 1991:207) with a "wage-earning father, stay-at-home mother and dependent children" (Edwards 2010:123). The nuclear family aligns with a patriarchal hierarchy structure, as the women and children are subordinate to the father of the household (Fogel 2012:24). The nuclear family ideal contributes to unequal labour within the household, as stay at home mothers take on additional "unpaid labour" (Shalleck 2000:198). "Unpaid labour" emerges through the caretaking of the home and children (Shalleck 2000:198).[3] Morin (2019:3-4) describes the woman's role as "the lieutenant of a household ultimately governed by the colonel patriarch". The nuclear family, therefore, operates under patriarchal rule.

The focus for women was on "domesticity" (Coontz 2000:10) and not labour production. Female "domesticity" (Coontz 2000:28) served as a middle class identifier alongside the American Dream's ideal of upward mobility. However, women did not freely 'embrace' the American Dream's prescribed female "domesticity" (Coontz 2000:10) and "unpaid labour" (Shalleck 2000:198). During the second World War, many women were employed and "joined unions and fought against job discrimination" (Coontz 2000:31) until the end of the war in 1945. After the war, employers attempted to remove women from the labour force by demoting them (Coontz 2000:31). Since women were reluctant to give up their new-found independence and return to household labour, the demotion strategy would reduce their income, forcing women to resign. Their resignation would force them to engage with the notion of the nuclear family and become a stay at home mother.

[3] The notion of unpaid labour is addressed in neoliberal feminist scholarship. Please see section 2.7.1 Female labour, Gendered labour for further scholarship.

In 1968 the first African American nuclear family appeared on television.[4] Although this representation emerged in 1968, people of colour were only included in the American Dream, forty years later, after the 2008 presidential election (White & Hanson 2011:1), This adaptation of the American Dream from strictly heterosexual white families to include more racially diverse families highlights the ever-changing nature of the American Dream and the structure of the nuclear family (Naficy 1989:42-43).

The American Dream became a dominant "state of mind" (White & Hanson 2011:8) in 1931. The current ruling political and economic ideology still embraces the American Dream. It uses the American Dream as a framework to "neutralize opposition, foreclose alternative explanations and fracture solidarity" (Winslow 2017:65). This ideology is referred to as neoliberalism and has, subsequently, become neoliberal capitalism. The following sections will discuss neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism.

2.3 Neoliberalism and the theory of Neoliberal Capitalism

Neoliberalism is an ideology that aims to create balance in society between the political and the economic or, as described by Mickunas (2019:1), a balance between freedom and equality. This balance between the political and economic cannot be achieved without taking social systems into consideration. After the Second World War, neoliberalism was promoted as a global "class compromise" between capital and labour (Harvey 2007:10), in order to avoid a repeat of the Great Depression.[5] This "class compromise" was an attempt to "construct the right blend of state, market, and democratic institutions to guarantee peace, inclusion, well-being, and stability" (Harvey 2007:10). This construction was promoted as a "guarantor" (Harvey 2007:10) of peace therefore an attempt to prevent further wars from developing.

[4] This research study does not focus specifically on the racial aspect within the American Dream or exhaustive theory on neoliberalism, as the scope is too great. This statement on the shift of the inclusion of African Americans into the American Dream is important, as it is one of the ways in which the American Dream has had to shift its ideals in order to remain relevant to the ever-changing American society.

[5] The Great Depression occurred in the United States of American between 1929 and 1940 (Calomiris 1993: 62). Between 1928 and 1929 the Federal Reserve Board created open market sales where people could borrow money from federal reserves and pay it back over a certain period of time (Hamilton 1987:148-149). This continuous increase in borrowed money led to an increase in loans (Hamilton 1987:149) and interest on said loans. This explosion of the open market sales led to multiple banking crises (Calomiris 1993:62) as well as the boom and crash of housing and stock market expenditures, which resulted in an economic recession (Temin 2010: 116-117).

However, neoliberalism is rooted within the Republican right wing of American politics that reforms the socio-economic spheres of American society by "labour-market deregulation, tax-cutting, privatisation and union repression" (Gilbert 2013:7-11). As such, the Republican right-wing influence causes an unstable labour market, upper class tax cuts, the privatisation of sectors, and banning of unionisation (Gilbert 2013:7-11). The neoliberal values of freedom and equality (Mickunas 2019:1) are epitomised in the American ideal of the individual self (Harvey 2007:5). These aspects of the American Dream ideal are discussed in the following section.

2.4 Freedom, Equality and The Individual Self

Mickunas (2019:2) states that each member of society has an equal claim to join the governing body. This claim to govern the country, state or city is considered an equal opportunity in that it does not discriminate on the basis of the individual's "wealth, family heritage, religious position, or occupation" (Mickunas 2019:2). In principle, individuals are free because they are all equal, with no factors that inhibit them. This equality also allows for individuals to '"make their own way'," where they determine their life based on the choices they make.

Neoliberalism has placed great focus on "individualism, self-reliance, and responsibility for oneself" (Funk 2013:185), echoing key tenets embedded in the American Dream. However, this utopian ideal and principle is false and cannot be exercised. There can never be equality and freedom in all spheres of life, as social equality might occur within a sphere wherein there is no political equality (Mickunas 2019:3). While socially an individual is permitted to 'make their own way' (Mickunas 2019:2) there could be political structures in place that prevent this from happening, and vice versa. Although neoliberalism appears economic-specific, it emerges in the social aspect of society by promoting an idea of the individual self.

Neoliberalism's main ideal is that of the individual self (Harvey 2007:5) where freedom is fundamental to one's dignity. Any opposition to this fundamental freedom is seen as a threat to the state. This individual freedom ideal targets those who want to feel empowered (Harvey 2007:5) by promising that they are allowed to make their own decisions. The individual self stands in opposition to state authoritarianism, since neoliberal "self-governance" (Chen 2013:443) guides the individual towards an individual self that has 'freedom' of choice. An authoritarian state would not suggest such freedom,

therefore neoliberalism is able to mask its control over society by supporting the 'freedom of choice' falsity.

While this control is masked, it emerges through implications of certain decision making (Chen 2013:444). In *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017), the main women characters are all faced with decisions that support or break this mode of authoritarian control. This is analysed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six through the themes of 'the individual versus neoliberal society' and 'the neoliberal individual versus themselves'. These analyses discuss how neoliberalism is used in practice, and how the respective women protagonists negotiate neoliberalism's performative empowerment.

2.5 Neoliberalism in Practice

Neoliberalism's global influence has created controversy as the unequal distribution of wealth has increased significantly alongside accessibility to education. Thus, neoliberalism has created a greater gap between the educated and uneducated. Essentially, these gaps highlight a tension between "freedom and equality" (Mickunas 2019:2). David Harvey (2007:152) warns that neoliberalism is not typically associated with positivity and growth, since the 'freedom' and 'equality' it promotes can be used as a front for exploitation, while simultaneously allowing the upper class to gain power. It is, therefore, not a compromise between freedom and equality, but a mask for the "restoration of the ruling class power" (Harvey 2007:153) that protects the upper class if the economic recession of the 1930s repeats itself in the twenty-first century.

The individual self is created through a free market that ebbs and flows between "deliberate government intervention" and the "inner-workings" of individuals, which creates an entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9). Rottenberg (2014:421) emphasises that this entrepreneurial identity is not only economic-specific, but also creates an identity where every individual endeavour is a form of entrepreneurship. This entrepreneurial identity also has a central goal, which is to ensure that individuals are empowered and have complete control over the outcomes of their lives. This emphasis on empowerment creates the belief that people are (disproportionately) capable of changing their circumstances through hard work (Rutherford 2018:623).

The neoliberalist entrepreneurial identity is presented as a completely natural desire for individualism, rather than the strategic implementation with government reinforcement it truly is (Gilbert 2013:9). Government reinforcement is evident in the 2003 Iraq invasion by The United States of America (USA) (Harvey 2007:6). The USA implemented 'freedom' by controlling Iraq's economy. This control consisted of:

> 'The full privatization of public enterprises, full ownership rights by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses, full repatriation of foreign profits . . . the opening of Iraq's banks to foreign control, national treatment for foreign companies and . . . the elimination of nearly all trade barriers'. The orders were to apply to all areas of the economy, including public services, the media, manufacturing, services, transportation, finance, and construction. Only oil was exempt (presumably because of its special status as revenue producer to pay for the war and its geopolitical significance). The labour market, on the other hand, was to be strictly regulated. Strikes were effectively forbidden in key sectors and the right to unionize restricted. A highly regressive 'flat tax' (an ambitious tax-reform plan long advocated for implementation by conservatives in the US) was also imposed.

By privatizing Iraq's public enterprises and allowing foreign firms "full ownership" (Harvey 2007:6) of businesses in Iraq, the neoliberal 'freedom' that the Iraqi economy supposedly obtained, was fully controlled and owned by foreign firms. Foreign control overtook every sector of the Iraqi economy, except the oil trade, while also banning unionization and strikes (Harvey 2007:6). Therefore, the majority of Iraq's economic 'freedom' was controlled by foreign firms who would subsequently gain capital. The USA-imposed Iraqi 'freedom' was a direct violation of the Geneva and Hague Conventions. These conventions were deliberately created in order to protect the assets of third world countries from exploitation that may occur by their occupying first world countries (Harvey 2007:6). The violation was deemed legal by the Iraqi government, who had been appointed by the United States.

This violation is inherently connected to neoliberal thinking, because the freedom of individuals allows for market freedom. Iraq inherently became a neoliberal state because of the dominant United States occupancy and the United States' appointed Iraqi government (Harvey 2007:7). I use the example of Iraq to illustrate how the 'free market' promoted by neoliberalism is, in fact, the exploitation of the economy. While American foreign policy falls beyond the scope of this study, the notion of economic exploitation is central, as seen in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), where the store workers unionise and strike despite the threat of job loss.

As neoliberalism situates itself alongside democracy, Mickunas (2019:3) states that is important to consider the public and private domain in conjunction with feudalism. Feudalism is the system from which "democratic equality and freedom emerged" (Mickunas 2019:3) and within feudalism there are two social distinctions, the peasant and the aristocrat. Wark (2019:46) revisits the categories of aristocrat and peasant when determining the neoliberal class structure. The aristocrat is the social distinction wherein people born in the aristocracy possess "wealth by birthright" (Mickunas 2019:4), therefore they are not concerned with obtaining "material wellbeing" as they are born into it. To the aristocrat, wealth is a natural condition. The peasant, however, is not born into such privilege and is unable to obtain or attain any of the wealth or wellbeing of the aristocrat. Mickunas (2019:4) highlights how the feudalist system reflects in neoliberal class inequality, since the lower class have not actually progressed from being peasants.

The feudal aristocracy controlled both the public sector and their private possessions. The only way in which peasants can then potentially acquire wealth and a higher status within society, is if the aristocracy loses their power and possessions (Mickunas 2019:4). Neoliberalism can, therefore, either be a utopian project, which restructures global capitalism, or a political project that creates systems in which unequal capital accumulation occurs and the economic elites are reintroduced into power (Harvey 2007:19). Class power and influence is used to persuade the lower classes that neoliberal freedom is the only option for a better life.

2.6 Class Structure in Neoliberalism

Class is defined as a group of people that have a shared experience in "everyday material and social circumstances, as well as a shared subjectivity including habitus, solidarity, and consciousness" (Neilson 2015:187). Neoliberalism strengthens its ideology through the idea of empowerment by using the notion that class is a "temporary social category" that can be changed through hard work (Jon 2020:162).

Neoliberalism moves away from the idea of fundamental class where similar identities are grouped and then given a permanent label. Since class is a temporary category, class divisions are influenced by the different types of employees and their different challenges (Jon 2020:164). Class in neoliberalism is, in truth, the project of the reconstruction of the upper class (Harvey 2007:31). Unlike the feudalist definition of the upper class, where the aristocracy is established through traditional kinship, the upper

class in neoliberalism is established through the financial sector and the amount of capital produced by private enterprises (Harvey 2007:31-36). American upper class individuals are able to accumulate vast amounts of wealth and economic power because they are under-taxed, while the lower class is taxed through wages and salaries, which creates social and economic inequality (Harvey 2007:19).

In an attempt to 'dispel' the notion of class categorisation, the upper class no longer participates in activities that stereotypically link them to their high class status (Wark 2019:50). These stereotypes have changed in terms of wardrobe, public appearances, and morals. Originally, upper class distinction could be identified through tuxedos, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and motivational speeches on hard work (Wark 2019:50). The upper class now engages in subtle forms of class categorisation where their attire mimics that of the middle class, yet costs more than a middle class's household income. Motivational talks have also shifted from hard-work and American Dream propaganda, to preaching "creativity, mindfulness and ethical consumption" (Wark 2019:50). The strategy to dispel upper class connotations is merely a surface-level attempt at a "temporary social category" (Jon 2020:162).

A broad definition of the different classes within neoliberalism identify "worthy working tax paying citizen" and the "unworthy citizens who do not work or pay taxes but rather receive benefits" from the government (Neilson 2015:192). Graeber (2018:9) discusses how certain careers that employees believe to be 'pointless', such as corporate lawyers, receive more recognition and are paid more than careers that are essential to society, such as nurses and mechanics. Jobs are classified as 'pointless' based on whether or not there would be a distinguishable difference if they no longer existed. Those who Neilson (2015:192) deems as "worthy workers" are also known as "the working precariat" who are considered trustworthy, honest, hardworking, and, most importantly, "morally opposed to taking welfare payments". Therefore, people who work in Graeber's (2018:9) "pointless jobs" receive accolades and praise. The "idle precariat" or "unworthy worker" that Neilson (2015:192) describes is considered lazy, "drug-addicted", and "welfare dependent" — everything that goes against the entrepreneurial identity. Bratslavsky (2019:217) offers defining characteristics of the working class that could be incorporated into Neilson's (2020:192) idle precariat. Bratslavsky (2019:217) states that "those who work an hourly wage (typically close to the minimum wage) in jobs that do not require higher education" are labelled as working class.

Evidently, neoliberalism promotes a competitive economy through an entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:421) where any person who does not actively participate in this identity, whether employed or unemployed, is deemed an "unworthy worker" or "idle precariat" (Neilson 2015:192). Neilson (2015:192) has offered a more formal definition of class hierarchy within a neoliberal framework. The "working precariat" are the groups of society who are "honest, hardworking, frugal, clean-living, resilient", i.e., people who do not use welfare benefits. The "idle precariat" is the opposite of the "working precariat" as they do not work and are dependent on welfare payments (Neilson 2015:192). The issue that emerges within this ideology is the pinning of social classes against one another through labels like "hardworking" and "lazy", which creates a collective selfishness and undoes social justice (Rottenberg 2014:420). The entrepreneurial identity is later analysed through the main women protagonists Amy, Allison, and Midge, in Chapter Four; Five and Six, respectively.

2.6.1 Neoliberal Capitalist Class Formation

David Harvey (2007:154) discusses how neoliberalism created capitalist class formation, which cements the upper class as the dominant rulers of society. The upper class is able to remain in power, as they use propaganda to promote improvement of social inequality through entrepreneurship and competition. However, these 'improvements' remove the responsibility from the upper class to bridge the gap between rich and poor. If the "idle precariat" (Neilson 2015:192) is unable to improve their situation and has to rely on welfare benefits, it is because they have failed, not because the upper classes have exploited them – here, failure is the result of a personal flaw, not systemic injustice or imbalance. McKenzie Wark (2019:46) emphasises this class inequality by stating that the lower class has not actually progressed from being peasantry, they are still being exploited for the little they have by the upper class. Not only has there been a restoration of an upper class, but neoliberalism has also created "corporate power" (Harvey 2007: 38) in multiple sectors, including the retail industry. This corporate power is seen specifically in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015).

Class is a central theme in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). As neoliberalism promotes a competitive economy (Rottenberg 2014:421), the ability to change an

individual's class category relies on themselves. One way in which class mobility can be achieved is through marriage.

2.6.2 Marriage as Class Mobility

Marriage in the United States has commonly been associated with romantic and religious notions of love and commitment (Marzullo 2011:759). While this is not entirely false, the political state of a country cannot be entirely exempt from the promotion of marriage. In the United States of America, the dominant political and economic ideology is neoliberalism (Marzullo 2011:759; Harvey 2007:2). Marriage in neoliberal America is an ideology promoted by the state to the middle and lower class (Heath 2012:5; Randles & Woodward 2018:41) as a solution to the social problems encountered by American citizens. These social problems range from "crime, poverty, teen pregnancy, educational failure and welfare 'dependency'" (Heath 2012:5). Heath (2012:5) states that if the marriage ideology is embraced by the middle to lower classes, the abovementioned social issues will be solved. The promotion of marriage also fuels the idea of class mobility, because it is associated with a 'solution' to poverty. This 'promise' of being able to move up the social ladder allows the lower classes to embrace marriage, as their union would decrease their chances of poverty (Heath 2012:9). Less than three decades ago, marriage was the only way for a woman to be seen as a respectable member of society (Kennedy 2013:5).

In order to increase marriage statistics, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Randles & Woodward 2018:39)[6] was passed in 1996. This act positions marriage and work as "routes to economic self-sufficiency" (Randles & Woodward 2018:39), therefore, appealing to the lower classes as a method of moving up social classes while also becoming economically self-sufficient. This promotion of marriage under a neoliberal state places poverty control onto the individual, rather than making it a government responsibility (Heath 2012:9). Marriage is therefore promoted as a way in which individuals will 'automatically' achieve security and stability in their socio-economic sphere (Marzullo 2011:771). Alongside the promotion of marriage, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) also

[6] This act along with 1996 Defence of Marriage Act were passed as in favour for a heterosexual marriage union (Heath 2013: 561). Marriage for homosexual couples was illegal until 2013 still however with limitations (Heath 2013: 561). This study acknowledges that neoliberalism and marriage under neoliberalism is in favour of heterosexual couples however it cannot analyse it due to the scope of study.

promotes a competitive economy through an entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:421). This entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:421) emerges through labour.

2.7 Labour and Human Capital

Individuals who enter the labour market are socialised to have their own cultural and gender identities as well as shared class aspirations. Capitalism views individuals who enter the labour market as products that have certain skills that allow them to accomplish certain income-generating tasks (Harvey 2019:167). Jenny Odell (2023:44) discusses how time and the clock have become ways in which an employer is able to buy an employee's time. This bought time, for Odell (2023:44-47), refers not only to the work hours of the employees, but also how much of this time during work hours is used to produce capital. Capitalism did not create time, it merely monopolised it in order to impose authority over employees (Odell 2023:55). This authority also allows for employers to discriminate against potential employees based on race, ethnicity, gender, and religious preferences (Harvey 2007:57).

Corporate authority also emerges in David Graeber's (2018:viii) discussion of the creation of "pointless jobs" that earn higher wages than jobs that have an essential function. Jobs that require "moving, fixing and maintaining" (Graeber 2018:viii), caring or educating, such as nursing, road maintenance, and teaching, are low-income earning jobs. Graeber (2018:ix) then continues to say that "the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it", highlighting not only on the irony of the economic sphere, but also how essential workers become classified as "ideal precariat" (Neilson 2015:192), because their survival is dependent on state welfare programs. Harvey (2007:169) states that low-income classes are able to earn a living by signing short-term contacts, which allows people to change jobs easily.

Neoliberalism creates the conditions for individuals to become – and even embrace themselves as – forms of human capital; neoliberalism therefore requires reproduction and care work in order to "reproduce and maintain this human capital" (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020:8). McKenzie Wark (2019:41) states that capitalism does not care about the labourers' thoughts and feelings, it just wants their "hands" and "muscles" in order to produce capital. Wark (2019:41) continues that the labourer either loses their mind and body to their authoritative figures, or their mind is "subordinated" by those in power.

The ability to reproduce human capital then falls onto women, maintaining the attachment of their value to their childbearing capacity (Rottenberg 2017:340). While neoliberalism targets and 'empowers' middle-class women to achieve work-life balance, they must still make reproduction a priority, whereas middle-class men must focus on their "professional advancement" (Rottenberg 2017:339). Neoliberal feminism is concerned with the concepts of work-life balance, reproduction capacity, and care work. Of the relevant available and accessible scholarship on labour, class, and television, the majority is about, or can be brought into conversation with, the series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015). While Neilson (2015), Banet-Weiser *et al* (2020), and Rottenberg (2017) offer generalised discussions of labour and class, they do not specifically address the lead female character, Amy, and her relationship to labour and class. In *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) the available scholarship focuses on Midge as a Jewish woman and Judaism. It does not discuss her relationship to class and labour. Therefore, the current available literature does not discuss how both Amy and Midge define themselves as empowered, which is why this study is necessary. At the time of this study's submission, there is also no scholarship on *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021). Allison, the woman protagonist, is another character who is desperate to be viewed as empowered and become independent from her husband, Kevin.

2.8 Neoliberal Feminism

Neoliberal feminism aligns itself within neoliberalism by stating that equality can be achieved in the economic sphere through the individual self and entrepreneurship (Olufemi 2020:iii). This creates an ideal for middle-class women that they should work hard and earn a living (Banet-Weiser *et al* 2020:8). This ideal, although targeted at middle-class women, is only applicable to upper-class white women who are able to replace men in the economic sector (Olufemi 2020:iv).[7] State control is what Olufemi (2020:13) calls "another arm of the patriarchy", as its institutionalised freedom, equality, and empowerment ideals do the exact opposite of how they are traditionally defined. Funk (2013:179) states that feminism in the age of neoliberalism can dangerously aid neoliberal ideals, which is what neoliberal feminism is able to achieve, and functions as another form of state control through false empowerment and ideals.

[7] While this study does not focus specifically on neoliberal feminism in conjunction with women of colour and migrant women, it is still important to acknowledge that neoliberal feminism disregards their standards of living in order for the upper-class white women to succeed (Olufemi 2020: iv).

Women are a form of human capital that must participate in the reproduction of human capital and care work (Banet-Weiser *et al* 2020:8). This ideal is a responsibility that they must bear alone. This notion of the independent and individual self cannot be exercised by all women, because so many women earn lower wages than men, which forces their dependence on state services like "child maintenance, legal aid and housing provision" (Olufemi 2020:12). This dependence on state welfare payments due to low wages, leads to many low-income earning women being labelled lazy (Neilson 2015:192). On top of creating human capital, women must also conform to the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity to become an empowered member in society (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9).

Neoliberal logic suggests that women need to be continuously ambitious in the spheres of work and domesticity to become empowered. Since creating a family is crucial, the focus of female labour is on both "professional advancement" (Rottenberg 2017:339) and achieving a work-life balance.

2.8.1 Female Labour, Gendered Labour

A distinct feature of neoliberal capitalism is gendered labour (Cockburn 2020:13). Gendered labour is understood through Cockburn (2020:13) as "the sexual division of labour" and "the unpaid labour in the home" where capitalism profits from women's gendered inequality in the workplace and the home. The concept of gendered labour emerges in neoliberal capitalism because of gender's historical link to capitalism (Cotter 2020:57). Even in their initial writings on class and society under industrialisation, Marx and Engels (citied by Cotter 2020:57) discussed how gender has become an "instrument of labour" within capitalist structures and determines the rate at which labour can be exploited. Competition between workers results in labour force divisions that can reduce the cost of labour as well as create a class division (Cotter 2020:57). Labourers will increase the weight of their individual workload to attain a higher position within the competition, therefore, what was originally three different jobs divided amongst three individuals transfers to one individual with three workloads. Women compete in this capital competition, shouldering a workload greater than one person's capacity, and then return home to begin their domestic labour (Cotter 2020:57; Rottenberg 2017:341).[8]

[8] I acknowledge that there has been a shift in domestic labour responsibilities and men are now more involved in domestic labour; however there remains a substantial amount of unpaid and unrecognised work performed by women (Cotter 2020: 57; Rottenberg 2017: 341; Olufemi 2020:20 & Hansen 2005: 1-22).

The responsibility of reproduction and care work remains directed to women, who are still seen as the pillars of family life. Rather than forcing women to stay at home, neoliberalism proposes a 'solution': allow women to achieve their work-life balance by delaying motherhood by egg freezing (Rottenberg 2017:341). This 'solution' has been achieved and supported by neoliberalism through offering benefit packages to those women who choose to freeze their eggs. It appears as though corporate institutions are placing importance on the advancement of women professionals, however, the freezing of eggs also is a continuous reminder to the female professionals that once they have achieved professionally, they must create a family (Rottenberg 2017:341). However, this benefit is solely for the middle class.

Reproduction within neoliberalism must be viewed from a structural perspective. Olufemi (2020:20) states that reproductive labour is an integral component in social reproduction. Social reproduction is described by Olufemi (2020:20) as the production of capital that is "inseparable from the production of life". The production of life is, therefore, the production of capital. Reproductive labour (Olufemi 2020:20) is the racial and gender exploitation of childcare; housework; nannies; housekeepers and nurses (Rottenberg 2017:341). The 'empowerment' of working women is "non-threatening to the status quo" as it allows women to *feel empowered instead of being empowered* (Rutherford 2018:624).

According to Harvey (2007:157) women suffer the most under neoliberal policies as the status of wealth also dictates their role and authority within the household and the market system. This loss of state protection largely affects women in the middle and lower class. The most recent loss of state protection that directly affects women in the United States of America was the overturning of Roe v. Wade in June 2022. Roe v. Wade was the federal constitutional right that allowed women the right to an abortion (de Vogue, Sneed, Duster & Cole 2022:[sp]). The Supreme Court overturned the right to abortion and declared it to be determined by the individual states, which has resulted in almost half the states either banning abortion completely or introducing strict regiments that will decide the validity of the grounds for individual abortions valid (de Vogue *et el* 2022:[sp]). This ruling is exemplary of the state control that Olufemi (2020:13) discusses, as women's reproductive rights have now been determined by the Supreme Court, who ruled in favour of social production and capital. The freedom to choose whether or not to

have an abortion allowed for women to decide whether they wanted the responsibility of having a child. Olufemi (2020:22) discusses this choice: responsibility is conveniently placed on mothers not on society, yet it is society that reaps the benefits from this social reproduction. Women carry the responsibility of the choice to have children, but, should they have children and are reliant on state welfare, they are accused of making the wrong choice. The overruling of Roe v. Wade removes the possibility of choosing not to have children, forcing women who become pregnant to have the child. It also places women's lives at risk if the mother were to experience any complications during pregnancy. The overruling of Roe vs Wade cements Harvey's (2007:157) statement that women suffer the most under neoliberal rule. Neoliberalism alleges reverence to individuals that conform to its ideals. However, its policies, such as the overruling of Roe v. Wade, remove the 'freedom and equality' (Mickunas 2019:1) neoliberalism supposedly affords its society.

This ruling also enhances the inequality between the rich and poor as the rich are able to travel to states that allow abortion, or leave the country to have the procedure. Women who do not have access to this kind of wealth will either have to bring the child to term or have the procedure performed illegally, which has numerous consequences (de Vogue *et al.* 2022:[sp]). This type of ruling also creates opportunities for capital to be acquired illegally. The free individual is therefore not entirely free as their living conditions are created by state ruling, not by their own individual choices (Olufemi 2020:25). In *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) Cheyenne had the option of having an abortion, but she was unable to get transport to an abortion clinic, which resulted in her keeping the baby. At the time this show was created, Roe v. Wade still provided her the option of pregnancy termination, even though the character was unable to do so. Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the option for termination has been removed completely.

2.8.2 Performative Empowerment

Empowerment is an important aspect of neoliberalism, as it allows the individuals to feel as though they are in control of their own lives socially and economically (Rutherford 2018:623). This 'empowerment' allows women specifically to achieve their professional goals by still maintaining their work-life balance. Olufemi (2020:10) discusses that the neoliberal state controls the way in which people live, despite its promotion of freedom and equality. This 'freedom' masks "sexist oppression" and "reinforces gendered oppression" (Olufemi 2020:11), which ultimately reinforces the oppression of women.

Just like the notions of freedom and equality, empowerment does not exist outside of the feeling of empowerment, because women are used for capital gain (Rutherford 2018:622). This ideal of false empowerment is referred to in neoliberal feminist scholarship as performative empowerment. The concept concerns cases where women hold no actual power, but are made to feel as though they do through their pursuit of certain neoliberal ideals.

In *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016), according to Darling (2022:133), Fleabag's sister Claire is the perfect "neoliberal subject". Fleabag, the woman protagonist, fails to meet neoliberal standards. Her life is "messy" (Darling 2022:133), that is, she does not prioritise the farce of self-reliance and individualism, whereas her sister does. Claire attempts work-life balance by maintaining a well-paying corporate job and starting a family. This attempt at creating a balance between her job and child rearing fails when she has a miscarriage, an event which harshly reads, in neoliberalism, as a personal failure.

Neoliberalism also masks empowerment for women under a "work upon the self" (Rutherford 2018:621) ideal, wherein women 'improve' their physical appearance through losing weight and undergoing cosmetic surgery. These changes are a neoliberal marketing ploy that is heavily utilised. This focus on the appearance of the individual self is not conducive to collective activism, which makes this form of empowerment "non-threatening to the status quo" — if women feel empowered, they will not protest against neoliberal inequalities (Rutherford 2018:623). Performative empowerment is, therefore, merely a feeling and women do not become truly empowered as their autonomy is restricted by neoliberal governance. The ideal of the working precariat (Neilson 2015:192), combined with the emphasis on reproductive and care labour, serves as a distraction that reinforces a gendered hierarchy.

There is a gap in research into other Western comedy series where there are women protagonists who may conform to neoliberal standards. There is also not much in available and accessible scholarship that specifically discusses performative empowerment in *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) and *Girls* (Dunham 2012). Darling (2022) does not directly reference performative empowerment, however, she discusses it through Fleabag's subversion of neoliberal performative empowerment, while her sister Claire embraces it. In the case of *Girls* (Dunham 2012), Genz (2017:20) discusses how

the characters in the show are trapped by neoliberalism, because success is a luxury in a society that is extremely competitive. The characters in *Girls* (Dunham 2012) are financially dependent on their grandparents and parents, as they are unable to secure full time jobs. Unlike Claire in *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) the characters of *Girls* (Dunham 2012) are not idealised neoliberal subjects who have supposedly 'made it' in a tough economic environment.

It is also vital to acknowledge that, while *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) is set in the United Kingdom and *Girls* (Dunham 2012) is set in the United States of America, both countries use neoliberalism as an economic model (Darling 2022:133) to promote the "free market, minimal regulation, capital enhancing" entrepreneurial identity of neoliberalism. This entrepreneurial identity is embraced by Claire in *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016), as throughout both seasons she is portrayed as the hardworking 'successful' sister who is financially secure as she has a high-paying corporate job. However, her sister, Fleabag, owns a guinea pig themed café that does not financially sustain her (until the second season). Although Fleabag can be seen as an entrepreneur, her guinea pig café does not create enough revenue for it to be labelled as "capital enhancing" (Darling 2022:133), therefore, she does fulfil the ideal neoliberal entrepreneurial identity. Claire's entrepreneurial identity and the stressful corporate environment of her job result in her miscarriage. While Claire adopts the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity, she loses her baby, which, through a neoliberal framework signifies a loss of future human capital (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020:8). The women protagonists in *Girls* (Dunham 2012) also attempt to embrace this neoliberal entrepreneurial identity, however, they are unable to secure full time employment that creates more capital for the economy. *Girls* highlights the tension between the idealisation and promotion of the entrepreneurial identity and the impossibility of achieving it.

As indicated above, Claire in *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) and the main women protagonists in *Girls* (Dunham 2012) have attempted to embrace the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity. Darling (2022:133) discusses how this identity is unachievable by design, and can be detrimental to the individual (as in the case of Claire's miscarriage). It is here, in the tension of pursuing labour delivery that compromises health and wellbeing, that performative empowerment emerges. These characters hoped to achieve performative empowerment by subscribing to the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity (Darling 2022: 133). It is, however, merely an illusion of empowerment without

tangible, sustainable markers of actual empowerment (Rutherford 2018:623). Embracing the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity (Darling 2022:133) increases economic capital while using performative empowerment as a mask for economic exploitation (Rutherford 2018:623). In the case of the two series above, performative empowerment functions not only as a false promotion of empowerment but also as a guise for the economic exploitation of women. As neoliberalism is the dominant ruling ideology, the next section explores neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism in American comedy television. This provides an in-depth understanding and foundation through which neoliberal performative empowerment can then be analysed in selected American comedy television series.

2.9 Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Capitalism in American Comedy Television

In the contemporary consensus of what neoliberalism means, as described by Kevin Vallier (2021), neoliberalism is a system in which "society's political and economic institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist but supplemented by a constitutionally limited democracy and a modest welfare state...[that] endorse[s] liberal rights and the free-market economy to protect freedom and promote economic prosperity". A neoliberal capitalist economy ostensibly supports and encourages "equality and freedom for all via individuality and self-expression" (Morris & Korobov 2020:1), whilst still promoting competition in both the entrepreneurial and commercial sectors, which is a deliberate intervention from the government (Gilbert 2013:9).

The protection of freedom and promotion of economic prosperity (Vallier 2021) are neoliberal ideals that aim to allow the individual to feel empowered (Harvey 2007:5) alongside affording them the opportunity to obtain "wealth, family heritage, religious position, or occupation" (Mickunas 2019:2). The deliberate governing of society's 'independent' behaviour is what differentiates it from classical liberalism. Catherine Rottenberg (2018:4) describes neoliberal female labour as relying "on reproduction and care work in order to reproduce and maintain human capital". The reproduction and maintenance of human capital becomes an additional form of labour for women.

Wacquant (2012:74-75) describes class structure within neoliberalism as being an ideology that represents opposite ends of the class structure. Neoliberalism encourages the expansion of capital for those who are in the upper class, while implementing specific

socio-economic policies that strengthen the permanent inequality of bottom classes. These socio-economic policies are hidden in the “competitive individualism” promoted by neoliberalism (Littler 2013:69) and the belief that hard work will allow you to move up in social class. This belief is merely a “disguise” (Littler 2013:69) to strengthen the socio-economic inequalities between the upper and lower class.

Neoliberalism cements itself as the “American dream” (Lamont 2019:660) and is favoured by the upper-middle class because the lower-middle and working classes cannot obtain the resources required to live the American dream. Catherine Rottenberg (2018:7) states that a neoliberal society is one that only considers those who are white, heteronormative and have class privilege. Therefore, anyone who does not fit in those categories will continue to be exploited, despite the ideology’s emphasis on the importance of the hard-working individual. As a result, ethno-racial minority groups, who fought to be seen as equal and included in the neoliberalist society, are rejected from it (Lamont 2019:661). In television, this appears as the rejection of “social welfare programs, unions [and] public education” (Bergman 2018:164). Those who do not fit in the “white, heteronormative, privileged class” category (Rottenberg 2018:7) are labelled as “lazy, fraudulent, wasteful, drug-addicted and welfare dependant”, which is a view reinforced by “competitive individualism” (Littler 2013:69; Neilson 2015:192).

As neoliberalism attempts to hide the inequalities it creates, television and film can foreground these inequalities by narrativizing the contradiction between this ideology and the reality it purports. Additionally, television series can provide different forms of representation, which gives the medium a power over what the audience is absorbing (Bratslavsky 2019:210). Therefore, television can play an important role in exposing the dangerous systems and ideologies which cement inequality. Neoliberalism has spread through mainstream media, which has been effective in promoting its ideals of freedom and equality (Meyers 2019:11). Guardino and Snyder (cited by Meyers 2019:11) state that one of most “consequential” shifts that occurred when neoliberalism was implemented, is the “relationship between the state and the media industry”. A prime example of this relationship is reality television, which promotes the freedom of the individual self (Meyers 2019:11). Neoliberalism uses the power television holds over its respective audiences (Bratslavsky 2019:210) as a form of socio-economic propaganda. Fourth wave feminism attempts to counteract this socio-economic propaganda.

Fourth wave feminism emerged during the 2010s (Strauss 2023:16) as a "transnational activism" – global and inclusive –committed to refreshing previous feminist ideals and incorporating new, diverse thoughts, whilst advocating against ongoing "misogyny" (Strauss 2023:16) and gender-based violence. Cabrera, Belloso and Prieto (2021:417) define fourth wave feminism as a feminist movement that focuses on "diverse identities and corporalities", while still working to overcome gender inequality. The fourth wave strives to normalise different identities, while giving a platform to those who are still marginalised in society (Cabrera et al 2021:419). However, Cabrera *et al.* (2021:417) caution that fourth wave feminism can very easily strengthen the ideology of neoliberalism. Fourth wave feminism strives to normalise different identities while still celebrating the differences (Cabrera *et al*. 2021:417- 419) unlike neoliberal feminism. Neoliberal feminism helps cement patriarchal ideas through the hyper individualising of women as producers of human capital. This hyper-individualisation encourages women to not only be aspirational in their careers, but also in their reproductive capacities and care work (Banet-Webster, Gill & Rottenberg 2020:8).

Neoliberal capitalism merely creates the illusion of equality and freedom, and subsequently labels all feminist activity as a "[perverted] exercise" (Morris & Korobov 2020:1), which threatens economic gain. Once women start protesting against unequal working standards, neoliberalism will lose both revenue that women labourers earn and its patriarchal domination. Morris and Korobov (2020:1) highlight the neoliberal attempt to discourage women from being feminists by classifying feminism as a "perverted exercise" and unsatisfactory endeavour. Authentic, praxis-based feminist activity exposes the inequalities that neoliberalism continues to hide.

Chapter Three concerns itself with fourth wave feminism, women characters in comedy television, as well as female comedy. Comedy can create a platform for authentic, praxis-based feminist activity when it incorporates women characters who use female comedy. Fourth wave feminism and female comedy create an authentic form of freedom, equality and empowerment that is not performative. The following chapter will critically engage with scholarship pertaining to fourth wave feminism and American comedy television.

CHAPTER THREE: "BECOMING ENOUGH" – WOMEN AND AMERICAN COMEDY TELEVISION

3.1 Brief Overview of Feminism

The chapter opens with a brief overview of the first, second and third waves of feminism as well as postfeminism. Providing this brief overview will help situate the study's use of fourth wave feminism which the study uses in its analysis of the three selected television series. The chapter will then discuss fourth wave feminism and the development of women characters in comedy television.

The first wave of feminism started in 1848 (Hewitt 2021:15) when women began to request a right to vote. This continued until 1920 when they were granted that right (Faupel & Werum 2011:181; Hewitt 2021:15). It was the beginning of the feminist movement also known as the women's suffrage movement that aimed to achieve equality between men and women. Both first and second wave feminism was mainly targeted towards white women. Women of colour were only able to vote in 1965 (Hewitt 2021:31). Second wave feminism emerged in the 1960s and focused on the liberation of white women by creating access to higher education, employment, and equal pay while critiquing gender inequality and the idea of motherhood and marriage as fulfilling endeavours (Dow 2005:380). Second wave feminism fought for the equality between men and women in all spheres, social, economic and political (Thompson 2021:40). Women of colour did participate in this wave however the focus was on the liberation of white women. It was only in the 1960s-1970s when women of colour rose to the forefront of the feminist movement in order to achieve their own liberation.

Third wave feminism began in 1960s -1970s and its main focus was on collective conscious raising which allowed women from all races and classes to address their issues with patriarchal domination by drawing on their experiences and multitude of identities (Sowards & Renegar 2004:535). This movement also included women of colour and men who had previously been excluded. Third wave feminism took a stand "against white supremacy and imperialism" (Thompson 2021:43). Third wave feminism brought forward the necessity in understanding white privilege and how it was crucial for feminism that white women and women of colour work together in order to achieve equality between not only man and woman, but extended its necessity for equality into class and race (Thompson 2021:45). A new type of feminism emerged surrounding the idea of resilient woman (Gill 2017) after the third wave of feminism.

The ideology around the resilient woman emerged in postfeminist discourse by Gill (2017), Gill and Orgad (2018), and Dobson and Kanai (2018), where women are expected to be resilient above all else. Postfeminism is the shift from female objectification to subjectification where the emphasis is on the self and the individual. This emphasis on the self can create ideas of gender difference according to Gill (2007:255) and Baer (2016:20). It can become a dangerous ideology within feminist discourse as it allows patriarchal ideologies to resurface and cement themselves within a discourse that actively tries to separate itself from them (Walsh, Fürsich & Jefferson 2008:125). A new form of feminist discourse that creates an opportunity for representation of the contemporary women emerged in conflict with postfeminism representation of women. This discourse is known as fourth wave feminism.

3.2 Fourth Wave Feminism

Fourth wave feminism is characterised by people who interact and associate themselves with feminism online (Blevins 2018:101). Blevins (2018:101) quotes Elasaid Muro's *Feminism: A Fourth Wave Essay,* where Muro states that feminism has shifted from an independent individual tactic driven movement to digital (online) "consciousness-raising" group activism. Fourth wave feminism and its digital sphere, when used correctly, can use the public narrative and mainstream digital forms to visualise the inequalities that women are subjected to, whilst also providing ways in which this inequality can change (Olufemi (2020:v). Fourth wave feminism has moved towards "a kind of discrimination that is harder to quantify and harder to fight" (Abrahams 2017). The way in which this discrimination takes place is masked by surface-level neoliberal values such as freedom and equality (Mickunas 2019:1) .

The fourth wave of feminism is the combination of digital and feminist activism (Blevins 2018:105). Cabrera, Belloso, and Prieto (2021:417-420) provide a more detailed description of fourth wave feminism: he tactics imperative to fourth wave feminism are "technological mobilisation; intersectionality; empowerment and the denunciation of sexual violence". Utilising these elements of feminism through social media allows for fourth wave feminism to be defined as its own movement, rather than a revival of previous waves. These "consciousness-raising groups" described by Blevins (2018:101) are what Olufemi (2020:20) calls "collective organising". Organized collectives are a threat to the neoliberal ideology of the hyper-individualised self, because a collective can overthrow the state and change ruling ideologies (Olufemi 2020:20; Harvey 2007:152-153).

Since contemporary fourth wave feminism concerns itself with a form of digital activism, its permutations could find its way into programming developed for online streaming television

series. All three selected television series are available on the streaming platform Amazon Prime Video, as discussed in the first chapter. Streaming platforms like Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, and Disney+ require an internet connection in order for their films and series to be streamed (Castellano & Meimaridis 2021:198-199). The instant availability of online streaming from any internet-connected device allows series to have an "addictive quality" about them, according to Cabrera et al (2021:417) and Marin (2019:27). This addictive aspect of television series has allowed the medium to establish a prominence in the digital sphere with the introduction of streaming sites. The availability of television in a digital format allows a connection to be created between fourth wave feminism and television series. Online streaming platforms for film and television are essentially avenues where artistic creations appear. Film and television that reflect on the inequalities that women face, provide a place where this oppression is visualised and can be reflected on by the audience watching it (Olufemi 2020:v-vi). Mainstream media can offer women a voice,[9] whether this be physical individual interviews or a representation of the collective's voice (Byerly 2019:61).

The currently available and accessible scholarship on *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) addresses the setting of the women-centric comedy television series in 1950s New York (Parmett 2022:1), as well as the nostalgia of this period representation of the American metropolis. In the article 'Jewish Stereotypes and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel'* by Lee Michael Cohn (2020:[sp]), Midge is described as a character that "embraces[s] and subvert[s] the stereotype of a Jewish Woman". The available scholarship does not address Midge's embrace and subversion of performative empowerment, which my study has the opportunity to address. *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are all women-centric American comedy television shows. As women protagonists have appeared in American comedy television since the late 1960s, the following section provides insight into the development of the woman protagonist in American comedy television.

3.3 A Brief Overview of Women Protagonists in American Comedy Television

The two American comedy television genres most relevant to the study are situation comedy and comedy drama.

3.3.1 American Comedy Television

[9] It is important to acknowledge that these streaming companies (e.g. Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, etc) are owned by capitalist behemoths. I am not suggesting that these organisations are altruistic or activist entities.

Situation Comedy

Mintz (1985:114–15) provides the following as a typical definition of situation comedy, and is worth quoting at length:

> A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour . . . Sitcoms are generally performed before live audiences, whether broadcast live (in the old days) or filmed or taped, and they usually have an element that might almost be metadrama in the sense that since the laughter is recorded (sometimes even augmented), the audience is aware of watching a play, a performance, a comedy incorporating comic activity. The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored . . . This faculty for the 'happy ending' is, of course, one of the staples of comedy, according to most comic theory.

Above, Mintz (1985:114-115) identifies the salient defining properties of a situation comedy: similar characters and settings across episodes; a short running time of approximately half an hour per episode, where the episode plot is concluded by the end of the episode; a laugh track or live audience response that is embedded in the broadcast; and, lastly, the upbeat ending of each episode as dramatic conflicts and tensions are resolved. Although Mintz wrote about comedy television in 1985, his clear definition of the key structural elements of situation comedy is still used in later research as a primary source by other television scholars, such as Jason Mittell (2004:13), Stuart Wallace and Randall Stevenson (2009:26).

Mittell (2004:13), along with Wallace and Stevenson (2009:26), discuss that when placing any text under a certain genre, in this instance the situation comedy (or sitcom), the genre is not rigorously bound by a certain set of conventions. While Mintz (1985:114–15) summarises some broad elements a television show must have to qualify as a sitcom, Mills (2005:27) argues that this traditional definition proves problematic, as it can also be applied to the drama genre series. The three aspects that are highlighted in the definition, the "setting, aesthetics and narrative" (Mills 2005:27), are found in the drama genre as well. Wallace and Stevenson (2009:31) argue that a series can stand firmly within the situation comedy genre when it does not reach beyond its limitations of being "coherent" and "stable", since remaining consistent within its limitations is an important defining element of the sitcom genre. Once it surpasses its consistency within the "setting, aesthetics and narrative" (Mills 2005:27) it transforms into another genre classification completely. There is a common consensus between Hough (1981), Mintz (1985:114-115), Mittell (2004:13), Olson and Douglas (1997:409), and Wallace and Stevenson (2009:31) that the defining factor of a traditional situation comedy is its positive ending with its resolution presented through comedy.

Kathleen Rowe (citied by Dow 2005:387) describes the sitcom as a platform that "represents the unrepresentable". The notion "unrepresentable" here does not refer to characters who cannot be represented, but instead refers to situational comedy creating a space where previously underrepresented characters or unrepresented characters can exist. Rowe (cited by Dow 2005: 387) discusses a popular situational comedy where the woman protagonist was larger and louder than women had previously been portrayed in situational comedy. In neoliberalism an example of an unrepresentable character would be an empowered feminist. Much more representable is neoliberal feminism, as it is a "non-threatening" form of feminism that misleads women into feeling empowered when they are not (Rutherford 2018:624).

Ahmed (2017:21) discusses how feminists "are often identified as being too reactive, as overreacting, as if all you are doing is sensationalizing the facts of the matter; as if in giving your account of something you are exaggerating, on purpose or even with malice". This labelling of a feminist as reactive, malicious, and overexaggerated (Ahmed 2017:21) is a result of feminism's threat to the neoliberal status quo (Rutherford 2018:624) by identifying and speaking out against neoliberal performative empowerment. As this kind of feminist is a threat to neoliberal feminism, there may be a lack of representation in certain genres to avoid threatening the governance in power. Rowe's description (citied by Dow 2005:387) of situational comedy as "representing the unrepresentable" would be a platform where a feminist character who threatens the status quo can emerge and be heard. Amy in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) is a feminist character that threatens the Cloud 9 status quo by unionising the workers and going on strike in the finale of season one.

Superstore (Spitzer 2015) was originally available on the streaming service Netflix as well as the streaming service Amazon Prime Video. Before it was removed from Netflix, *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) was placed under the sitcom genre. On Amazon Prime Video it is categorised under the comedy genre. When looking at the episodic structure of the first season of *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), many of the episodes end on a positive note and small problems are often resolved. Sitcoms conventionally offer viewers an upbeat ending in which challenges are resolved (Olson & Douglas 1997:410). All the episodes in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) are also under half an hour in length. However, there is a continuous overarching plot throughout the season about low-income earnings and the fear of unionisation, which does not result in a "happy and upbeat" (Olson & Douglas 1997:410) season finale, as the employees walk out in protest after their manager is fired for giving a pregnant colleague paid maternity leave.

This study therefore positions *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) as comedy, just as Amazon Prime Video also categorised it. *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) does not fit within the traditional sitcom definition as the season finale does not have a positive ending and lacks a laugh track – another prominent feature of the sitcom according to Mintz (1985:114-115). In the season one finale of *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) the employees walk out in protest after their manager is fired for giving a pregnant colleague paid maternity leave (Spitzer 2015). While their pregnant colleague gets a 'happy' ending, the rest of the employees are at risk of losing their jobs.

Comedy Drama

*Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) is also available on Amazon Prime Video and has been placed into the comedy drama genre by the streaming service. *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) incorporates an element of sitcom comedy style, but is not the dominant style throughout the show. The sitcom style is contrasted with stark realism as soon as the sitcom element ends. The typical sitcom elements described by Mintz (1985:114-115) is seen when Allison's husband Kevin is on screen. Kevin always faces a problem that he can solve with humour and comedy and there is a laugh track that accompanies his narrative of the episode, which changes every episode. Every problem he encounters is easily resolved by the end of the episode. The only characters that do not leave the sitcom style are Kevin McRoberts and his father Pete McRoberts. The only time Kevin's best friend Neil O'Connor leaves the sitcom style is in the final episode of the first season, when his sister Patti O'Connor smashes a bottle over his head to protect Allison, who Neil is strangling. The men, Kevin, Pete, and Neil (until the last minute of the show) never leave the sitcom aspect of the series, their storylines happen and finish there. The only characters who can exist outside of the sitcom aspect are Patti and Allison, and their plotlines take place in the stark realist style of the show, away from the sitcom's canned laughter.

The difference of the aesthetic design in the sitcom element and stark realist element of the show is what guides the audience in understanding Kevin's reality (sitcom) and Allison's reality (stark realism). The main differing factor is the colouring: bright colours during the sitcom sequences, and dark colouring when the stark realist sequence begins. This alternation between televisual styles in each episode allows for the series to be labelled a comedy drama, as the sitcom element is not the dominant televisual style.

*Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are both placed in the comedy drama genre on Amazon Prime Video. Comedy drama differs from situation comedy in the laugh track — comedy dramas do not have laugh

tracks, whereas sitcoms do (Wallace & Stevenson 2009:31). Thompson (2003:ix) argues that the two genres are linked as both make use of recurring characters in domestic settings and the plots of each genre unfold in an entertaining, yet easily comprehensible manner. As the laugh track is no longer a dominant identifying feature in situational comedy (Wallace & Stevenson 2009:31) distinguishing situational comedy from comedy drama has become more difficult.

Wallace and Stevenson (2009:31) argue that another area in which situation comedy and comedy drama differ is in the seriousness of the narrative. The seriousness of the narrative may emerge through numerous complex plot-lines (Mittell 2015:42). These multiple plot-lines allow for different sub-narratives to emerge and intersect or conflict with the main narrative (Mittell 2015:42).This difference is most evident in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021). In the second episode, the sitcom element follows Kevin waiting for a package with a framed hoodie to arrive. The package does not arrive, and Kevin is convinced the neighbours stole his package. Kevin starts a 'war' against them. In Allison's narrative, the stark realist element, she hides the hoodie from Kevin, who emptied their savings account on football memorabilia. To regain control, Allison wears the hoodie that Kevin has spent their savings on. Allison's plot is more serious, as she is also planning to kill her husband, in comparison to the light-hearted nature of Kevin's sitcom plot, where he is feuding with his neighbours.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (Sherman-Palladino 2017) does not alternate between different narrative styles like *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021). While there are comedic elements within the show (Midge decides to begin a career in stand-up comedy), it does not ignore the struggles that Midge endures throughout the series. Her husband leaves her, she then becomes a single mother, and starts the divorce proceedings while navigating a career in stand-up comedy at night and working during the day in order to provide for herself and her children. While Midge is privileged in that she comes from a wealthy family and is able to live with her parents, the show still incorporates the serious issues that she faces while using a comedic style to accompany it, therefore, classifying it under the comedy genre (Wallace & Stevenson 2009:31; Thompson 2003:ix).

Successful American television series often subvert a traditional element within story-telling and exclude an ending (Mittell 2015:33). The exclusion of an ending creates an "infinite model of storytelling" (Mittell 2015:33) where the infinite aspect can only continue for as long as a show is successful. The three series, *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are linked not

only through the genre of comedy, but also their women protagonists. The next section conceptualises women and feminist comedy.

3.3.2 Women and Feminist Comedy

Women's comedy and feminist comedy are two distinct areas of comedy that may or may not overlap. Women's comedy is defined by Swink (2017:17) and Gilbert (2004) as humour created by women, aimed at an audience of women, such as the television show, *Girls* (Dunham 2012). It has become associated with feminist comedy as it is used as a place from which feminist concerns can emerge. Shifman and Lemish (2011:255) identify the basic characteristics of feminist humour below:

> First, feminist humor is oppositional, as it criticizes the current state of gender inequalities and hegemonic stereotyping. Second, as an expression of empowerment, feminist humor relates to the capability for empowerment and freedom to express critical thoughts. Consequentially [*sic*], feminist humor often refers to the ability to create humor that mocks men and hegemonic masculinity. Finally, feminist humor requires access to an outlet that is a "stage" or a medium, through which this kind of humor is expressed and spread.

Feminist humour functions as a medium where women experience a sense of freedom that is not inhibited by hegemonic stereotyping (Shifman & Lemish 2011:255). It is a form of humour that allows women to express the inequalities and exploitation that they face, compared to other forms of humour which may censor these expressions. Feminist humour can become misconstrued if the humourist expression of "hegemonic stereotyping" (Shifman & Lemish 2011:255) serves more as an outlet for mocking hegemonic masculinity, rather than an outlet for empowerment and freedom of expression. Gray (citied by Swink 2017:17) states that feminist comedy is of great importance, since the comedy genre has always been male dominated. As Shifman and Lemish (2011:255) have stated, feminist humour can create a place of empowerment for women, as they are able to express the inequalities that they face through comedy. An example of a feminist comedy is *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016).

Fleabag (Waller-Bridge 2016) is an example of both women's comedy and feminist comedy. The show was created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, a woman, who also plays the main character Fleabag. The show's target audience is young adult women who relate to the themes that occur within the show. As women's comedy is often interlinked with feminist comedy (Swink 2017: 17; Gilbert 2004), what places *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) in the feminist comedy genre is the themes of the show. These themes are what frame *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) as a feminist comedy. The recurring themes in *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016) include gender

inequalities faced by women and hegemonic masculinity (Shifman and Lemish 2011:255). Therefore it is a show not only created by a woman, for an audience of women, but it also critiques gender inequality and hegemonic masculinity. Amazon Prime Video has placed *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) in the comedy drama genre category. As both shows have women protagonists they incorporate feminist humour through various aspects.

In *SuperStore* (Spitzer 2015), Bo runs away after he realises how much financial responsibility comes with having a baby. When Amy and Dina eventually find him, they realise he has not, in fact, run away, but is instead handing out falsified resumes in an attempt to find employment. Bo had initially decided to run away, as all his male role models had abandoned their pregnant partners. However, he decided instead to go find employment. This can be seen as a form of feminist humour in *SuperStore* (Spitzer 2015). The character Bo, initially represents a form of hegemonic masculinity (Shifman & Lemish 2011:255) by following his role models' examples and seemingly abandoning his family. When he is found handing out fraudulent resumes, an instance of feminist humour occurs. In his fraudulent resumes he claims to have experience within the medical field as a doctor as well as the editor in chief at *Vogue*, a famous fashion magazine. These claims are humorous not only in the range of professional experience he has, but also because the audience knows that Bo is actually an emerging rapper trying to find a music label to sign him. He has no experience in the medical field nor at *Vogue,* nor has he ever attended a tertiary institution to further his education beyond a high school diploma.

Bo represents a hegemonic stereotype (Shifman & Lemish 2011:255), where working class men leave their pregnant fiancés. When he is found, this stereotype is subverted because he instead made the decision to stay and support his family. This example in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) begins by showing the potential for feminist humour to mock hegemonic masculinity (Shifman & Lemish 2011:255). However, it shifts to challenge the stereotype, and place the focus on the young couple's ability to provide for themselves and their unborn child as low-income earning individuals.

Allison's aunt in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) comments on how Allison "got lucky" with Kevin because not all men are as wonderful as Kevin is. This instance is a form of feminist humour, as the aspiring Allison is a more layered and nuanced character than her layabout husband. The series makes it clear, and the viewer understands, that it is actually Kevin who has most benefited from his union with Allison.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel uses feminist humour in Midge's interaction with a judge. In the third episode, Midge appears in court to plead not guilty to the charge of public indecency and use of crude language. The judge describes Midge as "packaged right" (referring to her breasts) and decides to drop the charges if Midge agrees to "no longer engage in actions to the detriment of the moral health of those around [her]" (Sherman-Palladino 2017). Outraged, Midge says that she performed to an intoxicated audience who have no recollection of the evening, and therefore the notion that her performance was a detriment to their moral health is invalid. She then continues by asking the judge to point out why the language she used was a crime, as well as the differences between the crude language used in her performance and the crude language that can be overheard in any arbitrary conversation had by men at any point in time. Following this statement, she raises her concern about the judge's focus on her use of foul language when the country is experiencing much larger issues such as the "Jim Crow laws", "voter fraud", and the fabricated accusation of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (Sherman-Palladio 2017). Midge is jailed until she apologises for her disrespectful behaviour in the courtroom, which included using foul language in front of the judge.

Feminist comedy (Shifman & Lemish 2011:255) has been used as a tool to highlight the irony of the patriarchy by identifying flaws within the patriarchal system, as Midge has done. Her being jailed for the use of crude language is a complete waste of judicial time and resources, as the country is facing much bigger political issues. Her speaking out about these issues alongside her use of crude language in the courtroom, in front of the judge, shows how feminist comedy promotes freedom of expression and empowerment.

Feminist comedy aims to empower women while the performative empowerment only creates the illusion of empowerment. Comedy, and in particular feminist comedy, can create a sense of freedom and agency since people can freely express the inequalities that they face (Shifman & Lemish 2011:255). By analysing scholarship about performative empowerment and feminist comedy, the study aims to challenge and rethink the idea of 'being enough' for the women protagonists in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

3.3.3 Women in American Comedy Television

Gender roles can be challenged and explored within the two-dimensional televisual form (Holbert, Shah & Kwak 2003:45). Since Holbert, Shah and Kwak's (2003:45) initial publication in 2003, television has since entered a "golden age" for women (Perkins & Schreiber 2019:919). This "golden age" described by Perkins and Schreiber (2019:919) has seen an

increase in the representation of women not only on screen but behind the screen as well, as more women are now directors, creators, technicians. The representation of women in comedy has shifted from previous portrayals of strong, independent women attempting to create a balance between pursuing a career and creating a family (Holbert *et al* 2003:49), to female characters that grapple with the demands of a "gendered neoliberal(ist)" twenty-first century society (Perkins & Schreiber 2019:920) where the ideology of a resilient woman is being questioned by women characters who exhibit their vulnerabilities.

While there have been shifts in the portrayal of women characters, there are still shows that portray women, and women in positions of power, through a lens of enlightened sexism (Yates 2018:37-53). Enlightened sexism is a term that has emerged as a response to feminism in popular culture, whereby women and men are labelled and appear to be equal, that is, without a gender barrier that divides their successes (Douglas 2010 & Yeats 2018:37). This appearance of equality is rooted in sexism and is a retaliation on feminist movements (Douglas 2010:11 & Yeats 2018:37). This specific portrayal of women characters in power who experience enlightened sexism is found in HBO series *Veep* (Iannucci 2012). The woman protagonist in *Veep* (Iannucci 2012), Selina Meyer (Julia-Louis Dreyfus), is the vice-president of the United States of America. The series follows her journey as a woman who holds a powerful position in American politics (Yeats 2018:36). Even though she has a powerful position within American politics, she still falls victim to the gender inequality that takes place within American politics. Her political achievements and successes are often merely accidental mishaps, political epiphenomena that occur throughout the show. The little she achieves is deliberate, and thus, she is continuously the object source of humour in the show. While she could be considered a victim of the reigning patriarchal system, Selina herself uses the patriarchal system to her personal advantage at the expense of her family and fellow party members. The success of *Veep* (Iannucci 2012) as a women-centric situational comedy whose protagonist is a woman in (pursuit of) power, was made possible by the success of one of the first women-centric sitcom series that highlighted second wave feminism on American television, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970).

The Mary Tyler Moore Show

The plot of the show follows Mary Richards, a woman who is independent, unmarried, and working in the television newsroom — a male dominated industry, (Dow 2005:379 & Crozier 2008:51). Dow (2005:380) states that the show created a new type of woman character within the sitcom — the independent working woman — who rejected the traditional roles of family and occupations that were considered to be for women only, like nursing and teaching. *The*

Mary Tyler Moore Show (Brooks & Burns 1970) also allowed for other women characters within the show to get their own spin-off series. Rhoda, Mary's best friend, got her own spin-off called *Rhoda* (Brooks & Burns 1974) that focuses on her move to New York City, and Phyllis, Mary's other friend, got her own show called *Phyllis* (Brooks & Burns 1975) that centres around her life as a young widow living in San-Francisco. These spin-offs opened up the different avenues for the representation of women in sitcoms to wider narrative possibilities.

Dow (2005:380-381) highlights that the show lacked engagement with the second wave of feminism at the time of the series' initial broadcast. The show presents a form of "lifestyle feminism" (Dow 2005:380-381) where the premise is the only feminist element in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brookes & Burns 1970). Mary herself is not an active participant of the liberation movement, nor does she deliberately express any second wave feminist ideals. Her workplace replicates that of a family environment and her boss, Lou Grant, functions as the office 'father'. When Mary does try to create more opportunity for herself and the company, she is continuously reprimanded by Lou and unable to advance her career (Dow 2005 & Crozier 2008:56). Mary is, therefore, not fully independent since this 'family environment', which supposedly supports her, refuses her the opportunity to succeed beyond a certain point and her career decisions are determined by her male boss (Dow 2005:381).

Dow (2005:381) argues that, while Mary can be understood as an example of second wave feminism, the character does not explicitly identify as feminist. Dow (2005:380) is not placing "lifestyle feminism" within a negative binary in opposition to pronounced engagement in second wave feminism. Rather, Dow highlights the evolution of women protagonists in comedy. Mary's character functions as an "emerging feminine consciousness" (Crozier 2008; Jule 2010:124) because she continues to follow traditional aspects of femininity, while searching and creating more independence for herself within the male-dominated business.

Mary's character was ground-breaking representation for women during the 1970s as she was thus the first successful representation of the independent working woman.[10] The next women-centric comedy series to replicate similar success was *Murphy Brown* (English 1988).

Murphy Brown

[10] Success, in this instance, is indicated by the amount of time *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brookes & Burns 1970) and *Murphy Brown* (English 1988) aired on television.

The next successful women-centric comedy series *Murphy Brown* (English 1988) only aired 18 years later, in 1988. The success of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970) created an opportunity for many other female characters to receive their own spin-off women-centric series. However, these spin-offs, *Rhoda* (Brooks & Burns 1974) and *Phyllis* (Brooks & Burns 1975), were not as successful as their precursor.

Murphy Brown follows the personal and workplace experiences of fortysomething top investigative journalist and television presenter Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen). Despite her successful career, Murphy is labelled as single and flawed by Ferrell (2017:167). Murphy was extremely smart and described by Ferrell (2017:167) as "often the smartest person in the room", which created tension between her and the men she encountered. Ferrell (2017:167) also describes her as "talented, smart, uncompromising, complicated, nuanced, unpolished, unapologetic, aggressive and wonderfully imagined". Murphy's 'flaws' are that she does not submit to the men around her. Murphy's imperfections (Ferrell 2017:167-168) propelled the show's popularity among the audience.

Unlike Mary in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970), Murphy uses her wit and outspokenness to actively call out gender inequality within her workplace. Furthermore, she did not simply acquire her job by accident (as Mary did), but worked hard to become a top journalist. This difference does not dismiss Mary and her show's contribution to the representation of women in sitcoms, but highlights the development in the representation of the independent working woman. This change moves from Mary in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970), who accidentally acquired a job in a male-dominated television newsroom, to Murphy in *Murphy Brown* (English 1988), a woman that deliberately fought for acclaim and status in a male-dominated industry.

As discussed earlier, neoliberalism promotes hyper-individualisation in order to enhance the production of capital and for individuals to create a self-sufficient lifestyle (Rottenberg 2018:7). Women who embrace neoliberal ideals but do not procreate, do not enhance the production of human capital. Until a woman has contributed to the creation of human capital, she cannot be viewed as a committed individual to the advancement of neoliberal society (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020:8). This is evident in seasons three and four of *Murphy Brown* (English 1988), when Murphy Brown, the 'successfully independent hard-working single' woman, suddenly falls pregnant. Her pregnancy threatens to temporarily remove her from the work force, and promises to anchor her in the domain of the domestic.

Women who focus solely on advancing their careers and creating capital for their employers will not procreate and, therefore, not produce future human capital. It is important to acknowledge that an individual's desire for procreation does not make them a pawn of capitalism. However, participating in procreation in order to achieve neoliberal societal expectations makes an individual a victim to neoliberal ideals (Rottenberg 2017:332). Neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism thus exploits women for their labour and well as their ability to reproduce human capital. Only once a woman has achieved all of the above-mentioned criteria will she then be viewed as 'empowered'. Neoliberal empowerment is unattainable as there is no set measurement to be 'empowered', therefore, women are continuously exploited and exploit themselves in order to achieve performative empowerment.

Ferrell's (2017:167) discussion of *Murphy Brown* (English 1988) foregrounds gender inequality in the American corporate workplace of the 1980s and 1990s. This inequality in the workplace visualised how women's independence and success was ultimately gendered and defined by men. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970) and *Murphy Brown* (English 1988) both presented to their audiences the independent working woman who consciously or unconsciously had feminist views. Both shows also consciously or unconsciously presented to their audience a gendered independence, as both Mary and Murphy's success is defined by the men in power around them.

The Golden Girls

West (2010:1) and Van Bauwel (2017:2) describe *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) as a highly successful sitcom series, since it was the first women-centred sitcom that maintained popularity throughout its duration on television. Often, women-centred shows were cancelled and removed from television during the 1980s. Women-centred shows that focused on older women (65 and up) was something that had little to no visibility previously on screen. In *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) the four characters Rose Nylund (Betty White), Dorothy Zbornak (Bea Arthur), Sophia Petrillo (Estelle Getty), and Blanche Devereaux (Rue McClanahan) live together in a suburban home. The show is centred around their relationships with one another as a group of older women, where three of the four characters are widows and Rose Nylund is divorced (Belli 2017:140). This dynamic of four older women living with one another was likely unfamiliar to television audiences at the time. *The Golden Girls'* (Harris 1985) success may well have been aided by the situational comedy's ability to "represent the unrepresentable" Rowe (cited by Dow 2005: 387). The idea of unrepresentable can be linked to the show's appeal to audiences at the time, as previous shows alienated the older audiences. *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) was able to gain traction amongst newer audiences

despite the narrative centring itself around four older women. The show's success could also be contributed to the cast, particularly Betty White, who was an already established performer and social activist.

The notion of the sitcom representing the unrepresentable (Rowe cited by Dow 2005: 387) is evident in the show's focus on older women and their non-traditional family structure, which rejects the nuclear family ideal pushed by American politics (Belli 2017:140). Older women having sexual desires is not unrepresentable, but the agency and the empowerment that the characters represent is deemed unrepresentable for a neoliberal patriarchal-conservative viewership. Another of *The Golden Girls'* (Harris 1985) many successes was that its all-women primary characters address uncomfortable social topics of the time, such as the social acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community, the AIDS pandemic, racism, sexuality, and the mistreatment of the elderly (West 2010:2 & Belli 2017:138). These discussions represented the respective social movements at the time that had been underrepresented or had no representation at all because of neoliberal patriarchal-conservative viewership. These discussions and characters are not unrepresentable, they just did not have a place to exist commercially due to the stringent, ruling, conservative viewership at the time. *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) allowed comedy and women characters in comedy to provide viewers with representations of agency and empowerment. The space for representation has also allowed a shift in the development of the independent working woman character.

The independent working woman character has developed throughout the years on television. This is evident in the shift from second-wave feminist representation in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970) to discussions that were not only centred around inequality between white men and white women in *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985). *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) began referencing an emerging consciousness around the start of third-wave feminism, through their discussions of topics that were often avoided (West 2010:2 & Belli 2017:138). This reference to the emerging consciousness of third-wave feminism differs from the consciousness of second-wave feminism in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970) and *Murphy Brown* (English 1988), as *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) discuss a multitude of issues including sexuality, race, and ageism.

The Golden Girls (Harris 1985) also offered new insight into what a non-traditional family structure may look like for older women who are looking at their lives past retirement and have financial constraints (Belli 2017:139). The four women are "bound by financial need and personal choice", according to Belli (2017:139). While she may be referring to the community

of the non-traditional family structure that *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) created, the inclusion of "financial need" is an important aspect to note. These older women appear "empowered" (West 2010:13) in terms of embracing their sexuality and their "independence" as four older women who are able to live with one another and take care of one another. However, this personal decision to live together was largely made because of financial reasons. While disrupting the neoliberal idea of the 'nuclear family', the series also highlights that finances and capital are key factors informing decision making, even – or especially – for women retirees.

Their non-traditional family structure also receives resistance from other characters in the show who present them with challenges of being "chosen family" (Belli 2017:140). When the city inspector is made aware that there are three women renting rooms from Dorothy, the owner of the house, he immediately gives them a $10 000 fine, but disguises it as "improvement costing" in order to ensure that the house is liveable for four women (Belli 2017:140). The fine of $10 000 can be seen as a deliberate intervention from the government (Gilbert 2013:9) because the women threaten the ideologies of a neoliberal regime by living together and afford a comfortable lifestyle from their savings. Living off of savings also defeats the neoliberal objective of continuously working to create a better life for oneself through continuous labour and accumulation (Rottenberg 2018:7), as they no longer work to afford their comfortable lifestyle. The titular character in *Murphy Brown* (English 1988) embraces this ideal of working hard for a better life and is a top investigative journalist and television presenter in her field. Murphy, therefore, appears to be the ideal empowered neoliberal woman as she is self-sufficient. Murphy Brown's decision to embrace a self-sufficient lifestyle aligns with neoliberal hyper-individualisation.

Superstore (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are shows that align themselves with fourth wave feminism movement, which has emerged during neoliberalism (the current dominant ideology that influences society's political, economic and social spheres). The analysis will explore whether the shows strengthen neoliberal ideology or whether they aid to the consciousness around fourth wave feminism through the main women characters' negotiation of performative empowerment.

As stated earlier, the current wave of feminism is fourth wave feminism (Cabrera, Belloso and Prieto 2021:417) and it focuses on "diverse identities and corporalities" while still aiming to overcome gender inequality. *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong

2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are three women-centric comedy series whose narratives embrace these "diverse identities and corporalities" (Cabrera, Belloso & Prieto 2021:417). *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) incorporates a multitude of diverse characters with numerous men and women of different races, multiple socio-economic backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ representation, differently abled-body representation, significant age representation from a woman in her late teenage years to an elderly woman in her 80s, and religious diversity. *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), although having a predominately white main cast, includes a racially, socio-economic, and LGBTQIA+ diverse cast of secondary characters. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) also showcases diverse identities (Cabrera, Belloso and Prieto 2021:417), although the narrative is placed within the upper-class Jewish community in the 1950s. These diverse characters emerge when the main character exits her upper-class community and befriends the manager of a local downtown bar.

Chapter Three has focused on deepening the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of fourth wave feminism and women in comedy. This chapter has also conceptualised and framed the situation comedy and comedy drama genres, and the evolution of main women protagonist characters across selected American woman-centric comedy series. As the three selected series for the study all have main women protagonists, women and feminist comedy has been conceptualised by drawing from three successful women protagonist comedy series, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 1970), *Murphy Brown* (English 1988), and *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985).

Against the backdrop of this chapter, and as informed by key ideas from both Chapter Two and Three, Chapter Four focuses on the television series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), in particular the character Amy's embracing and undermining of performative empowerment through labour, gender, and class.

CHAPTER FOUR: AMY VERSUS CORPORATE: THE BATTLEGROUND OF PERFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT IN *SUPERSTORE* (S1)

4.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides a thematic and textual analysis of performative empowerment in the first season of the comedy television series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015).[11] This analysis occurs with due reference to the key ideas of neoliberalism, neoliberal feminism, and women-centric comedy series, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Within these respective analyses, the focus for the thematic analysis comprises identifying themes that are either continuously referred to or mentioned once and then not again. The textual analysis then builds on the specific themes identified in the series and analyses how the main women protagonists simultaneously embrace and undermine performative empowerment.

Bratslavsky (2019:209) describes *Superstore* as a comedy show that offers different representations of labour and class on television which have not previously been represented. The narrative unfolds within the super store, Cloud 9, and the characters are the low-income employees of the store. The structure of this show is also a subversion of the traditional situational comedy in that the laugh track and contained episodic narrative of the situation comedy do not appear within *Superstore*. This subversion of the traditional sitcom aids the show and its characters as they all continuously undermine Corporate and its policies (Bratslavsky 2019:216). Both the show style and diegesis challenge the traditional neoliberal systems in place that prevent growth and freedom. *Superstore's* world-building takes place within the Cloud 9 store. The show's narrative is contained to the store and it does not "re-expand [its] diegetic universe" (O'Sullivan 2019:57). The series' contained geographic setting allows the narrative to unfold through the characters and also adheres to the sitcom characteristic of the contained set.

In the context of the series *Superstore* the employees find themselves in conflict with the working conditions of the Cloud 9 store. To maintain specificity, this analysis focuses on the main female employees of Cloud 9. The recurring theme of the individual versus themselves captures how neoliberal performative empowerment creates an identity which embeds itself

[11] In the interest of streamlined reading, I will only provide the full reference *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) once per section and then simply refer to the title, *Superstore,* throughout the rest of the section.

within capital gain ideals, thus this 'individual' identity is not truly individual, as it is promoted by the dominant ruling ideology (Gilbert 2013:7-11). This neoliberal individualist identity causes tension between itself and an individual's actual identity.

This analysis interrogates the women protagonists' undermining and embracing of performative empowerment through labour, class, and gender. For *Superstore*, there is a greater focus on labour and, more specifically, gendered labour, with intersecting themes of class and gender. All episodes in the show continuously either directly or indirectly address the above themes. However, for the purposes of the current study I analyse the first episode, the seventh episode, and the last episode (finale) of the season. The thematic and textual analysis of each episode also includes references to specific moments from other episodes that speak directly to the identified themes.

4.2 Pilot Episode

The first episode of the series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) is analysed in this chapter. The selection of the pilot episode is important, as this episode establishes the diegesis and ideological points of reference wherein the narrative unfolds and introduces the prominent characters that appear throughout the season.

4.2.1 Plot Summary

The first episode introduces the big American super store, Cloud 9, the location of the rest of the season. The store is described in the opening dialogue as a place where American dreams can come true for the customers who shop there. Jonah, a new employee, joins the Cloud 9 store and confuses Amy, for a customer, as she is not wearing her employee vest. This misunderstanding creates tension between Amy and Jonah, as he positions himself as someone who does not look like a big department store employee. After Cheyenne, a heavily pregnant teenager who works at the store, asks Amy if she can take a break, Jonah realizes that Amy works at the store.

When Amy puts her vest on, her name tag reads 'Ramona'. When Jonah calls her by this name, she says that it's not her real name, she uses fake names because she does not want the customers calling her by her real name. She does not tell Jonah her name and leaves to continue working. Jonah spends the rest of the episode attempting to persuade Amy to tell him her real name and prove to her that he does not believe he is superior to minimum wage store employees. Amy's attempt to return to work is halted when Cheyenne receives a marriage proposal from her teenage boyfriend Bo, the father of their unborn child. Amy

interrupts this proposal and tells Cheyenne to think about her future before accepting the proposal. Cheyenne takes Amy's advice and does not accept the proposal.

In Jonah's attempt to prove himself to Amy, he re-prices all the electronics in the store to 25 cents instead of only reducing them by 25 percent. A chaotic outbreak then occurs when the customers seize this opportunity and Dina, the assistant manager, stops the stampede by firing a shotgun into the ceiling. After an employee meeting is held about making mistakes, Jonah attempts to reconcile with Amy by showing her the beauty in the mundane. His first attempt at this is throwing a white plastic bag into the air and watching it fall. Amy does not entertain Jonah's first attempt and walks away once the bag has landed on the ground. Jonah attempts to show Amy this beauty again, however, he is interrupted by an armed robbery that turns into a marriage proposal dance break planned by Bo.

Dina misunderstands the situation and calls SWAT to intervene. In order to delay the 'hostage' situation she turns off the power, revealing Jonah's 'beauty of the mundane' moment, where he has stuck glow-in-the-dark stars to the store ceiling. This moment persuades Cheyenne to accept Bo's proposal as she believes the stars were part of the proposal. Cheyenne is unaware that it was Jonah who spent all day putting glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling for Amy. The episode ends with all the employees leaving the store in the evening. As Amy and Jonah walk to their cars, Amy tells Jonah her name. Once they have said goodbye, Amy removes her wedding ring from her pocket and puts it on her finger.

4.2.2 Pilot Analysis (S1 E1)

Performative empowerment in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) is simultaneously embraced and undermined by the leading women protagonists. As performative empowerment emerges in neoliberal discourse as a superficial empowerment for women,[12] it fits into two themes, *the individual versus society* and *the individual versus themselves*. These themes emerge from playwriting and screenwriting discourse. They were introduced to me during a play and screenwriting workshop that I attended in 2023, hosted by Professor José Alejandro Melero Salvador. These themes, along with others, were presented as ways in which to develop plot depth and characterisation of a narrative (Melero 2023).

While *the individual versus society* and *the individual versus themselves* are used within screenwriting discourse, their universality allows them to emerge from the thematic analysis

[12] Performative empowerment is explained in depth in Chapter 2, section 2.7.2 titled 'Performative Empowerment'.

discourse of this study. They are, however, placed within the neoliberal and neoliberal feminism conceptual framework and understood through this, as established in depth below.

The Individual versus Neoliberal Society

Neoliberalism aims to create balance in society between freedom and equality (Mickunas 2019:1). This freedom and equality (Mickunas 2019:1) would create a society that is democratic, stable, peaceful, and inclusive (Harvey 2007:10). However, because of its roots within the Republican right wing, freedom and equality cannot be achieved, because it only solidifies and strengthens the upper class (Gilbert 2013:7-11).

In all the series, the women protagonists find themselves in conflict with society, specifically neoliberal society. Neoliberal society maintains that women should never stop working on themselves in order to continuously increase their value (Rottenberg 2018:2). If women have to continuously work on and improve themselves, both socially and financially in order to be of value, they will never 'be enough', 'independent', or empowered. If they want to engage with freedom and equality promised by neoliberalism they cannot, because it is an ideology that aims to solidify the upper class (Gilbert 2013:7-11). All their efforts to be seen as free, equal, and empowered will never afford them the opportunity to actually better their lives. They are, therefore, indefinitely working on themselves as the individual in order to create a better lifestyle for themselves in neoliberal society. However, neoliberal society will not afford them the opportunity to engage with class mobility and actual empowerment. These individuals then find themselves in opposition with themselves, as their continuous attempt to meet neoliberal ideals puts them in conflict with their actual self.

The Neoliberal Individual versus Themselves

The neoliberal individual versus themselves is a theme that assists in the understanding, embracing, and subverting neoliberal performative empowerment. As defined in Chapter Two section 2.8.2, performative empowerment is the false empowerment of women under neoliberalism. Women are promised 'empowerment' if they obtain a work-life balance (Rutherford 2018:622). Yet, this balance cannot be measured and therefore women work tirelessly to achieve it, when they merely assist the capital gain and labour production (Rutherford 2018:622). The neoliberal individual therefore engages with certain ideals in order to obtain an empowerment that, by design, does not exist. The neoliberal individual, in an attempt to obtain this false empowerment, will sacrifice their own sense of self and morality. One of the ways in which this kind of sacrifice (possibly reframed a voluntary compromise) may manifest is through 'bought time' (Odell 2023:44-47) where individuals

increase their work hours to produce capital and do the work of others (Cotter 2020:57) to achieve financial success. The higher work hours increases the amount of bought time (Odell 2023:44-47), which allows employees to earn more. After increasing their work hours in the hopes of achieving financial success, women then return home and begin their unpaid domestic labour (Rottenberg 2017:341). Therefore, labour for women does not end when their bought time (Odell 2023:44-47) is complete. They must further partake in unpaid domestic labour in order to obtain a successful work-life balance (Rutherford 2018:622).

Increasing bought time (Odell 2023:44-47) while still attempting to embrace a neoliberal work-life balance (Rutherford 2018:622), achieve financial success, and achieve 'empowerment' creates conflict within an individual. This ultimately results in the neoliberal individual in conflict with themselves, as they attempt to embrace a neoliberal persona whose ideals contradict their own individual values and ideals. The "difference and deviation" (Ahmed 2017:197) of the true individual self can be damaging to those in power, as this "difference and deviation" (Ahmed 2017:197) does not conform to the neoliberal self's ideals. The individual experiences a form of cognitive dissonance,[13] an experience of discomfort (Gbadamosi 2009:1079) created in this instance by the conflict between the individual's more authentic aspirations and desires and their willingness for soft forms of self-exploitation. Both these themes, the *individual versus neoliberal society* and *the individual versus themselves* play out across all three selected series for the study. In the case of *Superstore*, the themes emerge through the interactions and conflict between employees of Cloud 9 and Corporate.

1. Cloud 9, "Everything You Could Ever Want or Need" and Neoliberal Freedom

The audience is introduced to Cloud 9 at the start of the first episode of the series, through the following dialogue (Spitzer 2015): "The American superstore. One-stop shopping for everything you could ever want or need. Do you want to be thinner? Fatter? Happier? Sadder? Are you looking for friendship? Or solitude? Or even love?". This introduction to the store is one that mimics the neoliberal narrative of the individual self and the freedom that accompanies it. In Cloud 9, the customers can shop for anything they need as this superstore allegedly has the capacity to cater to all consumers' wants and desires. Similarly, the free

[13] Cognitive dissonance is psychological occurrence where an individual holds two different understandings of a piece of knowledge that are inconsistent with one another, which creates a discomfort within the individual (Festinger cited by Gbadamosi 2009:1079). While there has been much research since Festinger's understanding of cognitive dissonance (in Gbadamosi 2009:1079), the study uses Festinger's definition, as it reflects the theme of *the individual versus themselves*.

neoliberal individual has equal opportunity where they can make their own choices and are not forced into decisions by a governing force (Mickunas 2019:2-3).

The Cloud 9 superstore and the free neoliberal individual ideal both propose an environment wherein individuals can acquire anything they "could ever want or need" (Spitzer 2015). However, while this implies that the individuals have a certain freedom, what they can actually acquire is determined by governing bodies. Cloud 9 sells basic necessities that are often marked as discounted. In *Superstore,* what the customers are able to purchase within the store is determined by the company's corporate board. The viewer does not see this take place. The viewer only has access to what the in-store employees narrate.

'Corporate' is a mystery to the employees and to the viewer. The customers may feel they are 'free' to choose, yet their choices are already predetermined by the Cloud 9 corporation, similar to the (limited) freedom that neoliberalism claims it offers. Corporate and neoliberal governance mask their control by advertising a freedom of choice (Chen 2013:443). Freedom of choice is controlled through particular limitations implemented by governing bodies (Chen 2013:444). Therefore, an individual or customer may feel they are empowered (Harvey 2007:5) as they are free to choose, however, their choice availability is determined by the governing control. This controlled freedom of choice is highlighted 25 seconds into the first episode of the show, when Amy is introduced to the audience while attending to a customer that is inquiring about a discounted ring.

The customer is discontent with having to buy a $10 engagement ring because the $6 engagement rings are sold out. The stone used in the ring is a cheaper alternative to a cubic zirconia, an already cheaper alternative to a diamond. The customer is discontent because he feels the advertisement on the $6 rings was simply propaganda to attract customers and generate capital by only having the $10 rings. His frustration highlights the controlled agency of freedom of choice (Chen 2013:443). He was not actually free to choose his ring, as the only option available to him at the time was the $10 ring. The Cloud 9 store facilitates a structured environment that places particular limitations on customer choice and agency. These facilitated limitations implemented by the Cloud 9 governing body echo the neoliberal 'free' identity where 'free' choice and individualism are not as natural as they are promoted, due to strategic limitations implemented by government rule (Gilbert 2013:9). Cloud 9 not having the $6 ring was not a deliberate decision made by Corporate to inconvenience this particular customer. Stock of products is ordered in batches and if all the stock is bought, it cannot be sold to a customer. While this is a common occurrence, the amount of stock and its price is

predetermined by Corporate. If an individual is unable to obtain their item, they either have to settle for what is available, in this instance the customer purchased the $10 ring, or they have to wait until it is available again.

Lauren Bratslavsky (2019:209) states that "[the] NBC sitcom *Superstore* is set in an icon of neoliberalism: the big box store known for low wages and cheap products." While this is the reality of the super store franchise, it is not advertised as such, as is evident in the opening dialogue. The opening dialogue also addresses an underlying element of neoliberalism which is the capitalisation of lifestyle (Spitzer 2015): "Do you want to be thinner? Fatter? Happier? Sadder? Are you looking for friendship? Or solitude? Or even love?". A customer cannot physically purchase the above-mentioned emotions, however, they can purchase products that appear to assist them in indulging or heightening these emotions. The shot that accompanies the dialogue on "Sadder?" (Spritzer 2015) shows a frowning young adult dressed in all black, applying black lipstick. The young adult is attempting to appear sadder and, in order to enhance their sad appearance, they add black makeup. This decision to be sadder is also a decision that can be capitalised on because of the neoliberal individual self. This young adult is free to choose how they wish to appear therefore they are living their 'truth' by being sad and perpetuating their sadness with black makeup.

Customers are essentially encouraged to indulge in excessiveness. This guidance towards excess consumption is also highlighted throughout the entirety of the series with camera shots that frame product discounts or promotions. Whilst this dialogue gives insight into how Cloud 9 appeals to neoliberalism and markets themselves towards their customers, the rest of the episode shows how neoliberalism emerges within a superstore for its employees.

2. "What's He Doing Cleaning Up Toilet Paper?" – Class Distinction in Superstore

Amy's (America Ferreira) first interaction with new employee Jonah (Ben Feldman) is one example in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) that foregrounds class distinction among store employees in the series. When Jonah sees Amy re-stacking fallen toilet paper, he immediately rushes over to help her as he is under the impression Amy is a customer. Amy does not have her Cloud 9 vest on and Jonah has not been informed that she is, in fact, his floor supervisor. Amy is unaware that Jonah is a brand new hire, so when he tries to help her restack the toilet paper, she is confused as she has never seen or worked with him before. Jonah assumes Amy is confused because he doesn't look like a Cloud 9 store employee. Jonah perceives himself as a physiologically superior, young, muscular, good-looking, able-bodied, white male who is neatly dressed compared to the other male employees who have previously appeared

on screen. The other male employees that have appeared on screen are white men, men of colour, men who appear older, overweight, and untidy. Jonah, therefore, believes he does not look like someone who works there, as his physique and age appear in a higher class category than the physique and age of other store employees, who appear to be in the working class. Amy entertains Jonah's elitist impression of himself and describes Jonah as someone who is "very intelligent, educated, more cultured quality" (Spitzer 2015) as opposed to the other employees. Amy then gestures to the heavily pregnant teenage employee Cheyenne who is battling to pick up a box because of her large stomach. Jonah then realises that Amy does, in fact, work at Cloud 9 and is his supervisor.

This realisation of superiority occurs against a backdrop of discounted products that people use to manage their own personal waste — toilet paper. This is an ironic backdrop as Jonah frames himself as a member of the "working precariat" (Neilson 2015:192), someone of a higher class, yet, while he so desperately tries to convince Amy of his class status, he is standing in front of discounted products used to clean personal waste. After finding out that Amy is his supervisor, an interesting power dynamic takes place. Amy is, in neoliberal terms, a member of the "idle precariat" (Neilson 2015:192) because she is of a lower income status, yet she is Jonah's supervisor. In the workplace she has more authority over him, which is uncommon between the "working and idle precariat" (Neilson 2015:192). Jonah then spends the rest of the episode trying to 'clean' his name and prove himself a "worthy worker" to Amy after restacking the toilet papers. It is made evident later in the show that Jonah is a gambling addict who dropped out of business school and applied at the first job he came across, which happened to be at Cloud 9. Thus, while attempting to portray himself as a member of the upper class, he essentially conceals his current class category which is the "idle precariat" (Neilson 2015:192). According to neoliberal ideals, Jonah has failed and is essentially lazy for not working hard to overcome his addiction and better his future (Rottenberg 2017:339).

Amy's comment on Jonah appearing to be "very intelligent, educated, [and have a] more cultured quality" (Spitzer 2015) is a comment on how people who work in a minimum wage job are perceived by members of the upper class who have well-paying jobs. Stereotypically, people assume that minimum wage workers are the opposite of "very intelligent, educated, [and have a] more cultured quality". While neoliberalism defines class as a "temporary social category" (Jon 2020:162), it is actually a system which allows the wealthy to stay in power, because they are not taxed on their income, unlike low-income earners, like the Cloud 9 employees. Jonah presents himself as an elitist and member of the upper class while desperately trying not to. His preconceived notions on what a minimum wage employee might

look like, as well as the assumption that they do not know what an elitist is, position him as someone with no understanding of or exposure to minimum wage workers. The narrative of the first episode does create a mystery around why Jonah, who appears to be a well-educated young white male, is working in a superstore for a low-income wage. He very clearly does not understand that people are there to earn money, to afford simply surviving, as he continually tries to make everything fun and enjoyable. He has not yet grasped the notion that people are there because it is their only option for receiving an income.

3. "I Enjoy Hard Work" – Human Capital Disguised as Work Ethic

Mateo is a new employee that joins the company on the same day as Jonah. He views Jonah as his enemy because they are in competition with one another. In order to appear more competent than Jonah, Mateo states on multiple occasions that he is at Cloud 9 to "make something of [himself]", "[he] enjoys hard work", and wants to "see how far [he] can fly" (Spitzer 2015). He also attempts to win Amy's favour by snitching on Jonah and saying that he takes his job more seriously than Jonah, who is playing with the shopping carts outside. While Mateo may think he is 'better' than Jonah because he takes his work more seriously, the irony is that all of the employees still earn a minimum wage. Mateo believes that by working hard he might change his class category, which is not possible in reality.

As she has been working at the company for 10 years, Amy no longer requires a calendar to know what time of year it is, because what she unpacks on the shelves indicates what season and time of year it is. McKenzie Wark (2019:41) states that labourers lose their mind and body to their authoritative figures, or their mind is controlled by those in power. Amy has lost her sense of time and now associates with different holidays that generate revenue for the company. Odell (2023:44-47) states that time has become a venture in which capital is produced. It is no longer merely a marker of how much time has passed, but a commodity that is bought and imposed upon low-income employees to create capital.

America Ferreira's character in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) directly deals with the tension between the neoliberal identity and her own identity. She subscribes to the neoliberal identity by accepting the Cloud 9 corporate policies, as she understands that opposing them will result in severe consequences, mainly, losing her job. Amy does not accept the Cloud 9 policies because she agrees with them, she sacrifices her own values and identity because she has no other choice. Amy is a Latino woman who fell pregnant as a teenager and was unable to further her education. Her immediate priority was to earn an income to support her and her child. The child's father (Amy's husband) works for minimum wage to help support their family.

Her husband's ability to keep a job is erratic,[14] thus leaving Amy as the family's only stable income earner.

Mateo and Jonah are fresh human capital whose "hands" and "muscles" (Wark 2019:42) are employed by Cloud 9 to generate revenue. Mateo wants to be viewed as a hard worker in the hopes of changing his class category (Jon 2020:162), whereas Jonah wants to find beauty in the everyday. As Jonah and Amy come from two different class backgrounds, Amy explains to him why finding beauty in the everyday is not possible. Amy has been an employee at Cloud 9 for 10 years. Her work days only differ during significant times of the year, such as Christmas, Halloween, or a new school year. She has, therefore, realised that being viewed as a hard worker does not change her class category (Jon 2020:162) and finding beauty in the everyday is not a top priority when she needs to earn her family's livelihood.

Mateo still embraces the ideal of entrepreneurial identity promoted by neoliberalism (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9), whereas Amy has accepted that this identity is merely a ruse to increase human capital. Every day is the same, as the employees do the same work every day with minimal disruptions. The only change is the commercialised holiday décor, which signals time change. Amy's understanding of this, I argue, makes her aware that she is just another worker for the store, even if she does not express it. Her understanding that nothing really changes is very different to the two new employees who are still under the impression that they are free individuals who are able to change their class positions if they choose to do so. As the season continues and time passes in the store, impressions change as the cracks in Cloud 9 policy start to show.

4.3 "Colour Wars" Episode Seven (S1 E7)

4.3.1 Episode Plot Summary (S1 E7)

In this episode, it is Colour Wars day. The employees are divided into two teams, the red and gold teams, and the team that sells the most items and makes the most profit win a pizza party. Glenn, the store manager, is shown to be the only person who enjoys this day. Glenn is painted throughout the show as naïve and ignorant. He also continuously requires reassurance and help from Dina and Amy to fulfil his managerial role. His naivety is apparent as he continuously seeks out the positive in every situation, including the actions of Corporate (Bratslavsky 2019:214). He is disappointed when the employees are not enthusiastically partaking in the game. When Glenn asks Amy why, she responds that a pizza party does not

[14] In section 4.3 'Colour Wars Episode' the dynamic between Amy and her husband is discussed and analysed.

provide sufficient incentive for the store workers sell more products. Glenn then informs her about a surprise incentive that he intended to announce at the end of the day, which is that each member on the winning team also receives $100. Amy offers to announce the $100 cash prize bonus, but does not announce it to both teams, only to her own team, the yellow team. The red team are unaware of the $100 cash prize bonus and continue to not participate in the colour wars. Therefore, the yellow team is the only team that actively participates in the game as they are the only team aware of the $100. However, this does not last long, as the red team quickly becomes aware that the yellow team are suddenly participating and finds out about the $100 prize money.

As an act of revenge, Garrett, who is on the red team, announces over the store intercom that the yellow team are a second chances organisation that helps rehabilitate felons back into the world. This is when the 'war' begins. Jonah, who is on the yellow team, is not comfortable selling more expensive items to shoppers, even when a shopper says that "money is no object", he still sells the cheaper coffee machine. Amy catches wind of this and explains to Jonah that for many of the store employees $100 is a lot of money that they all really need. In her case specifically, it will help pay for her daughter's braces. Since Jonah comes across as someone who might not desperately need an extra $100, he decides to take the game seriously, as he can see Amy's desperation for the extra money. While both teams are selling unnecessary items to shoppers that they might not need – and advancing neoliberalism's capitalist dynamic of accumulation and surplus – Glenn and Dina are busy organising the pizza party.

In light of Amy's situation, Jonah finds a customer who is looking at a new grill. This customer expresses that he does not have the budget for the grill, however, Jonah convinces him that buying the grill will be an investment for his grilling YouTube channel, which has nine subscribers. This customer then decides to purchase $2000 worth of grill equipment. At the till, Jonah realizes that the $2000 grill shopper is Adam, Amy's husband. Realizing that Amy's family cannot afford it, Jonah offers to 'invest' in the business and pay for all the grill equipment himself. At the end of the day, the gold team wins, and Amy tells Jonah how her and Adam got together — they went to the same high school.

4.3.2 "Colour Wars" Analysis (S1 E7)

1. The $100 Bonus War

The 'colour wars' initiative was created in order for a day at Cloud 9 to appear different, with the promise of a pizza party and $100 bonus to everyone on the winning team. However, the

day is merely a façade created by Corporate. The employees may feel that there is some novelty to their day because they are competing for a prize, however, it is actually just another day of selling items to customers. This façade of a different, 'fun' day at work is extremely beneficial to Cloud 9, as the company uses internal competition to boost their profits.

By giving the employees an incentive of an extra $100 each, they are motivated to sell more during their shift. This is an efficient way in which capitalist corporations use time to boost their capital (Odell 2023:44-47). Through this game, the company has found a disguise where they can earn more profit by promising low-income employees an extra $100. Amy, who was initially unaware of the $100 bonus, did not want to take part in 'colour wars'. However, because her daughter needs braces and Adam has had his work hours cut, she had no other option but to participate. The $100 bonus, as she explains to Jonah later in the episode, is something that the workers of the store desperately need as they all struggle financially (Spitzer 2015). Whilst Jonah is uncomfortable with forcing people to buy what they don't need, he complies with Amy's request as this extra $100 is a necessity for her.

The irony of this episode is that Amy forcing Jonah to sell unnecessary items to customers backfires. Jonah, unaware of who Adam is, sells him $2000 worth of grilling equipment. His words to Amy "And every time I felt bad for the guy, I just thought, hey it's either coming out of his pocket or Amy's", come back and put him in an extremely uncomfortable position when Amy finds out about Adam's reckless spending behaviour. She is reminded that, in her determination to earn an extra $100 by complying with its immoralities, she is robbed of the opportunity to gain anything from the system. This kind of setback prohibits her from ever actually gaining anything tangible or material from the entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9). Her attempt to receive an extra $100 almost results in a $1900 loss. This example can be seen as a failed attempt by a low-income worker to change their class position and increase their capital in a neoliberal context where social mobility is complicated by the same measures put in place to allegedly help individuals to advance financially and socially. While Amy merely wanted to give her daughter braces, this medical expense would have been an extreme expense for her, regardless of her husband's spending. Cloud 9 is the only one who benefits from the 'colour wars', as they use the promise of $100 to create competition to improve the company's earnings (Harvey 2007:154). The employees are merely modes of human capital that the company exploits to increase their capital, even when this exploitation is disguised as a positive team exercise.

2. $100 Bonus and Female Labour

Amy and Cheyenne fall into a different category of labour because they are women. Female labour is an ideal within neoliberal feminism which classifies women as human capital, not only because they can be exploited like men in terms of physical labour, but also because they can reproduce human capital (Banet-Weiser *et al* 2020:8). The responsibility of reproducing human capital is promoted as a middle-class ideal to women, because they can achieve a 'balance' between their work and family life if they decide to have children. While this may appear empowering, the only people who are actually able to achieve this ideal are upper class white women (Olufemi 2020:iv). Cheyenne wants to use the $100 to get a three-dimensional ultrasound of her baby, something she cannot normally afford, but says she would "kill herself before she goes back to 2D ultrasounds". While her priorities may not seem as important as Amy's, she still wants to spoil herself as a soon-to-be teenage mother. However, a three-dimensional ultrasound is usually not accessible to working-class mothers. Cheyenne's desire to have one is potentially her only chance at a glimpse of upper class luxury.

Cheyenne has previously mentioned in the fourth episode of the series (Spitzer 2015) that her big aspiration for her unborn child is that, one day, they will become the assistant manager of Cloud 9. This appears to be a sad aspiration in comparison to Amy's desire for her daughter to be successful and not a Cloud 9 employee like she is. However, Cheyenne may subconsciously understand that because her child is being born into a low-income household, they might not be able to follow the neoliberal dream and change their social class. By receiving the extra $100, she is able to temporarily shift her social class by having a three-dimensional ultrasound. In the fourth episode, Amy refuses to acknowledge that her daughter, who was also born when Amy was a teenager and lives in a low-income household, might follow in her mother's footsteps and work at Cloud 9 for 10 years. For both mothers the $100 bonus is important for the futures of their children.

4.4 "Labor" Episode 11 (S1 E11)

4.4.1 Episode Plot Summary (S1 E11)

Labor is the final episode of the first season of *Superstore*. The episode opens with Dina telling Garrett she feels she has lost power, as she is no longer assistant manager. Cheyenne goes into early labour and is convinced she is giving birth in the store. There are no doctors in the store to help Cheyenne deliver her baby and the ambulance is too far away, so the only people who can deliver the baby are the store employees. The Cloud 9 pharmacist has no experience or training in delivering a baby and can only ask what medication she has taken prior to giving

birth. This opening sequence, however, is actually Cheyenne experiencing false labour indicated by Braxton Hicks contractions. When Cheyenne returns the following day to work, Amy, who is now the assistant manager, tells her that she should not be working on the account of her false labour the previous day. Cheyenne states that she cannot miss work because she needs money for the baby. Jonah then points out that America is the only first world nation that does not have automatic paid maternity leave. Amy and Glenn then try to explore other avenues for Cheyenne to be compensated for the time she needs to take off.

Jonah insists that Amy call Corporate and ask for paid maternity leave, as the company made over a billion dollars the previous year. When Amy calls Corporate, they are unable to give Cheyenne paid maternity leave as they do not offer it. Jonah, who is dissatisfied with this response, mentions that other companies offer it, but their employees are union members. The mention of the word union forces Corporate to take action, with many of the senior Corporate executives being put onto the line. This phone call ends with Corporate sending out Steve, a labour relations consultant. The following morning Steve gives the employees a presentation on why they don't need to unionise nor strike, as Cloud 9 Corporate listens to the needs of their employees. When Jonah asks about the possibility of paid maternity leave, Steve does not answer the question and continually deflects by distracting everyone with doughnut holes and coffee. When Jonah brings this up in the staff room after the meeting, Garrett asks him if he's only had this realization now as the company would not even splurge on full doughnuts for the meeting. Jonah then points out all the issues with the company and suggests starting a union in order for the workers to be paid fairly. Even Glenn, who in his naive manner is generally happy with everything, does not like Steve being in the store.

While Jonah tries to convince Amy about his union, Cheyenne goes into active labour in the store. The workers then help her deliver her baby. Cheyenne asks if it's okay that she might be ten minutes late to work the following day as she needs the money and cannot afford to take a day off. Glenn gives Cheyenne six weeks paid suspension as she violated numerous rules by giving birth in the store and distracted everyone from their work in doing so. Steve fires Glenn for giving Cheyenne six weeks paid suspension. Glenn then suggests that Amy take over as a manager, because Corporate will have his position filled by the next morning. Amy and Jonah then stage a walkout in solidarity with Glenn. Dina regains her power by not joining the walkout and informing everyone that she will mail their pay checks to them.

4.4.2 "Labour" Analysis (S1 E11)

1. Cheyenne's Labour

In the season finale of the series, Cheyenne experiences false labour. While everyone is convinced that she is going to give birth, a bigger underlying problem that is hinted at throughout the series is now also foregrounded in the same way as the pregnancy promises to result in a birth: the inequalities of being employed at a corporation such as Cloud 9. Cheyenne is close to really giving birth, but she still has to come into work as she desperately needs the money for her baby. Cheyenne's predicament reveals the illusions of a neoliberal feminist 'work-life balance' (Rottenberg 2017:341).

Cloud 9's refusal to offer paid maternity leave to their employees is one of the aspects that highlight Harvey's (2007:157) observation that women suffer the most under neoliberal policies, especially those who are in the lower class, because their wealth dictates their role in the market system. If they are in the lower societal brackets, like Cheyenne, they lose state protection and, specifically in Cheyenne's case, the loss of corporate protection by means of paid maternity leave.

Cheyenne giving birth in the final episode presents a cyclical process. She has just given birth to a child who will become another addition to human capital (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020:8). Cheyenne and the baby are taken to hospital when the store employees decide to go on strike. Although the purpose of the unionisation and striking is to obtain fair labour laws for Cheyenne and other mothers, it does not prevent Cheyenne's child from having to live with the same unequal policies when they are older. The cyclical process of human capital reproduction through Cheyenne's birthing strengthens the ruling of the upper class (Harvey 2007:153; Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020:8).

2. Union Buster Steve's Pointless Job

Unions are a threat to neoliberalism as individuals who group together are able to overthrow any regime, whereas the individual person cannot, which is why neoliberalism heavily promotes the ideal of the "individual self" (Harvey 2007:5). Union buster Steve arrives at Cloud 9 in an attempt to extinguish any talks of the store employees unionising. The irony of this scene is that the workers had no intention to unionise, Jonah used the word unionise briefly in Amy's conversation with Corporate, and this gained huge traction resulting in the appearance of union buster Steve. Corporate are more interested in destroying any unionisation than they are in giving Cheyenne maternity leave, thus serving as a reminder that

neoliberalism exists to prioritize the upper class while reinforcing economic inequality in the lower classes (Harvey 2007:19).

Steve has what Graeber (2018:9) describes as a pointless job. He does not attempt to rectify Cloud 9's unfair labour policies, but instead upholds them as he simply invalidates the employees queries into the unfair labour policies. While his job is a pointless job (Graeber 2018:9) in terms of not assisting the employees, it is extremely necessary for Corporate, as Steve's purpose is to uphold the entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9)

3. Amy and Performative Empowerment

Whilst I have argued numerous times in this chapter that Amy is aware of the neoliberal ideals that keep her stuck within the lower class, she is forced to act against them in the last episode. Amy had recently been promoted to assistant manager because Dina resigned. While she acknowledges that it is more work for the same amount of money, she receives an added benefit from the company, who pay half of her tertiary education expenses. While Amy is essentially gaining a benefit because Corporate will pay for her to further her education, she realises that the assistant manager role is more a label than anything else. The promotion is merely a form of performative empowerment as she is still earning the same as she was previously, however, she is required to take on more responsibilities at work. Her authority does not hold much weight outside of her low-income job, which, even as assistant manager, is still a low paid middle-management position. Amy has little actual power (Rutherford 2018:622), which she is acutely aware of (as evidenced in her phone call to Corporate regarding Cheyenne's paid maternity leave).

Glenn facilitates paid maternity leave for Cheyenne in the form of a paid suspension, after she gives birth in the store, which violates Cloud 9 policies. Glenn is fired, despite masking the paid leave as a suspension. Amy undergoes a "character transformation" (Mittell 2015:141), which is when an adult character makes a decision that causes a shift in "morality" and "attitudes" (Mittell 2015:141). This emerges in the narrative through "altered actions and long-term repercussions" (Mittell 2015:141). Amy is outraged because Glenn, just like her, has worked at Cloud 9 for a long time and was fired immediately despite all his years of service. Throughout the series, Amy has continued to accept and not challenge the neoliberal policies of Cloud 9, in fear of becoming unemployed, and has embraced the performative empowerment of being floor supervisor and assistant manager. She undergoes character transformation (Mittell 2015:141) when she realises the scale of inequality within the company

and undermines everything Cloud 9 stands for by gathering the employees to participate in a strike.

Glenn, is fired for giving an employee paid maternity leave under the guise of paid suspension, as Cloud 9 does not provide maternity leave for its employees. Glenn has been portrayed throughout the show as an obedient store-manager who adheres to all of Cloud 9's policies and requests. This corporate obedience is especially evident in Episode 9, "All-Nighter" (Spitzer 2015) where the employees have to stay late and install the new Cloud 9 branding boards, but are locked in the store due to an automated security system. When Glenn is fired for his disobedience, Amy, the assistant store manager, is confronted with a decision: remain obedient to Cloud 9's policies and do nothing, or resist, which could result in her losing her job.

Corporate policies mimic neoliberal ideals, therefore, *the individual versus society* (Amy versus Corporate) and *the individual versus themselves* (Performative empowerment Amy versus empowered Amy) emerge in the last half of the season finale. Amy's decision to strike undermines Cloud 9 corporate policies as well as performative empowerment. By embracing the performative empowerment identity, Amy is exploited for capital gain, as the fear of unemployment and the inability to provide for her family forced her to conform to the unequal Cloud 9 policies. Performative empowerment actually occurs at great personal (moral, social, intellectual) cost to the worker, especially women with caretaking priorities. Performative empowerment ensures that no woman worker can ever "be enough" as the usually vaguely defined notion of "enoughness" is perpetually deferred and clouded in corporate language.

4.5 Summarized Analysis Findings

In conclusion, *Superstore*'*s* (Spitzer 2015) subversion of the traditional sitcom style allows for the characters within the narrative's diegesis to subsequently embrace or challenge Corporate's neoliberal policies. This emerges especially through Amy's character, who complies with these policies out of necessity, to provide for herself and her family. When she attempts to gain $100 out of the system, she is robbed of $1900, thus assisting in her complete subversion of performative empowerment by walking out on strike. While Amy has not empowered herself in the typical neoliberal way through the entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9), she has accessed a small form of empowerment that subverts neoliberal performative empowerment through unionising and striking against unfair labour policies.

4.5.1 Audio-visual essay Attachment

Please watch the audio-visual essay using the following link[15] :

In section 1.6.1, the table provides an insight into what the audio-visual essay for *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) could encompass. During the creation of this audio-visual essay, I initially stuck to the idea of creating a montage where Amy is working without any audio overlay. Once the montage was created, it did not work, regardless of how I attempted to use it. It was also extremely short as there were less shots of Amy working than I had anticipated. My determination to include it hindered the process of the audio-visual essay, as trying to include it and attach it to any quote or thought did not work. I decided to then shift the focus from labour to the themes of *the individual versus themselves* and *the individual versus neoliberal society*. These dominant themes allowed for the intersections of labour, gender and class to emerge without restricting one another to specific moments or shots.

The purpose of this audio-visual essay is to audio-visually articulate insights into performative empowerment in *Superstore*. This audio-visual essay uses and cuts together footage from episodes 1,3,5,6,8,9,10, and 11. The audio-visual essay begins with a cut between shots of the employees singing together before the start of their shift and Amy telling Jonah that Glenn, the manager, has been fired. The essay then cuts back to the employees completing their chant. This cut not only serves as a foreshadowing of Glenn being fired, but it also as a critique of the loyalty that the Cloud 9 store shows its employees. The employees must operate as a cohesive unit in order to ensure the store is run optimally, however, neoliberalism's focus on individual self (Harvey 2007:5) allows for individuals to easily be made redundant, despite their contribution to creating a well-functioning workplace.

This early foreshadowing of Glenn losing his job shows that any individual who challenges the idea of the individual self (Harvey 2007:5) will endure severe consequences, as they threaten neoliberalism's state control by refusing to conform to its ideals. Neoliberalism in this audio-visual essay emerges through the corporate power (Harvey 2007:38) that Cloud 9 has over its employees. While the employees' goal is to increase profit for the corporation, they can chant and operate as a cohesive unit. If they endanger the production of capital, like Glenn does by giving Cheyenne paid maternity leave disguised as paid suspension, they will

[15] Please contact the author at vanrensburgrachael@gmail.com to request access to the audio-visual essays.

immediately be removed from the environment. This opening edit plays an extremely integral role in the audio-visual essay, as it depicts the power that Corporate has over their employees.

The next moment is an overlay of the employees walking out of the store. The image of the employees in their yellow T-shirts walking out to win the $100 'colour war prize' is overlayed with the employees walking out on strike after Glenn is fired. Each walkout occurs with determination and purpose, however, each scenario differs. The walkouts foreshadow the themes of *the neoliberal individual versus themselves* and *the individual versus neoliberal society*. The prominent yellow T-shirt image shows employees conforming to the production of capital by competing in the 'colour wars' for $100, therefore, they are subscribing to the neoliberal self for their bonus as well as neoliberal society in their determination to sell the most products to win $100. In the scene capturing the walkout strike, they are rejecting the neoliberal self and neoliberal society by protesting the unfair dismissal of Glenn. They subscribe to the neoliberal individual self to receive a $100 bonus, but later reject it to protest against corporate power. This is then cemented by the quote that appears on screen, introducing the themes.

This written introduction is juxtaposed by a laughing track to evoke discomfort and tension for the viewer, to mimic the tension that is created between a free individual and an individual who comprises their authentic self to conform to a neoliberal self and society. The laughing track is also used in traditional situational comedy (Mintz 1985:114–15) and *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) has often been placed in the sitcom genre, despite never incorporating a superimposed laugh track. The laugh track was incorporated to see how it could assist the overarching plot of *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) within the audio-visual essay. I only incorporated the laugh track alongside the written text to avoid creating a monotonous and irritating audio track. Confining the laugh track to the written text allows the audio-visual essay to make use of repetition without being repetitive.

The written text is included to briskly remind and guide the viewer of the two broad themes, *the individual versus themselves* and *the individual versus neoliberal society*. The audio-visual interrogation of *the individual versus themselves* focuses on the main woman protagonist Amy. In this montage, clips are taken from moments in three different episodes where the tension between Amy's individual self and her neoliberal self are clear when placed alongside one another. The viewer initially sees her resisting Corporate requirements, as these requirements compromise her morals, however, she conforms in order to create more capital for either the charity or for the yellow team. This is juxtaposed against her conversation with Jonah, where

he attempts to uplift her spirits by telling her to find the moments of beauty in the everyday. The montage of Amy sacrificing her morals is placed before the 'moments of beauty in the everyday', to show why Jonah's statement is uninformed, as there is no beauty in compromising one's morals to afford a basic standard of living. To lighten the tone of the audio-visual essay and incorporate a humorous aspect, I followed the idea of beauty in the everyday with Dina's makeup application sequence. This sequence represents the literal search for beauty in the everyday, as the customers have gone to Cloud 9 to purchase makeup products that can enhance their own beauty every day.

The individual versus neoliberal society starts with the lights being turned off and doors automatically locking. The purpose of this scene in the audio-visual essay is to show the power that Corporate have over their employees, as they are now stuck inside the store until the following day, when the doors unlock. This sequence is followed by a scene of Glenn attempting to create an extra income for Cheyenne. He pours the money collected at the tills for an animal shelter into one big container for Cheyenne, after he finds out there's no paid maternity leave for employees. This montage of corporate power and Glenn going against their ruling of no maternity leave by collecting extra income, shows how Glenn is starting to defy corporate authority. This causes him to lose his job, which is when there is a change in Amy's behaviour.

In *the individual versus themselves*, Amy compromises her morals and adheres to corporate regulations to keep her income. The firing of Glenn, a dedicated store manager who starts the audio-visual essay off by showing his enthusiasm for the store, forces Amy to confront her two selves, her individual and her neoliberal self. This confrontation and breaking of the neoliberal identity occurs when she convinces the employees to go on strike. She also defies Cloud 9 Corporate and neoliberal society by going on strike and taking the others with her, as any action taken against neoliberal power is regarded as an act of rebellion, because those in power can no longer control the body and mind of their labourers (Wark 2019:41). Amy embraces performative empowerment during *the neoliberal individual versus themselves,* as she compromises her morals to keep her job. However, at the end of the audio-visual essay, she has completely subverted performative empowerment by walking out.

The audio-visual essay illustrates how the two themes, *the individual versus themselves* and *the individual versus neoliberal society*, assist the embracing and subverting of performative empowerment. The following chapter analyses how Allison in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) embraces and subverts performative empowerment.

CHAPTER FIVE: PERFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT CAN F**K ITSELF: THE ANALYSIS OF ALLISON AND PERFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT IN *KEVIN CAN F**K HIMSELF* (S1)

5.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter Five provides a thematic and textual analysis of performative empowerment in the first season of the comedy drama television series, *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021). This analysis makes due reference to the key ideas pertaining to neoliberalism, neoliberal feminism, and women-centric comedy series, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Within these respective analyses, the focus for the thematic and textual analysis is performative empowerment in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021)[16].

Unlike *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* differs from *Superstore* is a comedy drama. As it is a comedy drama, the episodes are between 43 and 46 minutes long, and a 12-15 minute sitcom occurs within each episode. The sitcom storyline is fragmented throughout the episodes and juxtaposed with the darker drama element. Both genre styles, although fragmented, work together to create the comedy drama genre style that the show has been classed as. *Kevin can F**k Himself* also moves in between the tonally disparate aesthetic of the sitcom genre and the representational mode of realism. In the sitcom aspect of the show, the storyline revolves around Kevin McRoberts, Neil O'Connor, and Pete McRoberts, with Allison McRoberts and Patti O'Connor as side characters. In the realism aspect of the show, Allison and Patti centrally occupy the storyline with none of the men appearing in it (except briefly in the first episode and briefly in the last episode of the season).

The sitcom style that occasionally appears in *Kevin can F**k Himself* follows the traditional defining characteristics of a situation comedy, unlike *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), which defies it.[17] In *Kevin can F**k Himself,* the sitcom element is identified through traditional characteristics stated by Mintz (1985:114-115): the overlaid laughing track; the recurring characters within the same setting (Patti, Neil, Pete, Kevin, and Allison, in Kevin's living room); short airing time; and, a resolved "happy ending" (Mintz 1985). This "happy ending" (Mintz 1985:115) is usually Kevin's happy and resolved ending. In neoliberal terms a "happy ending"

[16] In the interest of streamlined reading, I only provide the full reference *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) once per section and then simply refer to the title *Kevin can F**k Himself* throughout the rest of the section.
[17] The subversion of the traditional situational comedy in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) is discussed in section 4.2.2 Pilot Analysis (S1 E1).

occurs for individuals who subscribe to, and who manage to actualise, neoliberal ideals. These ideals emerge through hyper-individualisation (Chen 2013:443), marriage (Heath 2012:5; Randles & Woodward 2018:41), the nuclear family, and financial stability (Goodman & Mayer 2018:32). If individuals are successful in all of these areas, they will have a 'happy ending', as they will become a member of society who has endured and overcome hardship. The audience is made aware of this by the starkness of the realism style, where Allison and Patti's 'real' storylines and their performative happiness is unveiled. When Allison is by herself, or her and Patti are alone together, their storylines unfold within the aesthetically dark realist aesthetic.

World-building is an element within film and television that "highlights changes that the serials [or film] create over time" (O'Sullivan 2019:57). "Serial narratives are positioned, more than any other publication method, to gradually map out, fill in, and then re-expand a diegetic universe" (O'Sullivan 2019:57). World-building refers to space but also functions as a clear indicator of time, as the understanding of the places created within a serial is a record of the viewer's engagement with the narrative (O'Sullivan 2019:57). Serial narratives can either use world-building or world-narrowing. In *Kevin can F**k Himself,* world narrowing occurs through Kevin's diegesis in the sitcom style, as everything is resolved at the end (Mintz 1985:115) and therefore resists the idea that a world might function outside of its frame (O'Sullivan 2019:57).

World-building occurs in *Kevin can F**k Himself* when the narrative moves from the sitcom aesthetic to Allison's starkly realist diegesis. The sitcom focuses on Kevin and his world, where Allison is a character who is continuously dismissed by Kevin, Neil, Pete, and Patti. She is portrayed by them as being a boring adult, a character who does not have a life outside of the sitcom world. However, when the diegesis cuts to her alone and in a different room, the world-building of her diegesis begins. Unlike the sitcom's world-narrowing technique, the stark realist aspect builds the world of Allison and her narrative within the town. Through her diegesis, the world is aesthetically dull compared to the bright aesthetics of the sitcom. *Kevin can F**k Himself,* as a serial, is able to build two worlds — Allison's diegesis and Kevin's diegesis, which are stark contrasts of one another. By making use of both world-building and world-narrowing techniques, the show is able to highlight how small and uninteresting Kevin's sitcom narrative is, because it always ends with a resolution that benefits him. Allison's diegesis allows for a world to exist outside of the sitcom, while still continuing to build her narrative.

Performative empowerment is where women appear to be 'empowered' if they subscribe to neoliberal ideals (Rutherford 2018:623). Women are thus in conflict with themselves, because subscribing to neoliberal ideals in order to feel like an 'empowered' neoliberal individual

prevents them from achieving actual empowerment as a non-conforming individual. I have, therefore, created a link between neoliberal performative empowerment and the theme *the individual versus themselves* to capture this inner conflict for performatively empowered women. In the stark realist narrative of *Kevin can F**k Himself,* the darker colours and narrative of premeditated murder give insight into the reality of their lives, which is overlooked in the sitcom. This aesthetic change between stark reality and sitcom strengthens the themes of *the individual versus society* and *the individual versus themselves*. The aesthetic design of the show visually highlights the theme of the individual versus themselves,[18] as Allison and Patti subscribe to their given identities in the sitcom that embrace performative empowerment and do not attempt to challenge them in any way, shape, or form. In the stark realism aspect the women appear as themselves, without subscribing to neoliberal identity.

As performative empowerment emerges from neoliberal discourse as a superficial form of empowerment for women, I argue that performative empowerment fits into two broad themes, *the individual versus society* as well as *the individual versus themselves*. To reiterate from Chapter Four: In the theme *the individual versus society*, the women protagonists find themselves in conflict with society, specifically neoliberal society, as they engage with performative empowerment as a means of social and economic survival (Olufemi 2020:11; Rutherford 2018:623). When the main female protagonists encounter the theme of *the individual versus themselves* they are in a battle with themselves as they have been conditioned to embrace performative empowerment and its assorted ideals and, consequently, when they undermine performative empowerment, it is a rebellion against what they have been conditioned to believe. This tension between learned performative empowerment and the desire to retaliate against it foregrounds itself *Kevin can F**k Himself* through a premeditated murder narrative, in which Allison wants to kill her husband Kevin.

The individual versus society and *the individual versus themselves,* as well as performative empowerment are broad themes to identity and analysis, the analysis interrogates the undermining and embracing of performative empowerment through labour, class, and gender. For *Kevin can F**k Himself,* there is a greater focus on female inequality with intersecting themes of class and female labour. All episodes in the show continuously either directly or indirectly address the above themes. However, for the purposes of the current study, I analyse the first episode, the seventh episode, and the eighth episode (finale) of the season. The

[18] Please refer back to Chapter 4, section 4.2.2, i and ii for the conceptualisation of the themes.

analysis of each episode also includes references to specific moments from other episodes that speak directly to the identified themes.

5.2 "Living the Dream" Episode 1

5.2.1 Episode Plot Summary

"Living the Dream" is the first episode of the television series *Kevin can F**k Himself* created by Valerie Armstrong in 2021. In the first episode, the viewer is introduced to Kevin McRoberts, Pete McRoberts (Kevin's father), Neil O'Connor (Kevin's best friend and next door neighbour), Patti O'Connor (Neil's sister), and Allison McRoberts (Kevin's wife). It is Kevin and Allison's anniversary coming up and Kevin would like to throw a party, which he calls an "Anniversa-Rager". Allison, however, would like a quiet dinner with just the two of them. Kevin disregards her desire for their anniversary celebration and continues with his own plans. When Kevin's boss overhears that he is having an anniversary party, Kevin invites him, but is extremely upset because (according to him) his boss is extremely boring. Kevin then hatches a plan and 'gives' Allison the anniversary party she wants by placing her and his boss in the living room, while he and all his friends have their rager outside. Allison accepts his plan on the condition that they go see the bank about buying a new house in a different area, called Amherst Gates. This house is one that Allison has wanted for a while, as she has pamphlets of it on their fridge. On her way to her job at the local bottle store (owned by her aunt), she walks past a real-estate office. Kevin agrees to their bank appointment as he can then have his rager without worrying about his boss.

While Kevin has his fun party outside, Allison sits with his boss, Mr Harrison. Allison steps on a cockroach and goes upstairs to change her shoes. When she comes back down, Mr Harrison has gone into the kitchen and is partaking in Kevin's side of the party. Mr Harrison then joins Kevin's party and Allison is left alone. She goes upstairs to drink by herself. When she hears something break downstairs, she goes into the living room where Kevin is standing on her Pottery Barn table. He then calls her to join him and announces that they are not going anywhere, as he has been promoted to fibre optics. When Neil stands on the table to celebrate the news that Kevin and Allison are staying, the Pottery Barn table collapses. This is the only 'expensive' and 'nice' item of furniture that they own, but has now been broken after Allison's dreams of moving are destroyed.

Allison goes outside to compose herself and runs into Patti. Allison opens up to Patti about being mentally exhausted and feeling like she's not enough, which is why she wants to move. Patti then tells her that the savings account that both Kevin and Allison put money into weekly

is empty. Kevin depleted the account without telling Allison. There is no money for them to move and change their lives. Allison then goes into the bottle store, takes a bottle of alcohol and walks around the town drinking. She ends up doing cocaine with a mechanic while coming to the realization that Kevin has taken away her independence.

When she realises that the mechanic is not listening to her either, she punches him. When she arrives home, Kevin surprises her with a morning dinner that she has to cook. Kevin also tells her that if she works more at the bottle store, their money in the bank can grow, so there is no need for them to move right now. Kevin has no idea that Allison is aware that the account is empty. Kevin requests that Allison pour him a beer and she accidentally breaks the glass. She then has a thought where she stabs Kevin with the broken glass handle. This does not actually happen, and when Allison walks out of the kitchen she smiles. She has realised that, in order for her to live the life that she wants, she has to kill Kevin.

5.2.2 "Living the Dream" – Thematic and Textual Analysis (S1 E1)

*Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) is a comedy drama that juxtaposes the stereotypical superficial female narrative within the sitcom against a much darker realist female narrative. Previously, television series have reinforced the place of women in society and their stereotypes, instead of challenging and exploring gender roles (Holbert, Shah & Kwak 2003:45), especially in situation comedies. In the analysis of *Kevin can F**k Himself*, the first episode reminds the audience of the preconceived gender roles that the situation comedy places women in (Holbert, Shah & Kwak 2003:45). In the sitcom aspect of the show, Kevin's version of reality is visualised, whereas Allison's reality unfolds in the realist aspect of the show. She does not adopt the same persona in each diegesis, but her identifying factor is that she is Kevin's wife. In the sitcom aspect, her role within the show is to serve Kevin. His sitcom character reinforces their stereotypical roles (Holbert, Shah & Kwak 2003:45) and his authority within the household. Allison's unhappiness and suffering is visualised in the realist aesthetic. This power dynamic reflects the power dynamic that Harvey (2007:157) speaks of, where people exist to serve neoliberal policies and women suffer the most. Allison's character functions as a thematic visualisation of unpaid domestic female labour (Cockburn 2020:13) in the sitcom, as her only physical actions are bringing Kevin food and beer, cleaning up after him, and carrying the laundry basket. The audience is aware that she has a job, however, only to Kevin's benefit — she works at her aunt's liquor store where she receives an employee discount. Allison is never seen in the sitcom actually working at the liquor store. Her existence outside of the sitcom is only alluded to occasionally in dialogue, but it is never visualised. As such, the sitcom aesthetic serves as world-narrowing technique. In the realist aspect, the

audience sees Allison prepare Kevin's food and follows her to work. The realist aspect provides insight into Allison's life outside of serving Kevin in their home. She does still, to some extent, serve him within the realist aspect.

1. Amherst Gates: Your Dream Home Awaits!

Early on in the first episode, a shot focuses on a close up of Allison taking a pamphlet off their fridge. The pamphlet reads Amherst Gates. When Allison opens that pamphlet the shot frames the two page fold out that displays two large houses. The phrases "Move to what moves you" and "Your Dream Home Awaits" are in bold and easily decipherable by the audience. The marketing phrases are a tool utilised under neoliberal rule, and promote the promise of change and class mobility (Jon 2020:162) as these homes appear to be in a more expensive area. Allison is, therefore, capable of changing her social standing and improving her class status if she 'follows her dream' of moving into Amherst Gates – the 'dream home'. While staring at the pamphlet she imagines her life there – a utopia where she and Kevin are dressed more formally, him in a suit and her in a gingham fabric dress with hair and makeup done.[19] She pours him beer and they both smile, appearing to be happy, replicating the 1950s nuclear family propaganda of Mr and Mrs Consumer (Sivulka 2008: [sp]).[20] This dream utopia presents an image of the American Dream in the post-World War 2 American suburbia. This image is juxtaposed by a clinical, white, and cold background colouring, as opposed to a warm colour background reflecting happiness, homeliness, and contentment that occurs in the sitcom element of the show.[21]

This utopian fantasy is interrupted when a cockroach enters the frame. The stillness and focus on Amherst Gates is broken. Allison stomps on the cockroach, killing it, and then wipes it off her boot with the Amherst Gates pamphlet. Both the cockroach and pamphlet end up in the rubbish bin. The cockroach upsets the fantasy, which serves as reminder to both Allison and the audience that Allison is of a lower class. Cockroaches stereotypically represent racial

[19] This image of Allison is significant because the fabric is associated in popular culture with the 1950s American housewife apron. In 1924, after the First World War, gingham flour sacks were created and functioned not only as a containment unit for flour but also as material that could be repurposed into a wide variety of clothing items, including the apron (Nixon 2010:13-17). This eye-catching gingham material also allowed the flour to be "immediately recognizable" to housewives (Nixon 2010: 14). The gingham material in clothing therefore become a common feature in 1920s housewife fashion.

[20] This image of replicates that of the Mr and Mrs Consumer, a marketing ploy created are the Second World War. Advertisements began using women's domestic viewpoint to increase produce sales and appeal to the "women's market" (Sivulka 2008: [sp]). Mr and Mrs Consumer were the 'stereotypical' portrayal of the middle-class families, with a working father and stay at home mother.

[21] It is important to note that the bright lighting used in the sitcom aspect is not the warm lighting I am discussing. The sitcom lighting, although bright, I would argue is not warm. It is bright and sharp. It functions as a sitcom element that ensures the audience is aware that they are watching a fictional performance (Mintz 1985:114-115).

inequalities, class inequalities and filth (Garcia 2017:[sp]).[22] In *Kevin can F**k Himself*, the cockroach does not represent racial inequality, because Allison is a white woman. Its association with class inequality and filth still remain an integral image to the study. The cockroach serves a reminder that Allison and Kevin are not from a higher class. The middle and working class, also known as "working precariat" (Neilson: 2015:192), are, among many things, defined as "clean-living" (Neilson 2015:192). They would, therefore, do not have cockroaches in their house, unlike those of the lower classes or "idle precariat" (Neilson 2015:192) who can only aspire to such cleanliness as a mark of status and accomplishment. The cockroach breaks Allison's utopian fantasy, functioning as the 'destroyer' of this neoliberal utopian project. Both the dead cockroach and the utopian promising pamphlet are discarded into the rubbish bin, which serves as a thematic juxtaposition. The dead cockroach is an attempt to kill Allison's association with the lower class and live "clean" life (Neilson 2015:192) like the middle and working class. Allison using the Amherst Gates pamphlet to scrape the dead cockroach off her shoe is a thematic visual of destruction of the neoliberal utopia. This utopian destruction solidifies Harvey's (2007:19) statement that if neoliberalism cannot function as a utopia, it is simply a systematic reinforcement of economic inequality, as the economic elites cement their class standing.

The neoliberal marketing phrases on the pamphlet allow potential buyers to believe that they are capable of achieving their 'dream'. Neoliberal marketing appears again in the series on Allison's walk to work, when an estate agent informs her about a potential home in Amherst Gates that she and Kevin might be able to afford. David Harvey (2007:154) cautions the lower classes against the neoliberal propaganda of class improvement, as it does not exist to change supposed 'temporary' class categories (Jon 2020:162), but rather cement them. Allison has fallen victim to this propaganda, as she is convinced that her life will improve if they move there. If she works hard enough she can change her circumstances and class category by buying property in Amherst Gates. Allison's belief that moving to Amherst Gates will change her life is an example of what Rutherford (2018:623), Rottenberg (2014:420-421), and Gilbert (2013:9) all describe as the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity. If Allison is able to change the

[22] Cockroaches where believed to have been brought onto American slave ships during the sixteenth century to nineteenth century slave trade (Garcia 2017:[sp]. Abducted African's were forced into the 'underdeck compartment' (Garcia 2017:[sp]) of the ship where the cockroaches also lived and bred. Because of this cockroaches became associated with African slaves and 'roach' and 'cockroach' because racial slurs used against people of colour and different ethnic groups. Because slaves were deemed unequal and therefore bottom-class citizens, they become associated with filth because cockroaches bred in 'underdeck' where many of the abducted African's died. Therefore cockroaches are associated with racial inequality, class inequality and filth.

outcome of lower class life and become a member of the upper class, she will become empowered (Rutherford 2018:623; Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9).

Kevin functions as a symbol for neoliberal control (Olufemi 2020:13). He entertains Allison's desire to move to Amherst Gates as it is time, after living in the same place for the last 10 years. He even agrees to go to the bank with Allison the following Monday so they can discuss their finances and potentially put down a deposit on a house. Kevin humours Allison and makes her feel as though she has been listened to. She smiles more and appears overall to have a calmer sense about her, even in the realist element of the series. However, this is nothing more than a feeling. She has, once again, been made to feel as though she holds some say in her and Kevin's marriage, however, it is merely performative, since she has no power in the marriage (Rutherford 2018:622).

This notion of performative empowerment and Allison's feeling of 'having a say' in the marriage is brought to the forefront when she is first informed by Kevin at the party that they will not be moving, because he has been offered a promotion at work. The second time performative empowerment is brought forward is when Patti informs Allison that the weekly savings account they would use to buy the house is empty. Every time Allison attempts to exercise her empowerment, she once again realises that she actually has no say in their marriage and, ultimately, her life. Even though she is free to desire moving and creating a better life for herself, Kevin continuously manages to stop that from happening.

David Harvey (2007:154) discusses how neoliberalism created capitalist class formation, which cements the upper class as dominant in society. The upper class are able to accumulate vast amounts of wealth and economic power because they are not taxed, while the lower class are taxed on wages and salaries, which creates social and economic inequality (Harvey 2007:19). Allison's dream to join the upper class in Amherst Gates is, to some extent, to do with the wealth and economic power of the upper class that restrict her from joining. However, it is largely Kevin's fault that they are unable to move to a better neighbourhood, as he depleted the account that she put funds into weekly. Kevin is the main obstacle to Allison's upward class mobility.

2. "I'm Fine" – The Broken Glass Motif

The realist aspect of the show occurs two and a half minutes into the first episode, after Kevin has asked Allison to refill his beer glass. As soon as she walks into the kitchen the lighting and tone of the sitcom immediately disappear. The show moves from the bright and light hearted

sitcom, accompanied by a laughing track, to a muted and shadowed lighting. The sound is a mixture between diegetic sound and a building static sound when Allison smashes the beer glass on the counter. She then calls out that she is fine, yet no one in the living room paid any attention to the glass breaking, as she received no response. This is the first time the simultaneous breaking of the stereotypical sitcom character and the beer glass occurs. The breaking of the glass functions as a brief narrative enigma (Mittell 2015:24). It creates uncertainty as to whether or not Allison breaks the glass because none of the characters in the other room acknowledge it and why she broke the glass. It can be argued that the breaking of glass functions as a release for her. It is her metaphorically releasing her anger toward Kevin. In the following scene, Allison has a plaster over her hand, where the glass cut it. The wound's existence does not diminish the use of Mittell's (2015:24) narrative enigma, as the uncertainty remains around why she purposefully smashed a beer glass in the first three minutes of the show.

Before she entered the kitchen, Kevin had, for the tenth year in a row, decided on their anniversary party without considering her request for a quiet dinner. In order to ensure Allison also enjoys the idea, he reminds her how much she loves to plan. This allows Kevin to keep his party without sacrificing anything to include Allison, because if she loves planning and organising the party, all he has to do is show up and enjoy it. On a neoliberal level, Olufemi (2020:13) refers to this as state control, where the patriarchy is able to maintain authority by appearing to give women freedom. While Allison "loves a planning phase" (Armstrong 2021), she is not actually planning anything for herself or that she wants. When Allison enters the kitchen and the aesthetic changes, she is alone and, therefore, able to drop the serving sitcom-wife performance. This visually manifests as the breaking of the glass, as she is in control and can break the glass if she wants to.

Mittell (2015:25) argues that most series that use "central narrative enigmas fail to live up to their concepts"; however, in *Kevin can F**k Himself* this narrative enigma builds throughout the episode as Allison's desire for change becomes stronger. At the end of the episode, when she finds out that Kevin has depleted their savings account, she has a thought where, while pouring Kevin beer, she breaks the beer glass and stabs him in the neck with the broken handle. This central narrative enigma within this episode (Mittell 2015:25), I argue, does not fail but rather cements Allison's plot for the rest of the show: she commits to killing Kevin. It also creates another narrative enigma (Mittell 2015:24) as to whether or not Allison will actually kill Kevin. This new narrative enigma occurs throughout the rest of the series, which allows the show to keep its momentum and creates "suspense and anxious anticipation" (O'Sullivan

2019:55), not only between *Kevin can F**k Himself* episodes, but also for Allison as it poses the question, will she kill Kevin or not?

Kevin was right in that Allison enjoys a planning phase; however, her new project is to plan his death. Allison planning Kevin's murder subverts neoliberal control (Olufemi 2020:13) as she is being dishonest, a quality which neoliberalism attaches to an "unworthy citizen" (Neilson 2015:192).

5.3 "Broken" Episode 7

5.3.1 Episode Plot Summary

Allison has hired a hitman to kill Kevin. She is paying him $7000 and meets with him to ensure that the kill is scheduled for when she is out of town visiting her mother the following week. This is the agreement, until the hitman, Nick, is fired from his waiter job for assaulting another waiter. Nick has violated his parole by assaulting the waiter. This violation will land him back in prison, as the owner of the restaurant must report it to Nick's parole officer. The owner of the restaurant agrees to give him a full day before he informs Nick's parole officer. Nick, therefore, has to kill Kevin and flee the town before the restaurant owner reports the assault. Allison is unaware of this change in plan. The next shot of Allison is when she is questioned in the police station about the shooting. This cuts to a preliminary questioning that Patti practices with her, four days before the beginning of the episode. Allison wants Kevin's murder to appear as though he is the town's drug dealer and was killed because of a lack of supply.[23]

Patti warns Allison that she needs to be careful as the cops will find out about her affair with Sam Park, the owner of the local diner. Allison then ends the relationship with him, because she needs to focus on her relationship with Kevin. After ending the affair, she goes to the fertility clinic where she has a check-up and expresses her desire to start a family with her loving husband. After ensuring that the visit will appear on their medical records, she takes pamphlets to solidify that she is serious about starting a family. When she gets home, she throws them away in the outside bin. While Allison has been making sure the murder cannot

[23] This footnote provides a brief plot summary of episodes 2-7, in order to provide information that is not directly addressed in the main text of the study. In the previous episodes of the series, Allison initially wants to kill Kevin by a drug overdose. While looking to purchase drugs to overdose him with, she finds out that Patti is the local drug dealer. Patti is supplied by a local pharmacist and, when she arrives to get the drugs from him, the police arrive to arrest him. Her supply is cut off and she cannot help Allison or any of her other customers. It is also important to note that Patti was under the impression she was supplying drugs to people who really needed them, as they came in the form of painkillers. When the pharmacist is arrested and Patti's supply goes dry, she is visited by Nick, the hitman. She was unaware that his aunt was buying the painkillers for him. He threatens to expose Patti if she does not get him the drugs. As the police are unaware that Patti is the supplier, they are looking for the town's supplier. This is why Allison wants to pin it on Kevin. Patti will then be safe, and Kevin will be dead.

be pointed at her, Kevin and Neil have decided to start a band. Neil finds the pamphlets in the trash can and interrogates Kevin about wanting to start a family and sacrifice their band. Kevin has no idea about the fertility clinic and both him and Neil go to the clinic to find out why Allison was there. After his visit to the fertility clinic, Kevin decides he wants to have children and announces this in front of Neil, Allison, and Pete. After this announcement Kevin and Neil's band have a concert. Kevin comes home later that evening, he wakes Allison up to tell her about the concert, and they hear someone breaking into the house. Kevin grabs a gun and runs downstairs to protect him and Allison. Allison realises that the hitman has arrived too early and then hears a gunshot.

5.3.2 Thematic and Textual Analysis of Episode 7 (S1 E7)

1. Reproductive Labour as an Alibi

The first time children are mentioned in the series is in the penultimate episode. Children are not mentioned thereafter, in the final episode. The decision to not have children has been made by both Allison and Kevin. Kevin is more vocal about his desire to not have children. He feels it is unfair that children get to sleep whenever they want. Allison goes to the fertility clinic, not because she has a desire to be a mother and raise a family, but because it will help protect her from being investigated after Kevin has been murdered by the hitman. As neoliberalism places a huge emphasis on women's ability to have a work-life balance and delay motherhood (Rottenberg 2017:341), Allison's age (35 years old) would not be suspicious. Neoliberal ideals present women the opportunity to delay motherhood and begin the process when they are ready, however, they must eventually fall pregnant and create a family (Rottenberg 2017:341).

Delaying motherhood via the preservation of a woman's eggs, is also class specific. Women who do not fall into a higher class often cannot afford such a luxury, leaving them to either have the child if they fall pregnant or abort it (Olufemi 2020:25). Allison has not chosen to preserve her eggs, as her and Kevin were not going to start a family. Allison's visit to the clinic and taking pamphlets suggests to the police that they were about to begin the process. This would remove her as a lead suspect in Kevin's murder, because of the emphasis neoliberalism has placed on having a family. The women who usually start the process of becoming pregnant later are often working women that have a desire to climb up their respective corporate ladders (Rottenberg 2017:341). Allison is not an aspiring career woman, she works at the local liquor store owned by her aunt and uncle. In a conversation with Patti in the fourth episode, Allison discusses how she used to work as a paralegal. She was inundated with work, which led Kevin to believe she was having an affair. He then put sugar in the gas tank of Allison's boss' car and got her fired. "Right when I felt like I was … worth something. He ruined it. And you just

watched him and laughed". Once again, while trying to create a better life for her and Kevin, he sabotages it. "He didn't like that something was my own and so he took it away from me". Allison does not have a well-paying job because of Kevin, therefore, she is not a 'female professional' (Rottenberg 2017:341). In performative empowerment the free individual is therefore not entirely free as their living conditions are created by state ruling, not by their own individual choices (Olufemi 2020:25). Allison is not free because her living conditions are created by a ruling state, in this case Kevin, not herself. By pursuing the idea of having children and feeding into reproductive labour it will assist Allison in not becoming a leading suspect in the investigation of Kevin's murder. This is solidified when Kevin returns back from the fertility clinic and announces to everyone in the house (Allison, Patti, Neil, and Pete) that he wants to be a father and that he and Allison will be starting a family.

2. Shadow Economy and Kevin's Murder

Neoliberalism's focus on the entrepreneurial identity (Rutherford 2018:623; Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9) and the liberation of the individual from government intervention inflamed the illegal narcotics and opioids trade (Edmoundson 2021:928). Although this was unplanned, it occurred due to the shift in ideology surrounding the cause of the illegal substance trade (Edmoundson 2021:928). While neoliberalism boasts numerous utopian ideals that allow the individual to "make their own way" (Mickunas 2019:2), implying that success is guaranteed if one works hard enough, the insufficient economic opportunities provided by the government fuelled the illegal trade of narcotics and opioids (Edmoundson 2021:928). The illegal trade of narcotics and opioids is often referred to as the underground or shadow economy (Blackburn, Bose & Capasso 2012:243), an umbrella term that encompasses activities of individuals classified as taboo or illegal within the formal sector (Blackburn, Bose & Capasso 2012:243).

Nick, the hitman Allison hires to kill Kevin, is not only a consumer of the underground economy, but also earns an income from it. Although originally a consumer, Allison's proposal of $7000 allows him to earn an income from the shadow economy. Allison's plan to kill Kevin is only possible through the shadow economy (Blackburn, Bose & Capasso 2012:243). She is able to hire a hitman and cover up a murder because of the ongoing police investigation into the town's narcotics trade. By relying on this underground economy (Blackburn, Bose & Capasso 2012:243) to 'free' her from Kevin, Allison is subverting performative empowerment by entering an economy that is far removed from neoliberalism's ideals.

In order to create class distinctions, people of a lower class are named “unworthy workers” (Neilson 2015:192). “Unworthy workers” (Neilson 2015:192) are members of society that either earn a low income or are unemployed and have to rely on government grants in order to survive. The lower class are unable to change their class category, as neoliberal rule allows for the taxation of the lower class wages (Harvey 2007:19), therefore, even if they adopt the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity (Rutherford 2018:623; Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9) they are unable to change class category. The lower class “unworthy workers” (Neilson 2015:192) are also associated with drug abuse and addiction”. What neoliberalism fails to acknowledge is that tax increases (Bethencourt & Kunze 2018:2) force desperate labourers to commit tax evasion, in order to obtain a reasonable standard of living.

Allison is aware that, even if the police link Nick to Kevin’s murder, they will not suspect her involvement. Nick’s prior imprisonment for the murder of his step-father alongside his previous drug use, and activity in the underground economy, all make him a prime (easy) suspect. By using Nick as a scapegoat,[24] Allison frees herself and Patti from suspicion and potential imprisonment. Allison’s understanding of the neoliberal inequalities and stereotypes allows her to use those same inequalities to undermine neoliberal performative empowerment.

5.4 “Fixed” Episode 8

5.4.1 Episode Plot Summary

Allison and Patti are in the police station after the attempted murder on Kevin. Kevin was not shot or injured during the break-in. Nick was injured and the police inform Kevin, Patti and Allison that Nick has been pulled off of life support. The cops consider Kevin and Allison as one of the ‘lucky families’ that have survived a home invasion unscathed. Even though Allison and Patti’s plan seems to have failed, Allison suggests that they plant the drugs in Nick’s apartment, framing him instead of Kevin. Allison and Patti break into Nick’s room and plant the evidence before the police obtain a warrant to search the apartment.

Allison and Patti are almost caught in the act by Nick’s aunt. Patti distracts the aunt while Allison plants the evidence. In Patti’s conversation with Nick’s aunt, she finds out that Nick is not dead, but in critical condition. While Patti and Allison are at Nick’s aunt’s house, Kevin is out drinking at the bar. In their drunkenness, Kevin and the other patrons of the bar decide that Kevin should run for office. Back at home, while Kevin is campaigning for office in the

[24] A scapegoat is defined as “a person who is blamed or punished for another’s faults or actions” (Cambridge Dictionary [sa]).

kitchen, Sam checks in on Allison and informs her that he has left his wife. While at Kevin and Allison's house, Kevin proposes that his campaign event should be held at Sam's diner.

At Kevin's campaign event, Neil is upset that Kevin is running for office. Kevin suggests that they play hide and seek and Neil runs off to hide. When Allison realises how much support Kevin has for his campaign, she searches outside for Patti. However, Sam finds Allison outside and the two have an argument about how Kevin always gets his way, like convincing Sam to use the diner for his event. In the midst of this argument, Sam says to Allison that she deserves better than the idiots inside the diner and that she could be "more" (Armstrong 2021). She then responds with "This is it. This should be enough", and walks back into the diner, where she starts drinking. Kevin reprimands Allison, saying: "You've got like an image now. You gotta act like a politician's wife". Allison points out the irony that Kevin also has an image, he drinks and the rest of the bar cheer him on. She calls him a "dick" and leaves the diner.

When Allison arrives home, she finds Patti on their couch. Patti had looked into the lead investigator's notebook and is upset that Allison asked her to do it. Since Patti is in a relationship with the investigator, Tammy, she feels that Allison exploited her romantic relationship with Tammy for information on the case. However, the notebook contained nothing of importance. Patti and Allison then argue, because they have both done much worse things for one another throughout the series, like trying to kill Kevin. Patti leaves and Allison goes into the kitchen, when Neil comes out of the cupboard claiming to have a recording of the argument. When Allison grabs the phone from him, Neil tries to strangle her. Patti rushes back in and smashes a bottle over Neil's head. He falls to the ground in pain, releasing Allison. Patti tells Neil that he will not be telling Kevin anything about what he just heard. The episode ends with Allison holding Patti's hand, reassuring her friend that she is fine.

5.4.2 "Fixed" Thematic and Textual Analysis (S1 E8)

1. The System is 'Fixed'

Initially, when reading the titles of the episodes, I assumed that, because the previous episode is called "Broken", the title of episode 8 implied that whatever had been broken previously would now be "Fixed". This is also the last episode of the series, therefore, it should 'fix' and give closure to any narrative threads that are still open. However, "Fixed" does not refer to fixing anything or giving closure, but rather to how Allison feels about her life. Everything is fixed, that is, rigged. She realizes that she can never win or achieve anything. Kevin was not injured or shot because he found a gun and defended himself. He also faces no repercussions

from the local law enforcement about gaining possession of an unlicensed firearm and firing it at someone. He is, in fact, applauded for his bravery and encouraged to run for local office.

Allison has attempted to become a free neoliberal individual, under the false promise that she can improve her quality of life (Mickunas 2019:2). However there is a powerful structure that prevents her from freedom. Kevin acts as a "deliberate government intervention" (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9) that prevents Allison's freedom. Not only does Kevin survive the attempted murder, but also walks away from the whole ordeal ready to run for office and make the world a 'better place'. However, Kevin and 'better place' cannot be associated with one another, as he only wants things better for himself. Kevin does not care about others. Allison has lost jobs and dreams because of him. Patti lost a potential husband when Kevin called her boyfriend to say that Patti is untrustworthy and a liar — all because she did not bring him a burger from a beauty con expo. Allison, by the end of the season, is not the only woman who has experienced Kevin's deliberate intervention.

2. "This Is It. This Should Be Enough."

When Sam tells Allison that she could be more, she responds: ""That's not a compliment. God, I used to think it was, but I am so done with trying to be more. This is it. This should be enough" (Armstrong 2021). Allison has spent the entire series trying to create a better life for herself, however, she realises that she will never win. She has tried to be the perfect wife to Kevin for 10 years and has achieved nothing. She has had her freedom and multiple opportunities taken away from her whenever she tried to "be more".

The only person who does not expect Allison to "be more" is Patti. Their bond in the realist aspect of the show has grown significantly. They do not expect one another to be more than they are. Their acceptance of one another, without attempting to meet neoliberal expectations, destroys the notion of performative empowerment. By not conforming to neoliberal expectations, they become empowered and can therefore threaten the status quo (Rutherford 2018:623). By the end of the season Patti and Allison refuse to work on themselves and better themselves, which is a direct undermining of performative empowerment (Rutherford 2018:621). Wanting to kill Kevin, and thereby, to kill the neoliberal ideal of performative empowerment, makes Allison dangerous.

Allison McRoberts and Patti O'Connor find themselves in conflict with the neoliberal sitcom storyline, where the men are the main focal point of the show, but Allison and Patti's characters appear to aid the men. They are not given their own narrative beyond their roles as wife and

sister. In the realism aspect of the show, Allison and Patti are the focal point, and their decisions drive the narrative. They are no longer the supporting roles of the wife and sister; their identities as individuals expand beyond that. Kevin, Neil, and Pete do not feature greatly in the realist aspect apart from being mentioned in conversation. They only appear briefly in the first episode, when Allison imagines killing Kevin and, in the last episode, where Neil confronts and attacks Allison and Patti smashes a wine bottle over his head.

The idea of a rigged system, one wherein Allison will never 'be enough' is supported through the title sequence of both episode one and episode eight. They have nearly the exact same title sequence, with the only differing aspect being an inversion of colours. In episode one, the title sequence reads 'Kevin can F Himself' in white text against a black background. In episode 8's title sequence, the title of the show is in black text against a white background. This revision of the title sequence aesthetic establishes the idea of false or deceit. From episodes two to seven, the title sequence changes dramatically, as some have blood splatter, others have a light bulb flickering. However, the only difference between the first and last episodes' title sequence is the colour inversion. This subtle colour change represents the change in dominance within the show. In the first episode, and throughout the season, Kevin has been in control of the women protagonists. However, in the final episode, when Patti has hit Neil over the head with a bottle, the women hold hands over the unconscious Neil as the final image. The positions of and claims to power have shifted. They are determined to not be controlled by the sitcom's façade. The women protagonists actively undermine performative empowerment by gaining control over the plot.

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5.5 Summarised Analysis Findings

Both Allison and Patti actively undermine performative empowerment throughout the show. Specifically, when they regain control of their own narratives in the final episode. They become aware of certain neoliberal feminism ideals and embrace these in order to cover up their undermining of performative empowerment. Allison embraces the notion of having children as a cover to exempt her from suspicion in Kevin's murder. Thus, allowing her to subvert the system, while seemingly embracing it to get away with murder. The series maintains that 'being enough' a utopian ideal: an aspiration worth pursuing, even though attaining that aspiration is highly unlikely and limited to those whose values and convictions align with neoliberal ideology. Threats to this system (such as Allison and Patti) need to be placated or, failing that, forcibly restrained.

5.5.1 Audio-Visual Essay Accompaniment

The accompanying audio-visual essay for *Kevin can F**k Himself* is accessible through the following link[25]:

This audio-visual essay aims to visualise Allison's break from neoliberal performative empowerment. In section 1.6, I discussed how I envisioned the audio-visual essay might explore gender and performative empowerment between Allison's two different diegeses. I did incorporate this envisioned idea, but it did not form the focus of the audio-visual essay.

The start of the audio-visual essay includes moments of gender and performative empowerment, where I contrasted the opening image of the google search with scenes of Kevin and Allison together in the sitcom. The search bar, initially starting with perfect 'm' and intermittent cuts to their marriage, alludes to Allison potentially searching for articles on the perfect 'marriage' and not 'murder'. However, as she continues to type, her intended search is more striking and unexpected. If the viewer were to rewind in the previous shots of Allison and Kevin's interactions, Allison's face in the shots of them together does not replicate that of a happy wife, as she appears frustrated with him. This shot selection was important to incorporate in the beginning of the audio-visual essay, as in the first episode Allison is visibly frustrated and unhappy with her life, but only plots to kill Kevin in the second episode. Engaging with these shots from the first and second episode allowed me to quickly situate the plotline of the show, while alluding to a possible murder. As the audio-visual essay continues from this point, there is a shift in focus on what Allison is actually trying to eliminate (or 'murder').

There is a continuous motif that occurs in the audio-visual essay of Allison in an alternative reality. In this motif, she and Kevin are in a fancier house, he is in a suit, and she is in a dress with her hair and makeup done, pouring him a beer. This motif only occurs in the first episode of the series, but has been used as a recurring motif in the audio-visual essay. It felt important to repeat this motif because Allison did not set out to kill her husband, she only intended to move class categories and join the upper class. The 'perfect murder' search in the beginning alludes to her murdering their lower class lifestyle to pursue an upper class lifestyle. The audio that accompanies the motif is taken from episode eight of the series, where Sam tells her that she could 'be more'. Originally, Allison understood 'being more' as attaining an upper class

[25] Please contact the author at vanrensburgrachael@gmail.com to request access to the audio-visual essays.

lifestyle, hence, it accompanies her alternative reality. This audio can link to the understanding of performative empowerment, where, even if you feel you have done enough, you can always 'be or do more'. For this reason, the upper class alternate reality is contrasted with Allison killing a cockroach, and saying that she is exhausted trying to 'be enough'. The second time this motif features in the audio-visual essay, it is overlaid with the cockroach shot, and the accompanying audio is a combination of the dialogue "wake the hell up, there's no we in there" and the sound of glass breaking. The third time this motif occurs, the accompanying sound is taken from the moment when Allison finds out the savings account is closed, and is followed by the shattering of glass sound again. This is followed by a montage of the broken glass motif.

The broken glass motif was used three separate times throughout episode one, and then again in the final episode when Patti breaks the bottle over Neil's head. I edited the first three instances together by splitting the screen into three and timing the glass to break at the same time. The split screen shows how Allison's acceptance of her circumstances is shattered, not once, but three times. It also symbolises the metaphorical breaking of her tolerance for performative empowerment. By placing all three glass-breaking scenes together, it also shows that Allison's different realities (the sitcom, stark reality, and alternative dreamlike reality) have all merged, symbolising her decision to kill Kevin as a unified one across all diegeses.

After Allison has broken the glass, she looks at her injured hand. The three images of Allison's bleeding fist holding the broken glass handle, can be likened to the feminist liberation movement's symbol of a clenched fist. Ahmed (2017:85) describes the image of the clenched fist symbolism in feminist scholarship as one of protesting hands. Especially in terms of labour, where women's hands have been "reproducing the conditions that enable others to live" (Ahmed 2017: 85). Allison has ensured that she has made life for Kevin comfortable in the hopes of, one day, being able to move. When the savings account is drained, her dream is shattered, along with the illusion of their marriage. Her clenched fist is a protest against the inequality she has endured in their marriage and the sacrifices she has made to ensure their marriage is comfortable. Allison's clenched fist that holds the broken glass handle unfolds, and the glass handle falls in the first shot of the hand uncurling. In the second shot where her hand uncurls, she uses the broken glass handle to stab Kevin in the neck. This second shot happens in her imagination, as she does not actually stab Kevin. This image within the audio-visual essay takes the protesting fist symbol and shows how Allison takes action against Kevin for draining their account and, subsequently, destroying her dream.

The shots of the cockroach informed the textual analysis of Allison's understanding of class, but only occurred twice in episode one. When editing the footage, it became prevalent that this motif has an underlying meaning, which I had originally dismissed in the textual analysis. When researching the symbolism of the cockroach, I found that it was intertwined with the understanding of class categorisation. As such, I reused it and added an accompanying quote to create the link between Allison's current class category and the class category she aims to eventually move to. The shots of Allison killing the cockroach feeds into the question of who or what she is actually trying to 'stomp out'.

In the second half of the audio-visual essay, I used shots of Allison and Patti to focus on their friendship. In the sitcom element, they do not get along and Patti is 'friends' with the boys. However, in the stark realism element, she is just as resentful towards them as Allison is. When both characters realise that their circumstances are similar, their friendship starts to form. Patti is the first character to validate Allison and not belittle her, like Kevin and the other men do. Using these moments also assists in Allison's actual empowerment, which does not come from her killing Kevin. In the audio-visual essay I illustrate Allison and Patti's connection and loyalty to one another as a form of empowerment that both women are stripped of in the sitcom element.

Although the stark realism element is visually darker and more muted than the sitcom, the women have a place where their empowerment is not performative, but tangible. The stark realism element's darker and more muted colouring feeds into the misconception that the narrative depicted will be negative. It protests against neoliberal performative empowerment, which is why it is darker in colour. I wanted to use this understanding and highlight how it actually represents hope for the women characters, compared to the bright sitcom element, which captures the falsity of performative empowerment. While initially the audio-visual essay's sole focus was going to be performative empowerment and gender, it was also able to explore actual empowerment for Allison and Patti.

The following chapter is the last analysis chapter and it considers how Miriam Maisel, in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017), engages with performative empowerment as a newly single mother who pursues a career in stand-up comedy during the late 1950s.

CHAPTER 6: MIDGE STANDS UP TO PERFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT: THE ANALYSIS OF PERFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT IN *THE MARVELOUS MRS MAISEL* (S1)

6.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides a thematic and textual analysis of performative empowerment in the first season of the comedy television series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017).[26] This analysis makes due reference to the key ideas of neoliberalism, neoliberal feminism, and women-centric comedy series, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Within the respective analyses, the focus for the thematic analysis is to identify recurring themes and singular thematic references. The textual analysis builds on the identified themes in the series and analyses how the main women protagonists simultaneously embrace and undermine performative empowerment.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel is a comedy drama set in 1958 (Amazon 2017). When her husband abruptly leaves her, the 'perfect life' of stay-at-home wife, Miriam 'Midge' Maisel, is altered. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* narrative is set almost 65 years before the narratives of *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) and *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021). This difference in time periods between the three series is critical. Similar issues are unpinned in all three series, despite Amy and Allison's experiences in their respective narratives more than half a century later. This time period difference is vital to the study, as it shows the continuation of certain ideals for over half a century.

The American Dream's ideals emerge from the diegetic world of the series. As the American Dream ideals feed into that of neoliberal ideals, the current dominant ideology at the time of the show's production, the analysis considers both discourses. The show aired in 2017 and its success reflects in the numerous awards and nominations it received (The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel [sa]). The show's success in 2017, despite its narrative being set in 1958, strengthens the idea that the American Dream and neoliberal ideals continue to infiltrate and affect society, especially women.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel is located in the comedy drama section on Amazon Prime Video. Its form differs from *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) as *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*

[26] In the interest of streamlined reading, I only provide the full reference *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017) once per section and then simply refer to the title, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,* throughout the rest of the section.

does not have a situational comedy aspect contrasted with a dark realist drama aspect. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* fits the comedy drama mould as it does not have a laugh track and its narrative is more serious than that of a traditional sitcom (Wallace & Stevenson 2009: 31). Although this show embraces many comedic elements and is about a woman pursuing a job as stand-up comedian, it does not undermine or overshadow the serious moments within the series. It highlights Midge's struggles not only in her stand-up comedy journey, but also her struggles as a newly single parent. All episodes in the show continuously address the above themes, either directly or indirectly. However, for the purposes of the current study I analyse the first episode, the seventh episode, and the last episode (season finale) of the series' first season. The textual and thematic analysis of each episode also includes references to specific moments from other episodes that speak directly to the identified themes.

6.2 Pilot Episode 1

6.2.1 Pilot Plot Summary

The series opens at Miriam and Joel Maisel's wedding. She is giving a speech at her wedding, in which she asks the guests, "Who does that? I do". She then enlightens the guests that she has been planning her life since the age of 6, when she decided that she would major in Russian literature. Miriam attended Bryn Mawr College, where she stayed in Katherine Hepburn's old room. While she is explaining to the wedding guests that Joel, her husband, took her to very fancy art galleries and theatre performances, the shot cuts to her and Joel at a strip club. At this strip club they not only watch strippers, but an up-and-coming comedian called Lenny Bruce. Miriam then ends her wedding speech by telling the Jewish guests that she loves her husband and that there is shrimp in the egg rolls. As this is a Jewish wedding, and shrimp is not kosher, the guests are appalled and the rabbi leaves. The episode then cuts to four years later where Miriam is shopping for lamb to cook for the rabbi, who will break the fast of Yom Kippur at their house. The rabbi has finally forgiven the family for the shrimp in the egg roll debacle. Miriam lives in a fancy apartment that has an elevator, an elevator operator, and a doorman. Joel is an aspiring comedian who performs at the Gaslight.

The Gaslight is a club downtown in the Village. In order for him to get a better time slot, she bakes a brisket to bribe the club managers into giving Joel a better time to perform, because the 'place is dead' at 1:45am. Miriam uses the excuse of her daughter's ear infection as the reason why 1:45 am is a difficult time for Joel. Midge bribes them with a brisket and their sick baby. Another woman, Suzy, who works at the Gaslight ,points out to Midge that the previous week Joel's time had to change because her mother had rickets and the week before that her brother threw out his back. These excuses highlight that Midge and Joel often bribe clubs with

brisket for an earlier time. When Joel is given an earlier time, Midge starts taking notes on his performance. On their way home, she reads him the notes she took to help him, but Joel falls asleep.

When they go to bed, Midge waits for Joel to fall asleep before sneaking to the bathroom, taking her makeup off, and putting curlers in her hair. She leaves the blind open a tiny bit so that the morning sun wakes her up before Joel. Before he wakes up, she goes back to the bathroom and does her hair and makeup. She then climbs back into bed and pretends to sleep until the alarm goes off and Joel 'wakes' her up. Midge left her and Joel's two children with her parents the night before. They live in the apartment above her. Midge's parents have a house helper named Zelda who cooks and cleans for the two of them. Midge's mother is concerned about her granddaughter who has a large forehead. Miriam suggests they cover it with a hairstyle that has a fringe and her mother agrees. Her mother also remarks that Midge's arms are too big and she must cover them up with a bolero. The next scene is of Midge measuring the width of her thighs and arms. After she's finished measuring herself, she turns her attention to the television, where Bob Newhart is performing the same act Joel did the night before at the Gaslight. Midge is mad at this and tells Joel that Bob stole his act. Joel is not mad or upset because it is originally Bob's act. He reassures Midge that all comedians borrow from each other in the beginning. Midge is disappointed because was under the impression that Joel wrote the act himself.

The next day, Joel phones Midge while he's at work. He was unable to get a time to perform at the Gaslight that evening and they have friends who are coming to watch the show. When Miriam arrives in the taxi cab to pick him up for his performance, Joel is angry that she is late and that the top she bought him has holes in it. When Midge tries to bribe Suzy with a brisket, she asks why Joel does not request a time himself. Joel is given a very late time and completely bombs on stage, as he does not do Bob Newhart's act. He blames Midge for everything going wrong because she encouraged him to do his own original act. When they arrive home, he tells her that he is leaving her for his secretary, Penny Pan. He also asks Midge to tell her parents that he's left her.

Midge then goes upstairs to tell her parents, and is blamed for choosing a weak man. Once back at her own home, she starts drinking and realises that she left her brisket dish at the Gaslight. Midge takes the subway, in her nightgown, to fetch the dish from the club. Once at the Gaslight, she goes onto the stage and does an impromptu stand-up comedy act about

Joel leaving. She ends her act by removing the top half of her night dress and is subsequently arrested for public indecency.

6.2.2 Pilot Textual and Thematic Analysis (S1 E1)

1. "The Upper West Side" vs "The Gaslight" and Class Distinction

In *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017), Miriam Maisel is the main female protagonist who embraces all aspects of a neoliberal, wealthy, white, upper class female. She is a housewife whose husband handles the finances and she ensures that she maintains her physical proportionality, is always well dressed and presented, and is supportive of her husband's stand-up comedy aspirations. Midge's embrace of the neoliberal lifestyle ends abruptly at the end of the first episode, when her husband leaves her. Midge then has to navigate her new imperfect life, which alerts her to the injustices of neoliberalism, while pursuing a stand-up comedy career — a field where women are rarely acknowledged.

Midge has the 'perfect life' at the start of the episode: a husband, two children, and life as a housewife in the Upper West Side. She is perfectly happy subscribing to a neoliberal lifestyle, since she is afforded the freedoms of the upper class. Neoliberal feminism aligns itself within neoliberalism by stating that equality can be achieved in the economic sphere through the individual self and entrepreneurship (Olufemi 2020:iii). This creates an ideal for middle class women that they should work hard and earn a living (Banet-Weiser *et al* 2020:8). This ideal, although targeted at middle-class women, is only applicable to upper-class white women who are able to enter certain spaces without resistance (Olufemi 2020:iv). Midge does not have to work, therefore, acquiring employment is not necessary for her.

Olufemi (2020:10) discusses that the neoliberal state controls the way in which people live, despite it promoting freedom and equality. This 'freedom' masks the "sexist oppression" and "reinforces gendered oppression" (Olufemi 2020:11), which ultimately reinforces the oppression of women. Midge experiences this first hand at the end of the episode, when her husband leaves her. Her parents put the blame on her for Joel leaving and tell her to go get him back. Joel does not face the consequences of having an affair and leaving. Even though she is a member of the upper class, Midge still experiences the "sexist oppression" and "reinforced gendered oppression" (Olufemi 2020:11) that neoliberalism creates. Shortly after being blamed for her husband's affair and his decision to abandon their marriage, Midge is arrested for using crude language and stripping at the Gaslight.

In an attempt to regain some sort of control, she gets drunk and goes to the Gaslight to get her glass brisket container. While waiting for it to be returned to her, she walks onto stage to get a feel of what her husband thought was 'the dream', the stand-up dream. She then performs an unscripted, unrehearsed stand-up set, which gets her arrested for her swearing, using sexual innuendos, and showing the audience her breasts. She needed a license to strip and women were discouraged from being crude. Even though Midge is the ideal target for neoliberal freedom, as a white upper class woman, she is still not allowed to fully express her freedom. The freedom of women in the upper class is merely performative, to make them feel empowered. This is known in neoliberal feminist scholarship as performative empowerment, since women hold no actual power, they are made to feel as though they do through certain neoliberal ideals (Rutherford 2018:622; Olufemi 2020:11). Midge's impromptu comedy set and arrest is the first example of her undermining performative empowerment.

2. "I'm leaving you" – The Catalyst for Midge's Actual Empowerment

The Myth of the American Dream

The Maisel's embody all elements of the nuclear family. Within the American Dream, lies the nuclear family ideal which comprises a "wage-earning father, stay-at-home mother and dependent children" (Edwards 2010:123). Joel is the employed patriarch of the household, while Midge is a stay-at-home mother, who cares for their two children, Ethan and Ester. Midge has embraced the "domesticity" (Coontz 2000:28) of a stay-at-home mother, as illustrated in the montage of her walking to the butcher and returning home to make brisket for Joel. She was forced to embrace this type of domestic lifestyle, as Coontz (2000:31) discusses, which was the case for many women after the second World War.[27] Midge finished her tertiary education at Bryn Marr College, married Joel, and became a housewife and stay-at-home mother. Midge and Joel embraced the American Dream and created their own nuclear family. However, when Joel leaves Midge and the children, he shatters not only their married life, but also the American Dream ideal. The American Dream is "a way of life in which positive outcomes are linked to inherent virtue" (Arnold 2013:2), which Joel and Midge accomplished by creating a nuclear family, being socio-economically successful, and owning their own home. They were within the minority of society who could tangibly achieve the American Dream, yet Joel discards it. His reasoning to Midge for leaving them is to "start over" as he "[does not] want this life" (Sherman-Palladio 2017).

[27] Please refer back to section 2.2.2 – The Nuclear Family in Chapter Two for more information surrounding the nuclear family.

The American Dream is the guiding mythology of American society (Samuel 2012:1) and, therefore, ingrained into the American identity. Achieving the American Dream is a marker of success and guarantees 'a good life'. Joel and Midge have achieved markers of American Dream, but Joel is unhappy (Sherman-Palladio 2017). The myth of the American Dream is that, once achieved, there is a "prevailing optimism" (White & Hanson 2011:3), and those who have achieved it have the confidence to overcome any hardships. Yet, for the Maisel's, a white upper-class family, this is not the case. The head of their household, Joel, leaves behind his children, wife, and the American Dream to restart his life. In the second episode of the series, the audience learns how Joel was able to 'achieve' the American Dream. Midge was only able to obtain the American Dream through her husband, by virtue of the institution of marriage.

In the second episode, 'Ya Shivu v Bolcom Dome Na Kholme' (Sherman-Palladio 2017), it is revealed that Joel acquired his job through nepotism. Joel's father arranged a well-paying job for him with his brother, Joel's uncle. Midge and her parents are also informed by Joel's father that he is the owner of Midge and Joel's apartment, not Joel, and everything Joel has ever purchased for Midge has been paid for by Joel's father. As such, in reality, Midge and Joel are broke and own nothing. Home ownership functions as a form of "financial security" (Goodman & Mayer 2018:32) and imbues the homeowner with a special status — one of the promises of the American Dream.

In the first episode, Midge and the audience are under the impression that the Maisel's' home belongs to Joel and Midge, making them appear financially secure (Goodman & Mayer 2018:32). Although they are part of the upper class and have access to generational wealth, ownership of their apartment allows them to achieve an 'independent' form of financial security as a newlywed couple. This 'independent' financial security, in the form of home ownership, serves as a form of proof that the American Dream has been attained (Arnold 2013:12). However because they are 'broke' and Joel's father purchased everything,[28] they never tangibly achieved the financial stability associated with the American Dream. Joel has a high income job due to nepotism, therefore, his infinite opportunities (Samuel 2012:6), individual freedom, and socioeconomic mobility (Graham 2017:2) that the American Dream promises, was not obtained through hard work (Samuel 2012:7).

[28] Although Joel and Midge have no money themselves, they both come from wealthy, upper class backgrounds and both have access to generational wealth. Their families are also willing to support them during their separation, therefore, they are not financially destitute. If they came from a lower-class category where they did not have financial support, their situation would be dramatically different.

Episode one introduces the audience to the American Dream that Midge believes she inhabits and represents, until Joel leaves her. The second episode exposes the myth of their American Dream as a farce. Joel has failed to provide for the household as the patriarch, the only member of the nuclear family able to earn an income and provide for the family financially. Graham (2017:3) discusses how the American Dream fails to take into account the different socioeconomic backgrounds of the different social classes and their varying access to opportunities. Joel highlights the upper-class' struggle to attain the American Dream, despite being awarded the most opportunity to achieve financial and social security. Joel has not tangibly achieved anything, despite his upper-class status. Despite the high-income position through he obtained through his family's nepotism, Joel was still unable to provide Midge and their children with the American Dream hallmarks of financial security, home ownership, and a nuclear family (Arnold 2013:12; Graham 2017:2 & Samuel 2012:7). The optimistic security the American Dream promised was a myth (Samuel 2012:7). Midge's nuclear family was a farce, because Joel's role as patriarch was an illusion. His father was the patriarch of their household and Joel was dependent on him to provide for his family.

An instance of irony occurs in the fourth episode "The Disappointment of the Dionne Quintuplets" (Sherman Palladio 2017), which completely contradicts Joel's statement in the first episode about wanting to restart his life. Midge takes Ethan to Joel (who is now living with Penny Pann, the woman he had an affair with and left Midge for) and finds that Joel has not started over, but is living the exact same life with a different woman and no children. Midge, enraged, tells him she expected him to be living downtown in a "smoke-filled atelier not two blocks away, living the Methodist version of our life" (Sherman Palladio 2017). This scene highlights the irony of Joel's "start over" speech in the first episode because he did not actually start a new life, but rather ended his American Dream life with Midge to attempt another with Penny Pann. Joel, despite being the one who left, suffers very little consequences to the destruction of their American Dream. The destruction of their American Dream has far greater consequences for Midge than for Joel. Midge no longer has all the elements which encompass the American Dream. She lost the optimistic security promised by the American Dream alongside her identity, of the nuclear family and the stay-at-home mother. The negative connotations associated with divorce also strip Midge of respect within society (Kennedy 2013:5). Unlike Midge, Joel does not appear to suffer socially negative consequences, as he is able to simply recreate the American Dream with another woman (Kennedy 2013:5).

Midge versus Society

When Joel tells Midge he is leaving her after he has a disastrous stand-up act at the Gaslight. Midge faces a pivotal point in her narrative and her life. Although she went to college, Midge's identity is tied to the marriage and family life she enjoyed, as it is associated with love and commitment (Marzullo 2011:759). However, marriage for Midge also functions as a way to gain societal respect, as it was the only way for a woman to be seen as a respectable member of society in the 1950s (Kennedy 2013:5). Joel leaving her strips Midge of her stay-at-home wife and mother identity but it strips her of societal respect (Kennedy 2013:5). Midge's loss of 'earned societal respect' as a woman foregrounds one of the many flaws and failures of the American Dream. She is a white, upper class woman (Olufemi 2020:iv), who has conformed to the family dynamic and economic class status of the American Dream, until her husband leaves her. Marriage plays such a significant role in attaining the American Dream. Midge was only able to attain it through her marriage to Joel, and she is unable to regain it without the institution of marriage. Joel achieves the American Dream through his new relationship with Penny Pann. Midge, however, has to first regain societal respect (Kennedy 2013:5) as she is no longer married, in order to potentially remarry to regain the American Dream.

Joel leaving Midge is the catalyst for her unmasking the starting point for the theme *the individual vs themselves*. The theme can be linked to performative empowerment because the neoliberal subject (Harvey 2007:5; Chen 2013:443) is an identity created by neoliberal ideals that people adopt in order to subscribe to the accepted neoliberal societal standard. The neoliberal individual, therefore, creates a tension between their performativity and a person's suppressed individual identity. Therefore, specifically for this study, the women protagonists navigate this tension of their neoliberal self-versus their actual identity. Their neoliberal identities are a performed empowerment (Rutherford 2018:624), an illusion, thus, the only way in which the women protagonists can actually become empowered is by undermining performative empowerment.

Midge has embraced performative empowerment by getting married, having kids, and doting on Joel. When he leaves her, she subverts performative empowerment and the respectable wife (Kennedy 2013:5) identity by getting drunk and going to the Gaslight, where she performs an impromptu stand-up comedy set. Her subversion of performative empowerment is so striking that she jailed for defying all aspects of a respectable woman (Kennedy 2013:5), including using profane language and flashing the audience her breasts. When Suzy proposes that she manage Midge as an up-and-coming stand-up comedian, Midge reverts back to her old neoliberal self, saying "Tonight was an isolated incident. There are medications I can take

to make sure that never happens again" (Sherman-Palladio 2017). Ahmed (2017:197) discusses how "difference and deviation" can be damaging to those in power, which is why so much focus is placed on familiarity in this instance — the familiarity is Midge's 'normal and correct' behaviour and her stand-up performance was an act of deviation from the ordinary. In neoliberalism, this "difference and deviation" (Ahmed 2017:197) is considered a revolt against the state, which disguises its control as the free neoliberal individual (Chen 2013:444). While Midge is free to perform stand-up, her act deviates from the standard, which leads to her arrest. By conforming to her neoliberal identity, she will avoid any deviant behaviour that has consequences.

Suzy poses a question to Midge, asking her if she wants to be insignificant or if she wants to be remembered as something more than a mother and housewife. Midge does not answer her, but leaves in a panic, as she is supposed to be fasting and has eaten peanuts. Following this conversation, Midge attends a communist party meeting. This sequence of events within the show function as images of Midge subscribing and then unsubscribing to performative empowerment. As neoliberalism is an attempt to restructure global capitalism, or rather, a political project where unequal capital accumulation occurs (Harvey 2007:19), Midge attending a Communist party meeting is a complete subversion and retaliation against neoliberal governance. Midge has now delved into her own individual empowerment; her exploration of this continues throughout the series as she decides to pursue stand-up comedy.

6.3 "Put that on Your Plate!" Episode 7

6.3.1 "Put that on Your Plate!" Plot Summary

Since Joel left in the first episode, Midge has been employed at a department store and Suzy is her manager. Midge has worked her way up to a tight 11-minute performance, which makes Suzy cry. They then decide it is time to perform stand-up at clubs other than the Gaslight. Suzy also arranges for a well-known talent manager, Harry Drake, to watch Midge perform. Harry Drake manages the biggest female comedian of the time, Sophie Lennon. He invites Suzy and Midge to watch Sophie's performance and arranges an opportunity for them to meet her. Sophie is a tall woman whose act is about her life as an overweight woman living in the lower class area of Queens. She has a famous catchphrase, "Put that on your plate!", which she repeats throughout her set. After Sophie's show, she meets Midge and invites her over to her house.

When Midge visits Sophie, she is surprised to see that Sophie does not live in Queens, but in an Upper Side townhouse. When Midge rings the doorbell, which sounds like a symphony, a

butler answers the door and invites her inside. Midge is visibly shocked as Sophie walks down the stairs and is not overweight. Midge was under the impression that Sophie was actually from Queens and lived in a lower class bracket.

When Midge and Sophie sit down in Sophie's Blue Room, Sophie is amused that Midge actually eats the macaroons. Sophie herself does not eat, and rather sucks on the rind of a lemon wedge. When she asks Midge what character she intends to perform as a part of her act, Midge says that she does not have one. She had planned on being herself. Sophie replies that no one will have any interest in watching that, because she is a beautiful woman. Men do not want to laugh at her, they want to sleep with her. Midge has to become a "thing" in order for her comedy career to be successful. After a tour of Sophie's house, Midge states that it is time for her to go. As she leaves, Sophie gives Midge a fur coat that she has worn twice and will not wear again. Midge then leaves, completely confused by the interaction, as she does not need a fur coat and the butler refuses to take it back from her.

When it is time for Midge to perform her set in front of the talent manager Harry, she goes completely off script and attacks Sophie Lennon for essentially lying to her fans about being from Queens and a member of the lower class. Harry gets upset and leaves, informing Suzy on his way out that he will ensure there is no future in the business for her or Midge. Midge, however, is well-received by the audience afterwards, as she had the whole room laughing for most of her set.

6.3.2 Episode Seven Thematic and Textual Analysis (S1 E7)

1. Miriam Maisel vs Sophie Lennon – a class battle

Class has previously been defined as a group of people that have a shared experience in "everyday material and social circumstances, as well as a shared subjectivity including habitus, solidarity, and consciousness" (Neilson 2015:187). Neoliberalism strengthens its ideology of empowerment by using the notion that class is a "temporary social category" that can be changed through hard work (Jon 2020:162). It moves away from the idea of fundamental class, where similar identities are grouped and then given a permanent label.

Sophie Lennon is a famous female comedian whose act revolves around her a lie that she is from Queens, a lower class neighbourhood in Manhattan. Her hair is not styled, but rather thrown back into a ponytail, she is overweight, and crude. Her outfit is one that replicates that of a house cleaner, a simply patterned collared dress with a white apron over it. Her act consists of discussing her life as someone from a low class area, which gains her lots of

popularity among the wealthier societies, as she performs in massive venues in the upper side of Manhattan. Sophie makes her living off of her comedy sets that revolve around her life. But Sophie Lennon, the comedian from Queens, is a fraud. Sophie resides in the Upper West Side, in a townhouse that Midge describes as a mansion. She is well-groomed, not overweight, and owns a vast amount of famous musician memorabilia. Sophie from Queens is merely a character that she plays and has become popular. Sophie is a complete contrast to Midge, who does not hide her true class status.

Sophie is under the impression that the upper class want to watch a character, a persona. They do not want to watch a retelling of their own lives on stage, which is why she believes Midge will be unsuccessful. Sophie Lennon has created a wealthy lifestyle for herself on the back of a lower class persona. If she were to perform as herself, she would not be able to afford the lifestyle she has. She has created sufficient wealth based off of a class that can barely make a living, sometimes referred to as the “idle precariat”, as they do not work and are dependent on welfare payments (Neilson 2015:192). The “idle precariat” (Neilson 2015:192) ends up relying on state welfare programs in order to survive. Harvey (2007:169) states that low-income classes are only able to earn a living by signing short term contacts, which allow people to change jobs easily. Sophie Lennon, an upper class woman, exploits the lower class through her shows.

Midge attempted to relate to the lower class in previous episodes, when she first started working, however, her set was poorly received, as the people who watch her performances at the Gaslight are from lower classes. Unlike Sophie Lennon whose audience consists of wealthy upper class members. Sophie also refers to her character as a ‘thing’, not a woman. By creating a persona based on the lower class and then further defining it as a ‘thing’ with no human qualities, cements the neoliberal class formation, as the lower class are disregarded unless a profit can be obtained from their exploitation. Sophie Lennon benefits from the neoliberal system’s underpinnings of the “idle precariat” (Neilson 2015:192).

Midge is also from the upper class, however, she does not dehumanise the lower class, nor does she profit off of their individual life stories. She performs as herself and people enjoy it, much to Sophie’s surprise. Sophie’s façade places Midge in a position of tension with society. She does not want to create a persona that is not true to herself, however, society has allowed Sophie Lennon to become an extremely successful female comedian by exploiting the poor. Midge is also confused, as her audiences and the society within which she performs completely rejected her set that discussed the working class. Sophie, therefore, consciously

embraces performative empowerment as she pretends to be from a lower class and appears to be empowering them, however, she is another wealthy person solidifying class distinction.

6.4 "Thank you and Goodnight." Episode 8

6.4.1 "Thank you and Goodnight." Plot Summary

After Harry Drake's threat, Suzy and Midge drink away the end of their careers. Hungover, Midge has to attend Ethan's birthday party, which is combined with her friend Imogene's daughter. Joel is at the party and Midge says that it is time for them to get a divorce. After the party, they both go back to Midge's parents' house to put the kids to bed and Joel ends up staying the night. The next morning they both feel as though they are ready to give their marriage a second chance. The following evening, Midge has a gig at a strip club, however, after she and Suzy have waited several hours, they are informed that their performance is cancelled. Harry had ensured that all of Midge's gigs were cancelled. Midge also informs Suzy that she spent the previous night with Joel and that they might reconcile their marriage. When Suzy goes back to the Gaslight after the show, the owner warns her to never let Midge on stage again after her Sophie Lennon attack. Suzy is also taken off of managing the talent at the Gaslight and assigning performers time slots.

Midge is at work at the department store when Penny Pan shows up. Penny calls Midge a "tramp" for sleeping with Joel and considering reconciling their marriage. Midge reminds Penny that Joel left her a while ago, yet he never took off his wedding ring. Penny's outburst causes trouble for Midge at work. After realising that he might get back together with Midge, Joel decides to go back into comedy and arrange a time slot for himself, without the help of a brisket. Although all the spots have been taken for that specific night, he declares that he will keep coming back until he gets a spot. None of the Gaslight employees pay him any attention. Midge informs her father that she and Joel might get back together. Her father is enraged, as their separation has upset everyone's lives. Miriam moved back into her parents' house with her two kids, and found employment because she refused to let Joel come back. The separation also caused tension between her father (Abe) and mother (Rose), because Midge did not tell her mother that Joel came back, and she turned him away. When Abe told Rose this, she refused to talk to either Abe or Midge and, essentially, moved Abe out of his study and into the living room. Once Abe has calmed down, he and Midge discuss how much she's changed, and that Joel might not want to get back together with the 'new Midge'. Abe reassures her that, if Joel is the one, he will accept her no matter what. Abe himself has had to accept many changes that Rose has gone through, but still loves her dearly. This scene cuts directly to Joel at a record shop. While at the record shop he hears a recording of Midge's

first stand-up performance, which was the night he left her. In a fit of rage, he throws down the record sleeve and storms out of the shop. After that, he quits his high-paying job despite an upcoming promotion.

While the above scenes are taking place, Suzy finds Lenny Bruce, a popular comedian who became friends with Midge in the second episode. Suzy tells Lenny that Midge has been blacklisted. Suzy asks for his help to get Midge's career back. Lenny agrees to do a show at for free, in order to help Midge save her career. Joel arrives at the Gaslight to watch Midge perform, but Midge does not know he is there, or that he heard her first performance. Joel blames Suzy for who Midge has become, however, when Midge is insulted by some men in the audience, he starts a fight with them to defend Midge's honour. Midge, who mentions her three-month separation in the set, has an extremely successful show, received by cheers, laughter, and applause in.

6.4.2 Episode 8 Thematic and Textual Analysis (S1 E8)

Blackballed and Becoming

After Midge has completely destroyed Sophie Lennon's career in an unscripted performance, she and Suzy are 'blackballed'[29]. They have no places to perform and Midge is banned from the Gaslight, as ensured by Harry Drake. Midge opted against Sophie's advice of creating a persona and performed as herself. By disregarding Sophie's advice and attacking one of the top female comedians at the time, Midge has resisted deliberate neoliberal intervention (Gilbert 2013: 9) by a member of the upper class. The consequences of her resistance to following neoliberal ideals that exploit the lower class, is represented by Harry Drake who ends Midge's career. Harry Drake's influential power in the performing arts, especially stand-up comedy, allowed for the immediate implantation of this blackball. It can be argued that these consequences occurred because Midge attempted to embrace the entrepreneurial identity, which promotes change as something achieved through hard work (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9; Rutherford 2018:623). Midge wants to be a successful female comedian, however, her efforts to achieve it by embracing the neoliberal entrepreneurial identity (Rottenberg 2014:420-421; Gilbert 2013:9), leads to being blacklisted and unable to perform.

[29] Blackballed as defined by Merriam-Webster (2024) is to be voted against or excluded from "membership by casting a negative vote". Midge and Suzy have been ostracized (blackballed) from the stand-up comedy performance scene. It differs from blackmail where "extortion or coercion by threats especially of public exposure or criminal prosecution" (Merriam-Webster 2024) occurs. Blackmail still teeters on being a threat without action whereas blackballed is an action that is implemented immediately.

Midge tells Suzy that she might be reconciling with Joel. Suzy replies, "It's a good thing you don't have a career anymore because the loser husband of yours would never have let you do this anyway". Stand-up comedy was always Joel's hobby, never Midge's. She just watched and helped bribe the Gaslight staff into giving him better time slots in the evening. Suzy realises that, even if Midge hadn't attacked Sophie Lennon and Harry Drake had been impressed, Joel would not have allowed her to perform. He benefitted from Midge embracing performative empowerment and continuously being available to help him when he was unable to help himself. This understanding is made clear when he hears Midge's first stand-up performance on a record in a record store. He snatches and throws the sleeve of the record because Midge is discussing his failures in her stand-up performance. That reaction, paired with him blaming Suzy for who Midge has become, highlight the truth of Suzy's statement to Midge. Joel does not want Midge doing stand-up, especially at the cost of his reputation.

In the final episode, performative empowerment is embraced when Suzy books Lenny Bruce to perform and to save Midge's reputation. Lenny Bruce is a popular male comedian whose performance, especially if entrance is free, would undermine any attempt at blackballing Midge. If Lenny Bruce accepts her, no one would question her talent. Midge is Lenny's opening act and, even though the audience are there for Lenny, the feeling of empowerment and applause Midge receives will help her regain her career. Furthermore, Midge and Suzy are completely aware that the audience is there for Lenny, not Midge. Midge and Suzy embrace performative empowerment, i.e. the empowerment does not actually exist outside of the feeling of empowerment (Rutherford 2018:622; Olufemi 2020:11), in order to regain their careers on the reputation of Lenny Bruce.

6.5 Summarized Analysis Findings

Performative empowerment, although created as an ideal for white upper class women to feel empowered, still reinforces "gendered oppression" (Olufemi 2020:11). Midge experiences this in the first episode. In the last episode, however, she embraces performative empowerment to restore her stand-up comedy career. That is the difference between Midge Maisel and Sophie Lennon. Sophie embraces performative empowerment and class distinction to attain more wealth, while reinforcing stereotypes about the lower classes. It can, therefore, be argued that Midge embraces performative empowerment only when it does not discriminate or undermine people of different racial and socio-economic circumstances. For Midge, then, "being enough" is to be independent without compromising the socio-economic status of less-fortunate or underserved individuals.

6.5.1 Audio-Visual Essay Accompaniment

Please find included below the link for chapter six's audio-visual essay[30]:

This audio-visual essay provides insight into how Midge embraces and subverts neoliberal performative empowerment. The American Dream motif is used repeatedly throughout the audio-visual essay as intertitle text. The first motif uses footage to visualise key ideas from section 2.2. The motifs that follow the first, aim to show the decline of the American Dream in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017). While the American Dream declines, it creates an opportunity for Midge to embark on her own dream and to find her own sense of empowerment. Every instance of the American Dream intertitle, the text lingers on screen until the next clip. The text only disappears in the final instance to show that the myth no longer holds value for either the audio visual essay or Midge. The American Dream is erased from the screen and then the pink/purple intertitle "Midge's Dream" appears.

Midge's Dream is in a purple/pink font colour to pay homage to the original title sequence colour in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.* It also contrasts the white American Dream motif, to draw attention to the change in dreams. As the narrative of the show unfolds substantially through dialogue, I refrained from using quotes as with the other audio-visual essays. The dialogue and the context in the footage of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* was enough to construct the American Dream audio-visually, without having to bring in scholarship from section 2.1 of the study.

To show the passing of time, I cut between clips of Midge and Joel's wedding, which occurs at the start of episode one, to Midge's current situation in episode 5, where she tells her parents of her job. Although Joel only leaves Miriam at the end of episode one, four years into their marriage, the time between their union and Midge's new found independence was an important one to juxtapose. Her optimistic extroverted personality between the wedding speech and her new-employment announcement does not change, despite the complete change of her lifestyle.

In the montage of Midge with overlaid sound of Joel explaining that she is 'too much', I specifically used shots of Midge in a deep purple coat. The intention here is to show how she stands out against the beiges and browns of other people. These shots stood out to me during

[30] Please contact the author at vanrensburgrachael@gmail.com to request access to the audio-visual essays.

the watching process of the show and I felt they should be placed next to one another, instead of scattered throughout the series. These visual clips aid the sound overlay, because it is clear, through the cinematography, that Midge stands out. Standing out and taking up space intimidates Joel, yet Suzy embraces it, and Midge taking up space as an individual leads to her first stand-up performance. When Midge's life shatters, Suzy, a stranger, is her only support for a substantial number of episodes, as Midge's parents attempt to reunite her with Joel. Suzy's support helps Midge find her independence, not only in doing stand-up comedy but also her independence as a new single mother. For this reason I included shots of Midge and Suzy together. It also supports the understanding of independence that, unlike the neoliberal ideal of independence as a form of hyper-individualisation, independence in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is gained through community and support.

The audio-visual essay for this chapter serves not only to aid the analysis of the show, but also aids as new insight into the American Dream and its failure since 1958 (the setting of the show). The following chapter concludes the study. This seventh and final chapter addresses the findings of the study in its entirety, and poses possibilities for potential research.

CHAPTER SEVEN: "THIS IS ENOUGH" - CONCLUSION

7.1 Chapter Introduction

This study is preceded by a framing prologue: Gloria's monologue from the blockbuster *Barbie* film (Gerwig 2023). This monologue captures the ideas of 'not being enough', as well as of performative empowerment: it foregrounds the false sense of empowerment that neoliberalism attaches to women's self-worth. Using it at the beginning of the study solidifies the necessity of this particular study, as neoliberal performative empowerment is still prevalent within the current society, evidenced by *Barbie's* (Gerwig 2023) release a year prior to completion of this study, and that film's ambivalent representations of gendered empowerment. Neoliberalism and neoliberal performative empowerment continue to misconstrue self-worth and empowerment as attainable markers of success, when they are, in reality, unachievable. This consequence of neoliberal ideology is made evident in this current study, which turned its gaze to three television series: *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017).

7.2 Critical Summary of the Study

Chapter One – Introduction introduced the focus of the study, performative empowerment and the three television series, *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). Performative empowerment is the study's main lens of inquiry, through which I interrogated the intersections of labour, class, and gender across *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). This chapter explained that each women protagonist in the selected series grappled with the notion of 'being enough'. I then linked the idea of 'being enough' to the neoliberal ideal of performative empowerment. Performative empowerment gives women a false sense of empowerment (Morris & Korobov 2020:1).

Chapter One also provided an overview of the methodology of the study. This study's methodology is located within qualitative research and televisual studies. I focused on a thematic and textual analysis with an accompanying audio-visual essay to interrogate performative empowerment within each series. The intersecting themes of gender, class and labour in each series provide the foundation through which the study analysed and interrogated performative empowerment.

Chapter Two – I Am Not Enough - Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Feminism discussed the conceptual and theoretical framework of neoliberalism and, within it, neoliberal feminism. Neoliberalism embraces ideals that emerged within the American Dream. As the American Dream was tied to American identity (Arnold 2013: 4) it was important to highlight which ideals aligned with the study. The two areas of the American Dream that the study incorporated was home ownership and the nuclear family. The events of *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017) takes place before neoliberalism became a dominant American ideology, and was heavily influenced by the American Dream ideals. *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) and *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021) are set within the dominant neoliberal ideology. The incorporation of certain American Dream ideals was vital to study as it situated neoliberalism and informed the time period of *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017).

Neoliberalism is a political, economic and social ideology (Mickunas 2019:1). Within this context, the chapter focused on expanding knowledge surrounding, freedom, and equality; the individual self; class structure and mobility; and the relationship between labour and human capital. Neoliberal feminism emerged within neoliberal scholarship. Chapter Two then focused on neoliberal feminism and its ideals. These ideals are comprised of female labour, gendered labour and performative empowerment. It was important for the chapter to provide an understanding into the socio-economic sphere of neoliberalism before shifting its focus to neoliberal feminism. Once this scholarship was foregrounded, the chapter engaged with how neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism occur within American comedy television. The portrayal of neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism in American comedy television was an important section to include within the second chapter as the study's methodology incorporates televisual studies. The themes surrounding freedom, equality and identity are then analysed in Chapter Three through fourth wave feminism and the televisual representation of women in American comedy television.

Chapter Three – Becoming Enough – Women and American Comedy Television discusses the intersections between fourth wave feminism and comedy television. It also provides a timeline of the change in situational comedy's female characters to demonstrate the important ways in which women protagonists in American comedy television had moved beyond certain stereotypes and presumed character limitations. The chapter began with scholarship on fourth wave feminism and situated women-centric comedy television within this framework. It was vital to the study as it opposes the notions of neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism. Where neoliberal feminism creates a form of empowerment that is performative, fourth wave feminism

offered a theorised feminist discourse which I used to understand the women protagonists in all three series.

Chapter Three's section on women in American television grounded the scholarship surrounding the comedy genres of the situation comedy and the comedy drama. These two genres are the genres in which the selected television series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) are placed by Amazon Prime Video. Foregrounding this scholarship laid the foundation for how each series embraced or subverted the 'traditional' structure of shows within the genres. The chapter then shifted to women and feminist comedy, explaining that women and comedy, and feminist comedy, are two separate forms of comedy that can occasionally – and constructively – overlap. Women's comedy is typically comedy about, created and for women (Swink 2017:17; Gilbert 2004). This differs from feminist comedy's pronounced aim of creating a space for feminist ideals to emerge (Shifman & Lemish 2011: 255). These separate forms of comedy positioned this current study's understanding nuances of women and female comedy, as well as its mapping the transformation of women characters in American comedy television. This section looks at three successful women-centric situation comedies – *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 197; *Murphy Brown* (English 1988) and *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985). The chapter highlights that *The Golden Girls* (Harris 1985) resisted neoliberal ideals while *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Brooks & Burns 197) and *Murphy Brown* (English 1988) embraced them. By tracking these changes and developments in women-centric American comedy television, this chapter not only provided background on preceding women in television but also established a foundation from which the ensuing chapters could build on.

Chapter Four – Amy versus Corporate: The Battleground of Performative Empowerment in *Superstore* (S1) is the first textual analysis chapter. Here, I analysed performative empowerment through the themes of labour and class in the series *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015). *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) is a comedy series that follows the employees of an American super store called Cloud 9. Amy, the lead woman protagonist is the floor supervisor of the store. This chapter focused on mainly on her, while often including references to supporting characters such as Cheyenne, a pregnant teenage employee. Amy can understand and relate to Cheyenne's socio-economic situation as she was also a teenage mom who started working at Cloud 9 to provide for her child and partner.

This chapter analysed the first, seventh and eleventh episode of *Superstore*'s (Spitzer 2015) first season. In the analysis of the pilot episode, I introduced the overarching themes of the individual versus neoliberal society and the neoliberal individual versus themselves. These two themes aided in the strength of my argument as they allowed me to situate Amy and her embracing and subverting of performative empowerment. Both themes address an individual at conflict with either their performative neoliberal identity or neoliberal society as a whole, or both. I introduced these terms at beginning of the fourth chapter and referred back to them in Chapter Five and Chapter Six as these two themes occur in all three selected series. In the analysis of the pilot episode, I also discussed the notion of freedom and equality within a corporate-run American superstore. The remainder of this first analysis focuses on the new Cloud 9 employees who introduced the neoliberal notions of class superiority and human capital.

In the seventh episode of the series, I highlighted the corporate exploitation of its employees by using the $100 as an incentive to sell more merchandise. This incentive not only exploits the employees but the customers as well. In attempt to gain an extra $100 is unaware that her husband, Adam, is lured into this and buys $2000 worth of grill equipment. This is a failed attempt by Amy to briefly advance her financial mobility as a low-income worker. In the eleventh episode despite being the family's main breadwinner, Amy no longer allows Corporate to dictate her morals and risks further employment precarity by starting a strike to bring attention to Cloud 9's unfair employment policies. Although these actions could result in losing her job, she takes a stand against the performativity of Cloud 9's corporate policies.

Chapter Five – Performative Empowerment can F**k Itself: The Analysis of Allison and Performative Empowerment in *Kevin can F*ck Himself* (S1) analyses Allison's journey of embracing and subverting performative empowerment by way of her class consciousness and gender in the series *Kevin can F*ck Himself* (Armstrong 2021). For this analysis chapter I focused specifically on the first, seventh and eighth episode.

In the analysis of the first episode I focused on class consciousness and Mittell's (2015:25) narrative enigma. The first episode established Allison and Kevin as living in a lower middle class. The cockroach and utopian dream function as a statement on the irony of neoliberal ideals as neoliberalism cannot be a utopia due to its reinforcement of socio-economic inequality (Harvey 2007:19). The inability to attain this improved socio-economic status was solidified by the narrative enigma (Mittell 2015:25). The episode initially showed how Allison embraced performative empowerment in an attempt to change her class standing through the

Amherst Gates utopia. The narrative enigma (Mittell 2015:25) that occurred within the same episode, shows Allison's subversion of performative empowerment when she decides to kill Kevin. Although her decision was triggered by financial stress, the narrative moves away from a desire to improve financial status to a focus on an actual form of empowerment that moves away from tangibility and focuses on a sense of self.

The seventh episode's analysis focuses on reproductive labour and the shadow economy. Both of these sections highlight how Allison once again subverts the neoliberal ideals of performative empowerment. Although her sudden desire to become pregnant may seem as though she embraces the nuclear family and performative empowerment ideals, she merely does it to strengthen her alibi. This, alongside her participation in the shadow economy, solidified her subversion of performative empowerment as no 'good' neoliberal individual would engage in such illegal acts. In the final episode, the eighth episode. The hit on Kevin is unsuccessful. Allison realises that neoliberal system is fixed and that she will never be free or enough even though neoliberalism promotes 'freedom and equality' (Mickunas 2019:2). When Neil attempts to assault Allison, Patti protects her by smashing a bottle over his head. This act reframes the previous male control to one where Allison and Patti are in control thus subverting performative empowerment.

Chapter Six – Midge Stands Up to Performative Empowerment: The Analysis of Performative Empowerment in *The Marvellous Mrs. Maisel* (S1) critically discusses how Midge, an upper-class woman who can live without consideration of material constraint, can still be affected by neoliberal performative empowerment. his analysis focuses on the first, seventh and eighth episode of the series.

The first episode foregrounded the class distinction between the Maisel's and the employees of The Gaslight. It also highlighted the myth of the American Dream. The Maisel's are members of the upper-class who conformed to the American Dream's nuclear family ideal in order to achieve the American "way of life" (Arnold 2013:2) until Midge's husband Joel, leaves her and their children for another woman. Despite being within the minority of society 'successful' in achieving the American Dream ideals, it is still not enough to ensure socio-economic stability. Midge's embraced performative empowerment through marriage and the nuclear family ideals however after Joel leaves her, she subverts it by getting arrested for an impromptu stand-up comedy act. Midge subverting her neoliberal identity and embracing her actual, individual identity allowed for her to be analysed through the theme of the neoliberal individual versus themselves.

In the seventh episode, the notion of class distinction is analysed again however it did not follow the traditional upper-class, lower-class distinction, it looked at Sophie Lennon, an elite member of the upper-class and her interaction with Midge, a 'normal' member of the upper class. Despite their upper-class differences, another aspect that distinguished the characters from one another was Sophie Lennon's embracing of performative empowerment and Midge's subversion of it. In the eighth episode, Midge faces the consequences for her subversion of performative empowerment. She then decided to temporarily embrace performative empowerment in order to allow her to continue on her path of actual empowerment, stand-up comedy. The embracing of performative empowerment can therefore also play a vital role in obtaining actual empowerment.

The following section will include the reflections and contribution of the study followed by the final concluding thoughts.

7.3 Reflections on and Contribution of the Study

7.3.1 Strengths and Shortcomings

In Chapter One, I state that, in cognisance of the scope of the current study, I did not discuss performative empowerment in conjunction with Amys Latinx background in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) and Midge's Judaism in *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017). These cultural variables, which certainly inform character construction and storytelling in these series, could allow for further intersectional research on performative empowerment, race, and religion. The intersecting themes of class and gender could have been enhanced further in tandem with performative empowerment's invisible whiteness. Due to the scope of the study, this addition could not be focused on but rather suggested as an opportunity for further research. An additional shortcoming of the study is that it does not examine how female friendships assisted women protagonists to obtain actual empowerment. All three main characters had distinct female friendships from where they enjoyed substantial support throughout their embracing and subverting of performative empowerment. While I allude to the value of female friendship in the audio-visual essays linked to Chapters Five and Six, I do not address it in the written analysis. The study could also have benefited from a deeper utilisation of fourth wave feminism scholarship as it focused more on the scholarship surrounding neoliberal feminism. While the study had certain shortcomings, it also had certain strengths.

The first strength this study had occurred in the understanding of empowerment. In the television series discussed in this study, none of the women characters substantially advance their financial status, or otherwise enhance their social class. Midge, in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladio 2017), is the only character (across the three shows discussed in the study) from a wealthy, upper class background where she was financially 'safe'. She rebels against this financial 'safety' by getting a job. In *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), Amy decides to further her education for her daughter's future, while still supporting the family with her minimum wage job. In *Kevin can F*ck Himself* (Armstrong 2021), after learning that Kevin has emptied their joint savings account, Allison decides to take back her independence and making her own decisions.

While this study did not set out to provide a definitive account of what actual empowerment is (compared to its surface semblance, performative empowerment), it did offer insights into how women protagonists can achieve a form of empowerment through their actions, despite the limitations imposed on their thought and behaviour by neoliberal ideology. Once the characters find an independence wherein they have unwavering support from their female friends, they are able to subvert performative empowerment to an extent where they gain an actual sense of empowerment: Amy started a strike and walked out of her job; Allison, although unsuccessful in killing Kevin, decided to put herself first, and; Midge became a single mom and started her career as a woman in 1950s stand-up comedy. These are acts of defiance. These acts of defiance allow the women involved to gain an actual sense of empowerment. This actual empowerment is a profound recognition of and acting upon, the validation of a sense of self, self-worth and agency. Instead of embracing of the individual self (Harvey 2007:5), neoliberal "self-governance" (Chen 2013:443), and marriage as "routes to economic self-sufficiency" (Randles & Woodward 2018:39), which often function as false forms of empowerment, Amy, Allison, and Midge find actual empowerment by rejecting these ideals and seeking out alternatives to these ideals. These women protagonists find support and empowerment through people, as opposed to the individual resilience proposed by neoliberalism. This empowerment and support through a community threatens the neoliberal ideal of the individual self (Harvey 2007:5), and its "self-governance" (Chen 2013:443), as the formation of supportive alliances can be used to overthrow a neoliberal governing force (Olufemi 2020:20; Harvey 2007:152-153). Actual empowerment and community also threatens the nuclear family ideal as discussed in *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) or as discussed in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) the neoliberal corporation policies.

The idea of 'being enough' served the study greatly as it led to the neoliberal feminist notion of performative empowerment. The women protagonists were unable to engage with their idea of 'being enough' while embracing performative empowerment, as it is an immeasurable form of 'empowerment'. It forced me to reevaluate what constitutes as empowerment which commonly linked to socio-economic markers. These socio-economic markers such as class categorisation and home ownership, are important and tangible ways in which empowerment can be achieved, if not under neoliberal rule. This also formed part of the study's shortcomings as I was unable to measure this idea of 'being enough' through socio-economic markers as none of the women protagonists in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) advanced socio-economically. 'Being enough' became a difficult term to link with actual empowerment because self-worth and self-validation and the recognising thereof are immeasurable. I felt I was unable to provide a more solid understanding of what contributes to 'being enough' and actual empowerment. The study was able to highlight instances of where the women protagonists in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) achieved individual empowerment through their small acts of defiance.

While each of the women protagonists in the selected series achieve individual empowerment – albeit in different contexts and to a different extent – these series highlighted the neoliberal inequalities that occur across the configurations of class, gender, and labour. How each character grapples with performative empowerment and attempts to achieve a sense of actual individual empowerment is explored through the audio-visual essay component of the study. For this component I worked strictly with the audio-visual components of the selected series in order to explore this notion of actual empowerment within their (the women protagonists) world.

7.3.2 The Audio-Visual Essay

In section 1.6.1 I alluded to the envisioned contributions of the audio-visual essays; however, when working with the footage from the selected series, the audio-visual essays moved away from what I had initially anticipated. The footage from *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) prompted a recurring question that had been posed to me during a post-graduate writing intensive, "What does empowerment look like for these characters once they have achieved it?". At the time of the post-graduate writing intensive, I was unable to provide an answer. However, when I started the editing process, I decided to explore an audio-visual creative

response to this question (Grant 2014:49**;** Grant 2016:255). Initially, my hesitation to answer the question was due to a preconceived idea that the women characters' empowerment had to almost mimic a spectacle to classify as non-performative. If for example, Allison had been successful in killing Kevin which would then allow her to obtain her financial and class mobility desires, I posed the question to myself, would she have achieved actual empowerment? Or would this attempt at empowerment have only functioned as a performative spectacle? Even with Kevin dead and her gaining these socio-economic desires, she would ultimately still be searching for some form of empowerment as this is the integral aspect of performative empowerment. You keep working and adhering to neoliberal ideals yet this utopia is never achieved because it cannot be measured. Killing Kevin would not solve the lack of 'enoughness' she feels because it is deeply ingrained in neoliberal society. She would still blindly follow those ideals in the hope of achieving a sense of actual empowerment. During the creation of the audio-visual essays, it became apparent that the characters' real empowerment did not require a 'spectacle moment'; these characters quietly obtained moments of empowerment that often did not result in achieving successive wealth and upper class mobility. The audio-visual essays functioned not only as a practical accompaniment to the study, but they also informed the textual analysis through the re-editing of images. What may have been overlooked throughout the initial viewing process was brought to the forefront during the editing process. For example, the cockroach explanation in Chapter Five, section 5.2.2 – i, only emerged after I had edited the corresponding audio-visual essay. This section is important, as it develops the textual and thematic analysis in terms of understanding class mobility in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021).

The only extradiegetic elements I incorporated were the individually inserted quotes, to situate and guide the viewer in understanding each audio-visual essay, and a laugh track in the *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015) audio-visual essay. Tangibly working with the footage of each series also helped clarify the written component of the analysis, such as the two broad themes, *the neoliberal individual versus themselves* and *the individual versus neoliberal society* in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), the American dream and Midge's Dream in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017), and class mobility in *Kevin can F**k Himself* (Armstrong 2021).

While the written study and audio-visual essays explored the subversion and embrace of performative empowerment in neoliberalism, neoliberal feminism, and fourth wave feminism, there is still a multitude of opportunities for further research into these areas.

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7.4 Suggestions for Further Research

In light of the frameworks established and explore in this study, additional research on the idea and practice of performative empowerment could focus on its articulation in different televisual drama genres and aesthetics, such as the horror *Yellowjackets* (Lyle & Nickerson 2021) and the thriller *Griselda* (Miro, Newman & Bernard 2024).

I acknowledge that performative empowerment does not only affect women; to some extent, men are similarly lured into compliance with gendered neoliberal performative empowerment. Gendered differences in performative empowerment suggests an opportunity for further research. The shift in domestic labour responsibilities allows for men to potentially be affected by aspects of performative empowerment as well. This shift could include stay-at-home fathers and single father households.

Another suggestion for future research is the more general entanglement between popular media and neoliberalism. As I stated earlier (see page 40, footnote 9) although all of the selected shows were initially available on Amazon Prime Video, the company itself does not subvert or dismiss neoliberalism. It is a multi-billion company that I argue relies on neoliberal ideals and capitalism in order to survive. This study's selected shows and the multitude of other shows that are available on platform do not share the same values as the company that own the intellectual property and distribution rights of these series. The political economy of making and airing these shows that resist the dominant ideology could be an option for further research.

The political economy of popular media and fourth wave feminism is another opportunity for further research. Both utilise digital forums in order to gain support. The creation of popular media to a certain extend relies on the neoliberal ideals freedom and equality to exploit in order to produce content. Fourth wave feminism actively protests against all spheres of inequality especially those which are "harder to fight" (Abrahams 2017). These are just a few suggestions that could allow for further research to be conducted. The following section will conclude the research that this study was able to conduct.

7.5 Conclusion

The following tables provide a summary of the neoliberal performative empowerment markers in each of the selected series. The audio-visual essay table highlights the motif that occurs within each audio-visual essay.

7.5.1 Neoliberal Performative Empowerment in Selected Series:

Title	NPE marker 1	NPE marker 2	NPE marker 3	NPE marker 4	NPE marker 5
Superstore	Neoliberal Freedom	Class Distinction	Marriage	Female Labour	Unpaid Maternity Leave
Kevin…	Class Distinction	Neoliberal Control	Marriage	Reproductive Labour	Shadow Economy
Mrs. Maisel	Class Distinction	The American Dream	Marriage	Class Exploitation	The Neoliberal Entrepreneurial Identity

7.5.2 Audio-Visual Essay Motifs:

Title	Characters	Audio-visual Motifs
Superstore	Amy	Empowerment through subversion of performative empowerment.
Kevin…	Allison	Empowerment through subversion of neoliberal individualism.
Mrs. Maisel	Midge	Empowerment through the rejection of the American Dream.

In the NPE table, there are differences and similarities in the way in which neoliberal performative empowerment emerges in each series. Performative empowerment emerges in *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) through class distinction and marriage. All three series highlight how marriage is supposed to ensure their social economic stability, and yet, all three women highlight how marriage did not ensure their socio-economic stability. Marriage gave these women a false sense of empowerment in terms of a semblance of socio-economic stability. The women realise that they are unable to achieve stability through marriage or outside of it, due to neoliberal ideals of the nuclear family, freedom and equality and performative empowerment – the work life balance that neoliberal ideals 'afford' people.

Neither marriage nor class distinction deliver on the promise of socio-economic stability. While there are different markers through which performative empowerment emerges in each series, there is a commonality or common thread — neoliberal control. Performative empowerment ultimately emerges through neoliberalist control in each series. Where there is neoliberal control, there is performative empowerment. The two cannot be separated.

The audio-visual essay motif table illustrates the motif of each audio-visual essay. While each exploration is different, all audio-visual essays produce motifs in which the main woman protagonist becomes empowered. Each of the women protagonists in the selected series acquire empowerment through different circumstances. These motifs demonstrate how actual empowerment can be achieved, if the individual decides to subvert their neoliberal self and society. When a woman 'snaps', there is hope (Ahmed 2017:211). When women subvert neoliberal performative empowerment and its empty promises of socio-economic stability or empowerment, actual empowerment lies ahead. This actual sense of empowerment arises through the embracing of a sense of self-claimed identity, understanding of ones self-worth and agency to subvert any ideologies that attempt to disrupt, influence or control that.

Finally, I am satisfied that this study has fulfilled the requirements of the National Qualification Framework level 9, Master's Degree by dissertation (The Proposed Revised Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework 2011:32). In accordance with NQF qualifiers, this study developed knowledge in advanced levels of scholarship pertaining to the intersection between neoliberal feminism and television studies. I was able to develop this knowledge through my in-depth analysis of performative empowerment with the complimentary intersections of gender, labour and class in the *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017). I was also able to develop new knowledge in a different medium , that of the audio-visual video essay, using footage from *Superstore* (Spitzer 2015), *Kevin can F**k Hi*mself (Armstrong 2021), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino 2017) in order to suggests avenues of actual empowerment – of 'being enough' in their own terms – for all three women protagonists. By using a thematic and textual analysis accompanied with an audio-visual essay component methodology, I am able to clearly communicate my findings to an informed readership.

EPILOGUE

"Take the expression "snap to it." It is an expression for when we have to break through something, to get attention, to pierce the seal of a haze or a daze. Maybe you have to snap your fingers. Snap to it: how to create an impression strong enough, sharp enough, to get through the defences [*sic*].

Snap here is not only about individual action, those moments when she doesn't take it anymore, when she reacts to what she has previously endured, though it includes those moments. Snap is also what is necessary for "it" to come to the surface as some tangible thing, as a situation that should not be patiently endured, as a situation that demands our collective impatience. We will not wait. Any delay is intolerable."

- Sara Ahmed (2017: 211)

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