Catching a Catfish: Constructing the 'good' social media user in reality television

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Abstract

This article interrogates the cultural work of 'old' media texts which take social media use as a narrative focus. Employing the MTV reality show *Catfish: The TV Show* as a case study, I argue that, in this program, the specific conventions of reality television - authenticity, confession and self-realization – work to produce and circulate normative scripts of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" ways to articulate the self on social media, which align with reality TV's established investment in the concept of the 'authentic' self. Further, I argue that the show's representations of social media use valorize the primacy of connecting with and accepting one's 'real' self, making legible a subject position which speaks particularly to young people – the program's target demographic – in the contemporary juncture of 2010s 'crisis' neoliberalism, by transposing political questions into personal crises.

Introduction

> The reason [I did it] was because I had so many self-esteem issues. I used to cut myself, like, I couldn't handle the depression anymore, so I had to find something to make myself happy. And it was bad, I understand, but I got so much out of it. That's the crazy thing about the internet, you can be whoever you want to be (Abbey, *Catfish: The TV Show*, Season 1 Episode 5).

With the above lines, taken from an episode of the reality television program *Catfish: The TV Show* (MTV, 2012-), a young woman describes her motivations for "catfishing." Catfishing, in this context, refers to the construction of a "fake" profile on a social networking platform, a profile which does not correspond to a user's "real" identity. In this sequence, scripts of social media use are articulated through the reality televisual tropes of discussing one's feelings in a confessional and emotional manner. This discursive process positions catfishing as the epitome of "bad" social media use, symptomatic of an unhealthy or problematic subjectivity which is yearning for therapeutic resolution.

While scholarship on online social networking sites (SNS) proliferates, little research has interrogated the relationships between SNS and so-called 'old' media, such as television (Dubrofsky, 2011). Seeking to address this epistemological gap, Rachel Dubrofsky (2011, 114) has brought SNS into dialogue with reality TV, arguing that both are 'symptomatic texts' of a cultural context in which performing certain versions of the self under conditions of surveillance has become naturalized. Dubrofsky (ibid, 115) also notes that references to SNS have become 'ubiquitous in popular culture,' including on television. However, the specific ways in which SNS use is represented in old media, and the cultural work these representations do, are yet to be subject to detailed critical interrogation.

This article contributes to scholarly understandings of the relationships between old and new media through an analysis of *Catfish: The TV Show*, a program which takes SNS use as a structural narrative focus. Through analysis of localized moments from across the first and second seasons of the show, I explore how in this text, the discursive and semiotic conventions of *reality television*, especially the genre's investment in authenticity, self-realization and searching for the "real," work to produce and circulate a normative mandate to represent oneself "authentically" on social media. Attention to these kinds of textual processes is important for scholars of new media, as it enables an interrogation of how seemingly common-

sense ideas around the "right" and "wrong" ways to use SNS are shaped not only by the interfaces of the platforms themselves, but by external cultural products *about* social media.

Moreover, *Catfish: The TV Show* is an important object of study because the program exemplifies how representations of SNS in "old" media, such as reality TV, have become a highly visible cultural framework through which broader discourses of self and subjectivity are produced. These discourses, particularly in this context of notions of the authentic self, have profound significance for everyday life, working to enable and delimit the ways in which selfhood and identity are able to be made sense of in the contemporary, neoliberal moment. Reality TV shows have been widely discussed as core fabrics upon which neoliberal ideologies have permeated everyday life and culture (Woodstock 2012). *Catfish: The TV Show* does particularly potent cultural work in this regard, due to its specific address to a millennial youth consumer through its location within the MTV brand. As Stephanie Genz (2015) has argued, neoliberalism's pull to 'authentic' subjectivities can harbor different implications for different forms of identity. This article therefore also interrogates how, in *Catfish: The TV Show*, the production of norms of SNS use through the conventions of reality TV makes legible a particular *youth* subject position, one which seeks to rationalize, rather than critique, the 'chaos, uncertainty and insecurity' (Silva 2013, 6) increasingly facing young people under 2010s 'crisis' neoliberalism.

The program

In the context of digital media, a 'catfish' refers to 'A person who sets up a false profile on a social networking site for fraudulent or deceptive purposes.' As this definition, taken from the Merriam Webster online dictionary, makes clear, catfish or catfishing (the act of being a catfish) are culturally construed as highly negative entities and practices, bound to a series of normative assumptions about "right" and "wrong" ways to represent oneself on SNS. Stories

of catfishing span a spectrum of media texts, from reality TV, to news media, to talk shows. Of these texts, *Catfish: The TV Show* (first broadcast in 2012, and in its fifth season at the time of writing) has provided some of the most consistent and wide-reaching representations of the phenomenon of catfishing.

In each episode, the show's presenter, Nev Shulman (whose own story of falling victim to a catfish, as told in the 2010 documentary film *Catfish*, inspired the series) is contacted by a member of the public who claims to be in a romantic relationship with someone they "met" on social media, have only ever communicated with via digital technologies, and whom they therefore suspect may be a catfish. Nev and his filmmaking companion Max travel to the home of the potential catfishing victim, who explains their story. Nev and Max then set about proving that the suspect profile is indeed a catfish. Images from the profile are processed through search engines which locate their legitimate origin on the web, "friends" from the catfish profile are made contact with, who invariably profess to never having met with this person in "real life," and so on. Nev then reaches out to the catfish to arrange a face-to-face meeting between the catfish and their victim. While the first half of the program revolves around establishing the catfish profile's (inevitable lack of) legitimacy, the second concerns the therapeutic and cathartic redemption of the catfish her/himself. As I explore in more detail below, in almost every episode, once exposed, the catfish discusses why they felt compelled to adopt a "fake" online identity, evoking some form of fractured subjectivity. At the same time, however, they almost invariably claim that their romantic feelings for their victim are real, and that they do genuinely love them. Through the intervention of the program the catfish vow to work on learning to accept their "real" selves, and to represent themselves "authentically" online in the future.

The logic of the show is therefore predicated upon an artificial distinction between "online" and "offline" selves. Scholarship on digital media has long complicated online/offline

dichotomies through the concept of augmented reality, which encapsulates how the embededdness of digital technologies and networks within everyday life has rendered the online and the offline, the digital and the embodied, impossible to prise apart (cf. Craig, 2013). As a text, *Catfish: The TV Show* is thus engaged in the cultural work of discursively reproducing the fiction of an online/offline split in relation to selfhood and digital media. In the show, the embodied, offline self is conceived as the location of the "real," and the morally "correct" way conceive self-representation on SNS is as an almost seamless continuation of one's "real" offline self into the digital environment. The perniciousness of the catfish stems from their mobilization of an online identity which does not match up with their supposedly *authentic* offline self. In the show, this jars with the incitement to authenticity on SNS proffered by the text, and also contravenes the broader mandate of reality television that individuals strive to "be themselves" at all times (discussed below).

It is also important to note that the catfish and his/her victim never meet on the kinds of dating sites that constitute the normative digital platforms for seeking out romantic relationships. Rather, in the majority of episodes the catfish has first made contact with their partner by a "random" friend request on Facebook. On one level, then, the discourses of good/bad SNS usage which the show produces relate particularly to the Facebook platform. Through features such as 'People You May Know,' the architecture of Facebook centralizes the forging of connections with people that users already know outside of the platform. Bound to the show's status as a kind of cautionary tale of social media use gone wrong, is therefore the suggestion that both the catfish and their duped victim have been using this platform "incorrectly." This compounds each episode's narrative resolution in which, for the catfish, a fantasmatic vision of the future defined by a romantic relationship with their victim (often conjoined, as I explore later, with material wealth and success) is given up in exchange for working to realize their authentic self. Often, however, within the program, different forms of digital communication

are collapsed into a catch-all rhetoric of 'on the internet.' This posits a value in authenticity which transcends platform differentials, suggesting that the show also uses SNS to circulate a broader discourse around the primacy of authenticity in all aspects of everyday life. As I explore later, in the text, this valorization of the authentic self corresponds to neoliberal ideals which speak in particular to young people in a juncture of 2010s 'crisis' neoliberalism.

Selfhood and authenticity on social media and reality TV

In this article, authenticity denotes a conception of selfhood as a unique and innate set of personality traits, desires, emotional and intellectual dispositions, which are perceived to form a psychological 'inner life' of the individual (Rose 1998, 22). I am approaching authenticity and the authentic (or "real" or "true") self, as *discursively constructed ideas* about self and subjectivity, which attain cultural legibility through their linguistic and semiotic production in cultural texts. Genz (2015, 548) has argued that, in the contemporary moment, ideals of authenticity have become 'a boundary strategy between self-hood and neoliberal capitalism.' The concept of the authentic self has, in part, enabled the expansion of neoliberalism from an economic rationality into an ethos which structures how individuals come to understand their self-identities. The imperative to connect with and articulate the authentic self, particularly through practices of confession and self-branding, has become central to the neoliberal project of the self, conceptualizing individuals as, 'entrepreneurial actors defined by their capacity for autonomy and self-care' (ibid). Popular cultural discourses which position the attainment of authenticity as the solution to all manner of personal and political problems therefore reconcile human identity with the dismantling of collective, state provisions, and the concomitant demands of individualism and self-sufficiency integral to neoliberalism. The concept of the catfish attains its portentous cultural charge through its apparent rejection of the incitement to authenticity central to such popular understandings of self and subjectivity.

The relevance of the concept of the authentic self in relation to SNS has, however, been a site of disagreement amongst scholars. Dubrofsky (2011) and Jodi Dean (2010) for example, have argued that (unlike reality television) selfhood on SNS is performed through actions and interactions which form a proliferation of data, yet which do not necessarily need to be coalesced into a coherent narrative of selfhood or identity. For these scholars, self-performance on SNS is engineered to produce a stream of data which can be captured and circulated through the commercial, corporate and economic structures of these sites. Others, however, have argued that SNS *do* encourage the idea of 'authentic' self-representation, and thus reproduce the concept of the authentic self (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Cover 2012; Ellis, 2010; Van Dijck 2013). José Van Dijck (2013, 212) points, for instance, to Facebook's 'real name' policy, which is based upon 'the ideology of people having only one 'authentic' identity that is transparent and does not hold secrets,' while the platform's Timeline architecture enables a continuous, linear narrative of selfhood to be forged through one's mediations on the site. These scholars have located the impetus to authenticity on SNS as partly a response to a *cultural* need for individuals to process their actions and interactions, both digital and embodied, into the image of a consistent and intrinsic self (Cover, 2012). SNS are configured here as discursive apparatus through which users are able to make sense of their identities by drawing upon, and rearticulating, culturally-specific ideals of authentic subjectivity. These arguments brings SNS into dialogue with broader sociological claims around the perceived breakdown of collective means of identity formation, such as local community and religion, in contemporary society. Sociologists have claimed that in this context, forming a coherent sense of 'who you are' has become fraught with difficulty (Brown 1999). In this dialectic, SNS becomes a tool for mitigating the ontological uncertainty which the modern age has appeared to induce.

My argument in this article builds upon this latter position on authenticity, selfhood and SNS. *Catfish: The TV Show* demonstrates that the incitement to authenticity on SNS is produced not

only within the interfaces of SNS themselves, but in outside media which engage SNS as a format or narrative object. Reality television has also been positioned within the sociological context outlined above (Tincknell and Raghuram 2002), and *Catfish: The TV Show* makes literal, on a micro-level, a broader discursive process in which authenticity has become consolidated as a norm of SNS self-presentation because it *makes sense* in relation to broader, normative epistemologies of the self.

Discussing the early mainstreaming of the Internet, Mark Stefik (1997) argued that the rise of online technologies was accompanied by the sedimentation of various 'myths' about the internet across a spectrum of cultural texts. These myths, he claimed, worked to reconcile the Internet, which had the potential to profoundly transform received modes of thinking about self and society, with established frameworks of knowledge, which in turn shaped normative understandings of online communication through these existing epistemological norms. Approaching the phenomenon of catfishing through this conceptual framework enables an interrogation of the ways in which the catfish has come to circulate as a cultural myth which fixes certain meanings and norms of usage to SNS. Part of way *Catfish: The TV Show* is able to attain this mythic function is through its particular status as a reality TV show.

Before continuing, it is important to emphasize that ideals of authenticity in relation to SNS do not necessarily translate to a wholly transparent and unexpurgated sharing of one's supposedly "real" self/life. Concepts such as 'impression management' (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011) and 'self-branding' (Banet-Weiser, 2012) have encapsulated some of the ways in which SNS users are selective, partial and strategic in their online self-mediations in order to present themselves in particularly flattering or positive ways. However, this is not seen to compromise the essential authenticity of SNS self-representation. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has argued, online self-branding has become construed as a means of realizing and displaying one's authenticity, an

asserton which taps into a history of cultural ideals around the power of technological mediation to solidify or confirm an individual's identity as authentic or real.

Paradigmatic of this discourse is reality TV, which has frequently staked a claim to representing the "real" in the selves and subjectivities of those depicted onscreen. Reality programs have often posited an almost causal relationship between their own statuses as constructed and mediated texts, and the revelation of participants' purportedly authentic selves. As Mark Andrejevic (2004, 108) has noted, in the logic of reality TV, 'surveillance provides a certain guarantee of authenticity…this authenticity becomes a process of self-expression, self-realization, and self-validation' (also Holmes 2006). Andrejevic has conceptualized reality TV as having naturalized surveillance as a benevolent rather than punitive force, with the power to bring out one's authentic self in line with the neoliberal mandate to self-sufficiency through self-realization.

Through this discursively constituted relationship between authenticity and mediation, reality shows frequently display self-awareness of their own statuses as constructed, televisual environments, calling upon viewers to assess which onscreen participants are being "real" and who, in opposition, is being "fake" and performing for the cameras. As Dubrofsky (2011, 117) has noted, the 'good' reality TV participant behaves 'As he or she is imagined to behave in an unsurveilled space,' offering a vision of selfhood which appears 'consistent across disparate social spaces and at different times […] To be seen as adopting a behavior specifically designed for the space of [reality TV] immediately designates a participant as inauthentic, unreal and suspect.'

 In *Catfish: The TV Show*, this imperative to maintain a consistent selfhood across mediated and non-mediated time and space is transposed onto the dialectic of offline and online activity I discussed previously. Norms of behavior in relation to SNS – that one's online and offline

selves must be fused together into an almost seamless articulation of an intrinsic and authentic self – are sculpted through established mandates of self-representation embedded within reality television.

'I just want you to be real': Mediation, emotion and the "real"

Catfish: The TV Show plays out a complex dialogue between reality television and SNS, sculpting epistemologies of normative social media usage through the tropes and conventions of reality TV. Foremost, the series works to emphasize the power of television to make manifest the purportedly authentic selfhoods of those it represents in ways inaccessible to new media platforms. In the show, the truth of selfhood is positioned as only fully capturable by the immanent lenses of the reality TV cameras, which, in this text, occupy a central role in fixing a particular semiotics of authenticity to the catfish's material body. Throughout each episode, cameras, particularly in the act of filming, are repeatedly visually evoked. In numerous shots, Max is shown filming events on his small, digital video camera, which are juxtaposed with shots of a grainier quality, connoting that this is footage filmed on Max's camera itself. Further, the wider film crew, with their larger, shoulder-mounted cameras, are also often visible inside the frame and referred to in lines of dialogue. These recurrent representations of the modes of production not only cement the claims to reality of the text, but construct the camera itself as a technology of authenticity.

It is not just the spatial, embodied proximity between the camera and the catfish which is construed as enabling the revelation of who the catfish "really is", however, but more so the series' broader claim that placing a subject before the reality television cameras bears the elusive power to bring forth the authentic self located within this corporeal shell. As Su Holmes (2006, 61) has argued, much reality programming suggests that authentic selves are "found" or released by the reality experience and its vaguely therapeutic and transforming qualities,

[which are] imagined as having brought forth the real self which was there ('inside') all along' (I discuss the therapeutic dynamics of this process in the next section). Moreover, scholars have argued that in reality TV the 'authentic' self is frequently coded through images of emotionality (Aslama and Pannti, 2006; Dubrofsky, 2009). Dubrofsky (2009) has argued that many sequences in reality TV build towards a kind of 'money shot,' a moment of seemingly uncontrolled emotional expression, where participants appear to lose control of themselves and surrender to an outpouring of raw emotion, made visible on and through the body, the seeming uncontainability which constructs this expression as real.

Such grammars of authenticity-through-emotion are abundantly represented in *Catfish: The TV Show*. In this specific text, however, this reality TV trope does additional cultural work, sculpting and circulating normative epistemologies around how to present one's identity on SNS, in which are embedded broader discursive frameworks for making sense of contemporary subjectivity. In most episodes, when confronted in the face-to-face meeting, the catfish initially refuses to show remorse for their apparent online deception. Yet, under the glare of the reality TV lens, she or he gradually breaks down, confessing the error of their ways and explaining how their compulsion to catfish stemmed from some form of personal or psychological turmoil and an inability to embrace who they "really are."

For example, in Season 2, Episode 2, the catfish, Framel (an overweight and unattractive young man who had been masquerading online as the handsome and muscular Marq), when confronted at his home by Nev, Max and his victim, Anthony, initially refuses to makes a sincere apology, stubbornly shaking his head and rolling his eyes. Anthony shouts, 'I just want you to be [bleeped expletive] real… I just want you to own up to being a [bleep] up person!' Framel then suddenly shouts back, 'You are not about to put me back in that place in my life. I said I was a [bleeped] up person then, I'm not [bleeped] up person now. It is what it is.' Upon these lines the camera abruptly pans to Framel, tremblingly zooming in on his face at a jarring

speed, as if straining to capture a spontaneous and uncalculated surge of emotion, as Framel's eyes grow wide and he gesticulates violently.

This very visible pouring forth of the catfish's vulnerable, fractured and deficient subjectivity through emotion before the TV cameras, is positioned as enabling their realization of the need to be true to their apparently essential selves. Framel's vigorous exclamation, and its textual framing, signify the initial emergence of his authentic self, leading into a segment where he explains that he constructed the fake online persona due to a sense of self-loathing born out of a physical accident which led him to put on weight, compounded by his family's inability to accept that he was gay. As he tells his story, the camera lingers upon Framel's face in close-up, his voice breaks and tears stream down his cheeks, which he attempts to wipe away with his hand. A soundtrack of long, melancholic, ethereal notes bridges a cut to Anthony sitting opposite who has also begun to cry. The real here is coded not only through the uncontainability of Framel's own emotions as he narrates his "truthful" biography, but through how Anthony, who moments earlier was shouting at Framel and threatening violence, appears caught up in a moment of affective transmission (Brennan, 2004), feeling and intensity overriding rationality and cognition. At the culmination of this sequence, Framel confesses his wrongdoing, imploring of Anthony, 'I need your forgiveness.'

In this show, placing the catfish within the self-revelatory apparatus of reality TV is construed as a means of re-situating the aberrant, inauthentic SNS user within the normative, neoliberal trajectory of individual empowerment through finding and displaying the authentic self. In this way, *Catfish: The TV Show*'s money-shot segments often emphasize the crucial role of *mediation* in making visible the catfish's authentic self, and enabling their eventual realization of their apparently failed subjectivity, of which their "inappropriate" SNS usage is construed as symptomatic. In Season 2, Episode 4, Kristen, the catfish, whose deficient sense of self is attributed to a car accident which left her with a prosthetic eye and led her to gain weight,

initially appears defensive towards Nev, Max and her victim in the face-to-face confrontation. As she speaks, however, her face turns red and she starts to well up in tears. Again, in this episode the emergence of the catfish's "real" self is coded through a moment of verbal exclamation. Kristyn shouts, 'I never used to be the fat girl. I was this skinny chick that got what she wanted, and then I had my accident and everything changed. Everything!' Crying, she attempts to stem her tears with her hand, leaving a smudge of mascara across her eyes. During this outburst, the text cuts back and forth between a medium shot of Nev and Max, with his camera held up in the act of filming, and medium shots of Kristyn, in which another member of the camera crew is partially visible behind her. Interspersed within this montage are digital images of her "fake" online persona, their imprecise and pixelated quality contrasting with the sharper focus of the TV cameras' footage. Reality TV, metonymically represented by the camera, is thus constructed as a domain of authenticity, offering access to the "real" in ways unattainable on SNS. In this textual process, norms of SNS self-representation are produced through the optic of established understandings of what it means to be real or to have a self, attached to the reality TV form. Kristyn's identity is grounded in an interwoven dichotomy of offline/online, real/false, her physical body, and the emotionality this produces, are demarcated as the ultimate location of her "real" self.

'I don't think there's a rehab for fake Facebook profiles': Therapy, selfhood and youth identity in 'crisis' neoliberalism

Central to the cultural work of *Catfish: The TV Show*, both in its production of norms of SNS use and the demarcation of broader ideals of selfhood through this, is the notion that failing to be authentic online is evidence of an unhealthy subjectivity, irreconcilable with happiness and fulfilment. However, the show does not only proffer mediation as a means of making tangible real selves, but as enabling the beginning of a process of resolving the catfish's state of ontological crisis. The initial moments of emotional revelation analyzed above are followed,

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in almost every episode, by sequences in which the catfish sits down with Nev and Max, and verbally expands upon the troubled relationship with their identity which led them to catfish. These scenes are paradigmatic of the kind of therapeutic, confessional talk which traverses reality TV. Foucault (1998), in his work on confession, argued that confession takes place within a power relationship in which the ability to confess is enabled by an authority figure to which the confession is told. In traditional religious or medical confessionals (the focus of Foucault's text), this authority was a priest or doctor, who not only hears the confession, but confirms, discursively, its ability to heal or transform. In the *televised* confession, as Mimi White (2003) has noted, this authority is endowed within the medium of television itself. In *Catfish: The TV Show*, besides his self-identification as 'someone who struggled in middle school and high school with who I was, and being comfortable, and also not being popular' (S1E1), Nev himself has no professional credentials as a therapist. What qualifies him to take this role is his connection to the media. Integral to this relationship between confession and television is the notion that certain kinds of TV shows *as TV shows*, including talk shows (White, 2003) and, significantly for my focus here, reality television, can function as a therapeutic apparatus through the emphasis on emotionality and self-disclosure integral to these formats (Andrejevic 2004; Dubrofsky, 2007; Woodstock 2014).

In Season 1, Episode 7 of *Catfish: The TV Show*, Rose, the catfish, discusses feeling 'addicted' to creating fraudulent SNS profiles. She states, 'I really can't stop, I feel addicted. I don't think there's a rehab for fake Facebook profiles.' Nev replies, 'Well, there's this…' gesturing to himself and Rose sitting together at the table. This 'this' encapsulates both Rose's opportunity to confess her imperiled subjectivity to Nev himself, in a set-up which is very reminiscent of a psychotherapy session, and the broader importance that this confession is mediated via the therapeutic domain of reality TV.

In consonance with the genre's investment in the authentic self, as Dubrofsky (2007, 267) has argued, therapy in reality television is often centered not on changing the self, but 'embracing' the self that one already, intrinsically, has; learning to 'admit that one's "true" or "authentic" self is good.' In this framework, what is transformed through therapy is one's *relationship with* the self, a transformation in which the intervention of television itself is construed as fundamental (ibid).

Catfish: The TV Show evokes these kinds of discourses in order to play out an ethical condemnation of catfishing, and produce norms of SNS usage through this, in highly therapeutic and existential terms. This is epitomized in Season 1, Episode 8, where Aaron, a young, overweight, African-American gay man, has been posing as Amanda Miller, a conventionally attractive, Caucasian girl, in order to engage in online relationships with heterosexual young men. During the confessional sequence, Aaron explains to Nev that he began catfishing in order to feel 'liked', something which he did not have access to in his 'offline' life due to experiences of homophobic abuse. Responding to Aaron's story, Nev states, 'But you don't even like you,' to which Aaron replies, 'No, not really… I don't know who I am yet, so there's always [the chance to] change.' Aaron evokes an ambivalent coupling of ontology and stasis, whereby the intervention of the show has initiated a process of *self*-discovery and *self*-acceptance. Nev's therapeutic counseling to Aaron stresses the need for him to, 'Really own who you are and your problems and your failures and your insecurities,' re-casting the social prejudice which Aaron tells of having faced as a *personal* crisis to be resolved through connecting with his authentic self.

Similarly, in Season 1 Episode 1, Nev asks the catfish, Chelsea, a young bisexual woman who had been posing as a male model to attain online intimacy with heterosexual females, 'You spend a lot of time lying on the internet. Where does that stem from?' Chelsea replies:

Being bullied in high school, that, somewhat, could have had something to do with this. I mean, throughout the past few years I've been called dyke, lesbian, fag, fat-ass, you know, everything. I definitely missed out on a lot of things in high school, like proms, dances...

In this statement, the persona that Chelsea adopted online attains a complex entanglement of the real and the fake. Her catfishing becomes construed as the expression of an essential and innate queer desire, but one which she was unable to express in an "appropriate" manner. The string of homophobic and sizeist slurs which Chelsea says have been directed towards her, alongside her apparent exclusion from 'proms' and 'dances' - events associated with formalized rituals of heterosexual courtship - emphasize how her bisexual identity had been experienced in painful opposition to normative expectations of heterosexuality. This sense of subjective dissonance is further compounded by her departure from traditional ideals of bodily beauty and size. Again, Nev's advice is dispensed at the level of the personal, encouraging Chelsea to reflect upon, 'how wonderful your friendships could be [if] you're just yourself.'

Chelsea and Aaron's catfishing is suggested to have enabled them to "escape" suffering pertaining to stigmatized facets of their identities, and access forms of social privilege denied them in their embodied, social interactions due to racial, sexual and gendered hierarchies and inequalities. This is not unique to these episodes. Across the program, catfishing enables people of color to pass online as white, gay people as straight, transgender as cisgender, fat as thin, and poor as rich. As the examples I have drawn upon thus far make clear, catfishing is repeatedly construed as a disharmony with, or inability to accept or express some aspect of one's identity. At the same time, this mental suffering is frequently attributed a social or cultural basis, such as the systemic privileging of heterosexuality, or norms of female bodily beauty. Yet, the solution offered to all catfish is the same: affirming and accepting their

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authentic selves, rendering opaque and uncritiqued the structural inequalities which led them to catfish.

This therapeutic transposition of the social and political into the personal and individual points to the show's convergence with critiques of reality television as 'emblematic' neoliberal television (Woodstock, 2014: 784). Neoliberalism has become a widely-used and somewhat amorphous concept in academic literature. Here, I use the term specifically to conceptualize the ways in which certain economic rationalities have come to permeate and shape discourses of selfhood and identity within popular media. Several scholars have explored how reality programming produces subject positions which are resilient, self-reliant, enterprising and 'empowered,' and which can withstand the 'changing, uncertain, economic and political landscape[s]' naturalized through neoliberalism (Woodstock 2014, 783-785; see also Couldry 2008; Ouellette & Hay 2008). One of the key insights of these collective analyses is, however, that reality TV should not be conceptualized as circulating a unified and overarching neoliberal subject position. Rather, reality television has made legible a variety of *different* subject positions, which speak to the dynamics of neoliberalism in different ways, tied to the format specificities, imagined consumer or temporal moment of individual programs.

Catfish: The TV Show occupies a very specific position in the reality television marketplace, a product of the MTV brand and aimed at a youth demographic. Indeed, it is significant that, within the show, all of the catfish are *young* people, aged generally between their mid-teens to early twenties. While most scholarship on MTV has focused upon its broadcasting of music videos, the brand is also a prolific producer of widely-circulated, youth-targeted reality television (Middleton, 2001). MTV has played a crucial role in the cultural construction of youth subjectivities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, producing in particular the notion that young people's senses of self-identity are more in the making than those of fully-formed adults (ibid). As Nancy Lesko (2012, 91) has explored, in Western culture, youth is

characterized as a time of transition, a period in which individuals undergo 'emotional, social and cognitive changes.' Within popular discourses, young people are frequently perceived to inhabit a kind of ontological 'threshold' between childhood and adulthood. It is therefore no coincidence that many MTV reality shows dramatize moments of transition in the lives of young people (e.g. *16 and Pregnant*, *My Super Sweet 16*), or offer interventions to address and resolve barriers to young people successfully transitioning into adulthood (*Plain Jane*, *I Used to Be Fat*).

In *Catfish: The TV Show*, the take-up of SNS use as an object of narrative scrutiny becomes a core facet of MTV's discursive making of contemporary youth subjectivities. In this show, a normative and successful transition into adulthood is associated with particular kinds of self-representation on social media. Relatedly, the failure to present oneself "authentically" is construed as a barrier to self-realization and the ability to move forward into adulthood as a fully-realized individual. Catfishing is repeatedly evoked within the program as evidence of a stunted, immature, or childish subjectivity. For instance, in Season 1, Episode 2, a friend of the catfishing victim, Trina, proclaims of the catfish, 'How can he deal with [talk to] someone and lie to them for a whole year?' Trina replies, 'Ask the men,' gesturing to Nev and Max, 'let's get a man's perspective.' Max interjects, 'Girls do this too,' as Trina's friend retorts, 'Girls do this. Not *women*. Women don't do that.' To similar effect, in Season 1, Episode 5, the catfish, Abbey, concludes her therapeutic discussion with Nev with the words, 'Time to grow up. Time to get over it.'

It is also highly significant that *Catfish: The TV Show* (and indeed the whole concept of the catfish) has emerged at a particular temporal moment in the life-cycle of neoliberal capitalism, the post-2008 financial crisis. At this juncture, traditional anchors of what Lauren Berlant (2011, 3) has called the 'good life' of 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, lively and durable intimacy' (Berlant 2011), have become increasingly out of reach

for the millennial generation who are represented within and addressed by *Catfish: The TV Show* (Silva 2013). The 'fake' online personas created by the catfish are, in almost every case, successful, glamorous and wealthy individuals: models, rappers, pageant queens and the like. In Season 2 Episode 2, Nev and Max chat via webcam with the man whose images Framel had taken to construct his fraudulent profile, a handsome nightlife promoter called Josh, who boasts 13,000 followers on this Facebook page, who states that his likeness is frequently used for catfish personas.

These visions of economic success are also conjoined with another kind of idealized image of the 'good life:' monogamous romance and coupledom. As I noted previously, during the face-to-face confrontation, the catfish almost always maintains that their romantic feelings for the victim were 'real' and they do genuinely love them: 'Everything is real, I'm still the same person [inside]' (S1E2), 'It was me and not me. All the emotions, just a different face' (S1E5), and the catfish and their victim have often discussed marriage and having children together. The catfish persona is thus construed as an ambivalent entanglement of the real and the fake, designated as a means of achieving, at least in disembodied, online form, fantasies of success defined through wealth, popularity and domestic partnership, which their 'real' identities – bound to vectors of sexuality, gender, race, body size or economic status - appear to have rendered unobtainable.

Jennifer Silva (2013, 7-8) has argued that in the context of 'crisis' neoliberalism, 'drastic economic restructuring, profound cultural transformations, and deepening social inequality' have necessitated a 'reimagining' of what it means to become an adult in American culture. Central to this shift in the meanings of adulthood, Silva claims, is a fixation with 'emotions and psychic health' as the locus of stability, happiness and security, over external signifiers like a career, financial security, home ownership or a nuclear family (ibid, 10). Discussing this same social context, Berlant (2011) has argued that cultural texts have come to represent strategies

for navigating such a climate of intensified socio-economic precarity, which are often articulated in emotional or existential terms. Bringing Silva and Berlant's arguments together in the context of *Catfish: The TV Show*, we see that the mediation of SNS use through the reality televisual tropes of emotion, confession and therapeutic self-realization, works to produce and disseminate strategies for making sense of what it means to be a youth subject 'in a world where taken-for-granted pathways to adulthood are quickly disappearing' (Silva 2013, 6). For the young people who catfish, an image of futurity characterized by romantic coupledom, a nuclear family and economic security must be given up. In its place, melded as part of a "successful" transition into adulthood, is a future centered simply upon a relationship with the authentic self. This relationship is positioned to bring happiness and fulfilment in emotional, if not material, terms, making legible a norm of youth subjectivity which is resilient to, rather than critical of, the inequalities inherent to neoliberal precarity which have disproportionately impacted the young.

In this narrative, SNS is endowed with a profound significance as the means through which this process of self-realization is both measured and enabled. Each episode of *Catfish: The TV Show* concludes with a segment taking place, or so the on-screen text maintains, a year after the events of the episode's main narrative. Nev is shown communicating via Skype-call with the (now former) catfish, who asserts that they have deleted their false SNS profile and relinquished their catfishing ways in order to work on being their authentic self, and are much happier for it. As Abbey, the catfish of Series 1 Episode 5 proclaims, beaming into the webcam, 'I've had time to focus on how I feel about myself, and I have more self-esteem. Things are changing, and I'm changing!'

Conclusion

This article has sought to make two primary interventions. Firstly, I have argued that the imperative towards 'authentic' self-representation as a norm of social media usage is, in large part, produced by the cultural scripts *about* social media which are constructed and circulated in so-called "old" media texts. *Catfish: The TV Show* is emblematic of this process, sculpting and disseminating discursive and disciplinary indexes of "good" and "bad" SNS use thorough the tropes and conventions embedded within *reality television* programming. In particular, the show's insistent valorization of connecting with and realizing one's "authentic" self, delineates catfishing as the ultimate "aberrant" social media practice, symptomatic of a fractured and imperiled subjectivity in need of therapeutic resolve. In this way, the concept of the catfish, as represented in *Catfish: The TV Show*, functions as an Internet 'myth' in Stefik's (1997) terms, a discursive archetype which works to shape the ways in which social networking platforms come to be used, through existing epistemological norms of self and subjectivity.

Secondly, I have argued that the take-up of social media as a narrative focus in *Catfish: The TV Show* is central to the program's exemplification of the permeation of neoliberal ideologies into everyday life and culture, far beyond the domains of formal politics and economics (Woodstock 2014). In this show, SNS use circulates as a narrative fabric in which are woven broader ideals of subjectivity which speak in particular to the dynamics of youth identity in the contemporary juncture of 'crisis' neoliberalism. Of course, the deliberate aim of the program is no doubt simply to generate commercial capital, appealing to MTV's youth demographic by capturing a zeitgeist in which SNS have become a ubiquitous mode of interpersonal communication, and integrating this with the established tropes of reality TV. Yet, the amalgamation of reality TV, SNS and youth identity within this text makes legible, as a cultural by-product, a subject position in which traditional, material and romantic markers of success take second place to a less tangible relationship with the self. This forms, in Berlant's (2011) terms, an 'affective rhythm of survival,' a kind of ontological strategy for navigating a climate

of naturalized precarity for the millennial generation, which diffuses the possibility of critique or challenge of the ever-deepening inequalities of the political present.

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