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MY JOB IS ME

Postfeminist celebrity culture and the gendering of authenticity

Stéphanie Genz

My aim in this paper is to think through a number of issues concerning the relationship between postfeminist/neoliberal brand culture, celebrity femininity and commodified authenticity. Using the case study of British glamour model and media mogul Katie Price, I suggest that the affective and commercial appeal of postfeminist celebrity culture depends on the commodification and gendering of authenticity whereby the currency of “realness” in the current media economy is harnessed to neoliberal and postfeminist expressions of (self-)branding, entrepreneurship and feminine agency. I argue that the “Katie Price” brand makes use of a series of authenticating strategies to involve consumers in the construction and assessment of postfeminist celebrity subjectivity. In particular, I focus on three tropes that occur in conjunction with this type of authenticity in consumption: personal narrativization, class groundedness, and entrepreneurial/plastic femininity.

KEYWORDS postfeminism; (self-)branding; authenticity; celebrity; neoliberalism

Introduction: (Self-)Branding, Postfeminism and Authenticity

Current scholarship on postfeminist subjectivity has focused on the breakdown of dichotomies—feminism/femininity; subject/object; complicity/critique; false/enlightened consciousness; emancipation/empowerment—to discuss the complex identity positions that become available in the context of neoliberal modes of governmentality that construct the self as both freely choosing and self-regulating (Stéphanie Genz 2006, 2009; Rosalind Gill 2008). Critics have struggled to reconcile the affective and entrepreneurial dimensions of postfeminist culture with its confining and disciplinary aspects, giving rise to a number of Foucaultian- and Butlerian-inspired concepts that seek to capture the postfeminist dialectic of agency and control, self-actualization and normalization. Contemporary neologisms such as postfemininity and sexual subjectivation point towards a new subjective space that offers various degrees of freedom and boundedness to postfeminist, neoliberal agents (Genz 2009; Gill 2003). The gender implications of this conceptual turn are clear as it is predominantly women who are called upon by postfeminist neoliberal economies to articulate their selfhood in terms of pre-set scripts of femininity, beauty and sexiness.

In this article, I want to move away to some extent from these valuable examinations of what postfeminist subjectivity entails to an interrogation of how postfeminism engages
subjects in the perplexing double binds of discipline and choice. In many ways, my analysis responds to calls from feminist cultural critics to expand our understanding of the intimate connections between culture and subjectivity, to investigate as Rosalind Gill puts it “how it is that what is out there’ gets ‘in here’ to reconstruct our deepest yearnings and sense of self” (2011, 66). In this respect, I am also indebted to more wide ranging sociological and philosophical theories of affect that examine the cultural dimensions of capitalism and the ways “feeling is negotiated in the public sphere” (Kristyn Gorton 2007, 334). As Sara Ahmed suggests, one of the reasons that societies maintain particular hierarchies of gender, race and class is the strength of our affective attachments to social norms (2004, 11–12). In fact, “feelings might be how structures get under our skin” (Ahmed 2010, 216).

More directly, my thinking is influenced by debates in contemporary consumer studies that focus on the effective/affective operation of neoliberal brand culture. As Naomi Klein noted in her influential No Logo (2000), we now live in a “new branded world” characterized by an unparalleled integration of brand and culture in the course of which the straightforward relationship between buyer and seller is transformed into something far more “invasive and profound” (Klein 2005, 3, 335). This is part of a larger shift in Western society towards the experience economy where consumers no longer merely consume goods and services but they are looking for memorable events that engage them in a personal way (Joseph Pine and James Gilmore 1999). Here, as Sarah Banet-Weiser explores in Authentic TM (2012), we need to take into account the “affective relational quality—the experience—of brands” to understand changing relations between seller and buyer, marketer and consumer (2012, 9). Recently, this interest into affective economies and the cultural process of branding has focused on a plethora of self-presentation techniques, such as self-branding, that incorporate branding and advertising practices into the construction of identity as a product to be consumed by others. In this context, the self-as-brand has been discussed in relation to social media and other online spaces that create a narrative of the self using the logic and strategies of consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 2011; Alice Marwick 2013). Of course, the promotional ethos of self-branding is not an invention of social media genres but has appeared in corporate marketing literature (Alison Hearn 2008) and also been narrativized by reality television where the demotic turn (Graeme Turner 2006) presents fame as available to ordinary persons. In these on- and offline sites, self-branding comes to be seen as a form of labour—undertaken by both elite and ordinary people—with material/economic goals of self-promotion, profit and visibility entangled with individual/affective aims of self-reflexivity/care, creativity and authenticity.

My focus is on the gendered dimensions of such labour that emerge in the context of postfeminist/neoliberal brand culture when this kind of emotive consumption intersects with gender identity and celebrity media and gives rise to distinctly regulated—entrepreneurial, classed and sexualized—formations of feminine identity. In other words, I want to investigate how postfeminism as a gendered brand space taps into emotion and affect as crucial elements in the construction, marketing and consumption of female subjectivity. For my purposes, postfeminism is usefully described as a “cultural landscape and historical moment” enabled by late-twentieth-century neoliberal consumer culture and post-second-wave “commodity feminism” that absorbs feminist ideas and rhetoric (e.g. emancipation, empowerment, choice, etc.) in a politically ambivalent, media-friendly and individualistic ideology and practice (Genz 2006; Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon 2009, 2; Robert Goldman 1992). Often criticized for its exclusions in terms of class, age, race and sexuality—whereby “the ideal postfeminist subject is seen to be a White, middle-class,
heterosexual girl” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 8)—postfeminism, or rather the consumer goods that emerge in its cultural/commercial milieu, is also eminently saleable and brandable. Specifically, postfeminism is a “particularly rich context” for “self-branded girls” who are encouraged to be self-reliant and empowered within consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 2012, 56).

In the following sections, I want to parse out the intricacies and entanglements of this “postfeminist self-brand” (Banet-Weiser 2011) and suggest that the brand promises and agency claims it makes are maintained by a gendered and mediated form of authenticity that acts as an affective commodity in a crowded neoliberal market. To this end, authenticity is conceived within the contours of the brand and incorporated into a general entrepreneurial attitude (adopted by neoliberal capitalism) and a postfeminist ethos of feminine achievement and sexual subjecthood. I argue that this kind of commodified authenticity has a pivotal role to play in the understanding of postfeminist agency and self-branding, both in relationship to the subjects that postfeminist discourses create and the consumers of those discourses. Here, the producing and consuming subjects adopt self-branding techniques and authenticity labour as a formative activity that creates the self as part of a gendered and classed marketplace. This self-work can be conceptualized in terms of “affective labour”—itself a subdivision of Marxian notions of immaterial or “living labour”—that involves the production and manipulation of affect (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri 2000).

Next, I will discuss the consumption and production of authenticity in Western media economies and I will focus on celebrity culture as a key repository of authentic capital. Using the case study of British glamour model and media mogul Katie Price, I propose that the affective and commercial appeal of postfeminist celebrity culture depends on the commodification and gendering of authenticity whereby the currency of “realness” is harnessed to neoliberal and postfeminist expressions of self-branding, entrepreneurship and feminine agency. Price’s example is part of a broader cultural dynamic that involves the normalization of gendered (self-)branding techniques whereby women in particular (celebrity and otherwise) integrate market logic into reflexive and lucrative performances of the feminine self within a limiting script of consumer culture circumscribed by specific gender, class and sexual norms. The “Katie Price” self-brand makes use of a series of authenticating strategies to involve consumers in the creation and assessment of postfeminist/neoliberal celebrity subjectivity. In particular, I will focus on three tropes that occur in conjunction with this type of authenticity in consumption: personal narrativization, class groundedness, entrepreneurial/plastic femininity. The intersections and contradictions between these tropes highlight the ambivalent nature of brand culture and the neoliberal/postfeminist subjectivity it gives rise to, fraught with tensions between empowerment, creativity, entrepreneurialism on the one hand, and the disciplined and profit-geared performance and practice of gender/class subjugation on the other hand.

**Commodified Authenticity and the Neoliberal Project of the Gendered Self**

The possibility of authenticity within the context of capitalist consumer culture has been debated at length. While classic arguments of Adorno and Horkheimer for example were invariably sceptical of the culture industry producing authentic products of any kind, interpretivist and pragmatic approaches have adopted a more multidimensional and
performative stance that highlights the central role of authenticity seeking in everyday consumer practice (Michael Beverland and Francis Farrelly 2010; Randal Rose and Stacy Wood 2005; Phillip Vannini and Patrick Williams 2009). While authenticity has been recognized as a “new consumer sensibility” by marketing analysts and consumer researchers in particular (James Gilmore and Joseph Pine 2007)—endowing products with a kind of “commercial story telling” that generates emotional content and desire (David Lewis and Darren Bridger 2000, 39)—recent studies also have demonstrated how consumers find authenticity in seemingly fake or contrived objects. Rose and Wood’s 2005 study into reality television for example reveals how viewers are able to locate authentic elements—what they consider to be genuine or “true”—in consumption experiences that others may consider inauthentic or false. Here, the consumer is identified as a skilled and creative producer of authenticity, adept at transforming the ontologically fake (objects, brands, events) into the phenomenologically real. Cultural critics as well now readily accept that authenticity can be branded and that authentic and commercial interests can be seen as potentially consistent (Banet-Weiser 2012). In this context, authenticity is discussed in connection with entrepreneurial self-concepts—encouraged for example in blogging communities—that set up a mutable set of affective relations between individuals, audiences and commodities (Marwick 2013). Authenticity links individual selfhood to neoliberal capitalism and requires consistent labour, or self-work, to achieve and maintain its own authentic capital.

Consumer culture and marketing theories such as these focus on the changing consumer role and the emergence of consumption communities around ubiquitous, mass-market objects (Bernard Cova and Daniele Dalli 2010). The working/producing consumer (or “prosumer”) shifts the relationship between production and consumption by adding cultural and affective elements to market offerings and thereby increasing the market value of these offerings (Lewis and Bridger 2000; Gilmore and Pine 2007). Consumption thus becomes a vehicle for authenticating the self and/as product in a cyclical process that, once constructed, is used to validate its own manifestations. Authenticity is involved in this continuing cycle of marketing and branding the self so that commodified authenticity is used not only to sell the (self-)brand but also to verify and authorize its own products. The self-replicating pattern of self-branding and self-authentication is part of the logic of authenticity labour where being authentic now becomes congruent with engagement in commercial brand culture. Authenticity thus becomes a boundary strategy between selfhood and neoliberal capitalism where in order to experience the authentic self, this self must now be branded.

Some critics have been quick to dismiss this conspicuous kind of authenticity in consumption as the ultimate marketing position that sells brands at the level of self-image and identity—or, as Andrew Potter puts it, a “hoax” that will never deliver (2010, 13). Yet, research into consumer agency and neoliberal subjectivity indicates that this is not simply the fabrication of consumption-inducing authenticity by profit-seekers; rather, this mediated, commodified authenticity is built into the structure of neoliberal media economies that construct the subject as self-enterprising, self-authenticating and narrativising (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Anthony Giddens 1991; Rose and Wood 2005). In this sense, authenticity labour can be discussed as an integral element of the neoliberal reflexive “project of the self” where in “post-traditional” society individuals are reconceptualised as entrepreneurial actors defined by their capacity for autonomy and self-care (Giddens 1991; Nikolas Rose 1996). The concept of the self-as-project/work/labour
also allows neoliberalism to exert its regulatory function whereby “seductive but deceptive authority is folded into the subject and the existence of external obstacles denied” (Joanne Baker 2009, 277). The traditional ties of class, gender and race are both rendered obsolete and reified by neoliberalism’s increasingly normative conceptions of choice and success that privilege distinctly classed, racialized and gendered bodies.

As has been noted by a number of commentators, the notion of the neoliberal entrepreneur of the self who constantly works on and updates personal biography also provides an ideological link with postfeminism whose gendered subject is framed by the conceptual paradigms of enterprise culture (e.g. self-production, self-determination, empowerment, choice) (Genz and Brabon 2009, 167–172; Gill 2008). I want to further investigate this junction between postfeminism and neoliberalism by drawing on the concept of commodified authenticity and examining its regulation and normalization in gender and class terms. As the case study of Katie Price reveals, authenticity is branded both in relation to a postfeminist ethos of feminine entrepreneurial agency and sexual subjectionhood, and a commercial ideology based on mediated celebrity identity and working-class ordinariness. In line with a range of reality television commodities that rely on the discourses of gender and class—in a US context, Jersey Shore (MTV 2009–2012) and The Hills (MTV 2006–2010) spring to mind while British versions include The Only Way is Essex (ITV 2010–2014) and Made in Chelsea (E4 2011–)—Price’s self-brand harnesses the authentic capital of (working) class identity and feminine labour to contrive and manipulate a multi-layered celebrity product that is simultaneously exclusionary, disciplinary and profitable in its construction of a hypersexualized, classed body as well as performed and consumed as self-created, authentic and attainable for others to imitate. Using Sara Ahmed’s terminology (2004), class and gender “stick” and are fixed upon Price’s celebrity brand/body in contradictory ways that exemplify the inevitable ambivalence at the heart of postfeminist/neoliberal brand culture.

Of course, celebrity has long been recognized as a means of self-validation in contemporary society and a key operational site in the production and management of authenticity (Richard Dyer 1998). Contemporary audiences are invited to share in celebrities’ personal experiences and feelings and access those parts of their lives that are normally labelled “private.” However, given the often differing demands of audiences and the diverse commercial interests of celebrity culture, celebrities’ attempts to portray their “real” self are regularly in competition with other media outlets that promise to provide an even greater, more “truthful” insight into a celebrity’s private life—with celebrity magazines and gossip blogs as key loci for such claims. The frequently unsanctioned intrusions into a celebrity’s privacy—fuelled by a steady supply of paparazzi pictures—not only jeopardize the celebrity’s construction of “realness” but also raise interesting points about the construction and stratification of authenticity. The possibility of simultaneous and potentially incongruous claims of authenticity—made by celebrities, audiences as well as other media institutions—exposes a hierarchy of meaning and value in the production and branding of the authentic whereby different branders might be vying for their take on authenticity and encourage various, potentially clashing, affective connections between consumers and brand. With regard to the “Katie Price” self-brand, this authentic hierarchy is organized around a series of mediated, classed and gendered markers that allow Price to claim multiple positionings in relation to neoliberal entrepreneurship, class (dis)respectability and self-sexualization. In the next section, I want to focus on the authenticating strategies that are used to validate Price’s self-brand and the consumptive
practices and experiences it gives rise to in the context of neoliberal consumer/postfeminist culture. I argue that brand-authenticity is shaped by three connected and at times inconsistent tropes: personal narrativization, class groundedness, entrepreneurial/plastic femininity.

Being Jordan: Female Celebrity and Postfeminist Authenticity

When in 2004 Katie Price joined a group of celebrities and headed for the Australian jungle to appear on the British reality television show *I’m a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here,* the British public was already well acquainted with the image of the silicone-enhanced model who regularly featured in a range of tabloid publications and “lads mags.” Better known by her modelling name “Jordan,” this was Price’s first concerted attempt to leave behind the world of topless tabloid modelling and present a more bare-faced and presumably “real” self to a wider television audience. Every evening, viewers watched a practically-minded and seemingly less lacquered “Katie” do her jungle chores and endure tough “bushtucker” trials—in stark contrast to the notorious, endlessly posing and heavily made-up party girl they had become familiar with over the years. The harsh surroundings and primitive amenities provided the appropriate stage for Price’s attempt to “shed” Jordan and “rough it,” while also allowing her to foster a media discourse around “the relationship between ‘Jordan,’ the media image, and the person known in reality as ‘Katie Price’” (Su Holmes 2006, 56; Price 2009a, 310).

Even though Price did not emerge as the winner of the program—she was among the final five contestants—she attracted the majority of media attention, not least because of her budding, on-screen romance with fellow jungle mate, Australian pop-star Peter Andre. The liaison resulted in a four-year marriage—during which the pair and their children became regular faces featured on the covers of celebrity magazines and generated a whole volume of reality TV products, including their fly-on-the-wall reality shows (ITV2 2004–2009). Like their highly televised marriage, the couple’s split in 2009 was fought out in the full glare of media scrutiny, with Price losing out in the tabloid skirmishes with her ex-husband and being chided for shameless partying, reminiscent of her “Jordan” days. The British media seemed to take Andre’s side which was made apparent when Price decided to return to the jungle for the 2009 series of *I’m a Celebrity.* While Price had emerged from her first spell in the Australian rainforest as “a woman with an enhanced, but hard to quantify, reputation,” this time she cut “a pretty mixed-up, tragic figure,” lasting only seven days after having been voted every day by the audience to face the show’s infamous jungle trials (Tim Dowling 2009; Deborah Orr 2009).

Following her premature exit, journalists were keen to comment on Price’s fall from grace, arguing that she had been defeated and outwitted by the very medium that had turned her into a household name five years previously—in her complete reliance on public approval, she seemed to have “forgotten how the programme works” (Dowling 2009). Moreover, commentators observed that she had lost touch with her endearing, “real” self and become reduced to her headline-grabbing, pathetic alter ego—as Orr put it, “the poor thing has become single and Jordan again” (2009). While Price’s career might have declined in 2009, she confirmed her reputation as a shrewd media manipulator by co-producing a six-part reality TV series *What Katie Did Next* which followed Price as she coped with the aftermath of her marriage break-up. As her co-producer Mark Wagman emphasized, the series “isn’t part of the PR battle, it is a very honest account of her life moving forward.
All the sides of Katie’s life will be covered, good and bad” (quoted in Leigh Holmwood 2009). In 2010, Price was firmly back on track and rehabilitating her damaged media profile after publicly apologizing for her post-split behaviour and embarking on another highly publicized but short lived marriage with cage-fighter Alex Reid. This has been followed most recently by a third tumultuous marriage to builder/part-time stripper/sex addict Kieran Hayler and the births of their son Jett Riviera in 2013 and as of yet unnamed daughter in August 2014.

Building on her successive media exposure, Price capitalized on the audience’s infatuation with the “real Katie” to develop and market a highly lucrative self-brand that extends into the publishing and fashion/cosmetic industries, lending her name to, among other products, calendars, fitness DVDs, lingerie and swimwear lines, fragrances, a range of equestrian wear as well as forty books (fiction, autobiographies, children’s stories). Price cemented her reputation as a key player in British media with the 2009 launch of her own production company “Pricey Media” and, in 2011, starting her own glossy magazine Katie. In 2009, Price was ranked 40th in The Times’ “50 People of the Decade,” leaving behind other nominees like former American Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, oligarch Roman Abramovich and pop icon Madonna.

In many respects, Price’s presence among “the most important, influential and interesting people” of the Noughties highlights the prominence and significance of celebrity as a defining feature of the decade and beyond (Ben Macintyre 2009; Chris Rojek 2001; Turner 2006). Price’s example also allows us to think through the larger neoliberal/postfeminist contexts in which reality/authenticity-branded products are produced, watched and experienced. As a case study in self-branding, Price’s story reminds us of the deeply biased and normative scripts of neoliberal/postfeminist brand culture that restrict “success” and authenticity to those who can display and perform gender/class/race in highly specific ways. As I will discuss shortly, Price’s self-branding is articulated and narrativized in terms of white, working-class femininity that is both disparaged—due to its excessive, highly sexualized corporeality—and celebrated for its reflexive entrepreneurship and unreflective ordinariness. The gendered and classed politics evident in Price’s instance are also recognizable as endemic features of most reality/authenticity-based brands that encourage individuals to master the practices of self-authentication/branding through individual discipline, labour and self-normalization. As Brenda Weber has recently suggested in relation to reality television, the genre is rife with reductive gender stereotypes whereby women are reduced to “bitches, morons and skanks” and men to “hypermasculinized thugs” (2014, 8). The type of celebrity that emerges in this context is often implicitly coded as “feminine” in terms of its evacuation of the concepts of “talent” or “work” and its micro-obsession with the “private” (Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn 2014, 38).

While Price undoubtedly can be held up as the apotheosis of the celebrity factory—being, on the one hand, an exemplary “DIY celebrity” without any particular talent apart from the relentless pursuit and financial exploitation of fame (Turner 2006, 156)—she also confounds the logic of dispensable celebrity through her durability and resilience in a media culture that typically grants celebrity-seeking individuals their “15 minutes” of fame before submerging them again into media obscurity. The key to understanding Price’s rise to fame and, more importantly, her ability to retain celebrity status and direct market forces relies on her conscious exploitation and manipulation of the authentic capital of her self-brand that generates, in Weber’s words, such “affective exuberance” resulting in equal parts “disgust and delight” (2014, 29). Here, it might be worthwhile heeding Weber’s advice that
we have to aim for a more nuanced understanding of the operative modes of reality television—and, importantly for my purposes, self-branded (celebrity) subjectivity—to “expand beyond an oppression-submission hypothesis” (2014, 10).

**Personal Narrativization**

In line with other self-brands, the “Katie Price” brand constructs a lifestyle for consumers and offers ways of “being” beyond mere purchasing by constructing “whole environments of meaning” (Sarah Banet-Weiser and Charlotte Lapsabsky 2008, 1249). In particular, the exchange between consumer and brand is framed by personal narratives and recourse to a discourse of authenticity that creates affective bonds between product, producer and purchaser. Price skilfully exploits consumer desire for authenticity by constructing a branded self-identity that is conceived as simultaneously fake—particularly in relation to bodily plasticity—yet genuine. The interplay between the “real” faker—exemplified by Price’s exhibitionistic staging or flaunting of femininity—and “realness”—in terms of her candid disclosure of her body enhancements, her down-to-earth ordinariness and working-class allegiance—endows the self-brand with a complexly hybridized type of authenticity that acknowledges the media-savvy contemporary consumer who is well aware of capitalist sales techniques. As Beverland and Farrelly note in relation to reality television, the “conferring of authenticity to an object involves conscious negotiation or production of meaning, including the active use of brand cues” (2010, 838). Price provides her fans with these cues through a series of consumption experiences and products that allow them to authenticate the “Katie Price” brand.

Claims of authenticity and genuineness pervade Price’s media appearances and products ever since she showcased the “real” Katie Price on *I’m a Celebrity*. Since then, there has been a steady stream of reality products created and advertised in her name. In the course of this negotiation of authenticity, Price has successfully transformed herself from media object into media producer, granting her paying audience access to various levels of privacy in her interviews, TV series and books. While her initial construction of the surgically enhanced model persona “Jordan” and her subsequent disclosure of bare-faced, girl-next-door “Katie” might have been conceived along binary lines—principally by media reports that debated the issue in terms of a schizophrenic split between plastic bimbo and businesswoman (see Marina Hyde 2004)—her subsequent ascent to fame has been accompanied by a struggle over the meaning of authenticity, with Price trying to keep control of the “Katie Price” brand in the face of constant media exposure and paparazzi attention. In this sense, Price’s example also reveals the precariousness and provisionality of the process of self-branding—with competing media players and institutions fiercely claiming authorship of a celebrity’s lucrative authenticity.

One of the main authenticating strategies that Price employs in the production of self-disclosure draws on celebrity confessionalism and the now well established genre of private exposé of a celebrity-being-ordinary (Andrew Tolson 2001). Price’s example can be connected to a broader context of “confessional culture” that “depends on the exposure of the self, and the normalization of this culture” in contemporary neoliberal society (Banet-Weiser 2012, 77). Here, everyday mundane practices—which in the case of celebrities like Price include the personal experience of fame and coping with its pressures—are turned into items of consumption, underlining the importance of individual identity as a lucrative self-project and entertainment for others. Female celebrities in particular have taken up the work of being a “private” self which reinforces the idea that the production of closeness and
the public display of once-private feelings are intrinsically gendered activities, linking the personal to the conception of female celebrity (Holmes 2006). The normalization of confessionalism also reinforces neoliberalism’s self-regulating culture where, as Michel Foucault writes, “confession is at the heart of the procedures of the individualization of power” (1978, 59), and citizens discipline themselves without the need for overt forms of (state) control.

Price herself is keenly aware of the allure of authenticity and she frequently specifies “honesty” and “normality” as crucial factors in her commercial success and audience appeal. As she explains in Standing Out (2009), “I’m often asked why I’ve been so successful in business. I think it comes down to hard work and staying true to myself” (2009b, 92). In Price’s case, celebrity authenticity is marked not only by emotional intimacy with the audience but also a degree of reflexivity about the position of being a celebrity (Jo Littler 2003, 13). In line with other media forms that capitalize on the appeal of the authentic, Price attempts to “keep it real” by reminding her audience of where she came from and the amount of work she had to put in on her way up. In her eyes, this is what differentiates her from other celebrities deemed “unapproachable, not very down to earth and far too worried about what people think”—Price’s long-standing and well documented rivalry with “Posh Spice” (Victoria Beckham) is a case in point (2009a, 248; see Price 2005, 153–161). By contrast, she insists that the public is given privileged access to unscripted celebrity normality: referring to her ITV2 series with her now ex-husband, she emphasizes that “Pete and me have got so used to being filmed that we definitely don’t put on an act for the camera—we’re ourselves and we’re down to earth—and I think that’s what people like about us” (2009a, 93). As Tolson points out, for a celebrity, “performing-as-ordinary” for the camera is not necessarily perceived as acting but as a new kind of authenticity that is part of a self-conscious personal project (2001, 452). This type of authenticity can be interpreted in terms of a quest for an “authentic mediated identity,” a credible public persona that commercially exploits the ideology of “being yourself” while fostering emotive bonds with consumers (456).

Class Groundedness

Price’s production of celebrity common(place)ness is also invoked through an appreciation of “working-class” ethos and forms that ground her as “one of us” and create the perception of normality untouched by prominence and wealth. As is customary in many debates about the meaning and value of celebrity culture, class is encoded euphemistically through references to ordinariness, which in Price’s case is assembled around a respectable working-class character—defined by tenacity and unpretentiousness—as well as more polarizing and disparaging connotations of vulgarity and crudeness (Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett 2010). In fact, the “Katie Price” self-brand treads the tightrope between “traditional” British working-classness—circumscribed by hard work, solidarity and honesty (Frank McDonough 2005)—and late-twentieth-century constructions of a White “trash” underclass that is characterized by excessive consumption, aesthetic impoverishment and hypersexualization (Tyler and Bennett 2010). As Beverley Skeggs (1997) has noted in a British context, working-class as a category has been used historically by the middle classes to differentiate themselves from “definable others,” most notably through conceptions of respectability. In particular, working-class women have been the target of a “classing gaze” that upholds respectable femininity as a “standard to which to aspire” (Skeggs 1997, 3).
Identifying herself as a working-class glamour girl, Price trades on the supposedly instinctive, unreflective nature of her working-classness—that allows her to remain *herself*—while also refusing to undergo a process of middle-class acculturation that would endow her with a more respectable, understated and “classy” femininity. As an authentic but also inescapable element of her celebrity persona, Price’s working-classness is thus multi-layered and poly-vocal, turning her into an object of identification and contempt.

Price constantly reminds her audience that she has “never seen [herself] as a celebrity” and her own rise to fame and fortune is rooted in hard work, fighting spirit and self-belief—as she sums up her position in *Standing Out*, “I want to be known as the girl who came from nothing and went on to conquer the world . . . I’m a strong woman who . . . fought bloody hard to get where I am today” (2009a, 61; 2009b, 89). Here, working-class ordinariness is retrospectively attributed a symbolic and material value that celebrities can capitalize on once it has been surpassed in financial/social terms. This brand of authenticity gains commercial viability and profitability only as part of celebrity/consumer culture that turns the individual into a brand while keeping intact the discursive continuity with, what Littler (2003) calls, the “pre-fame self.” In this sense, the patent displacement from working-class economic and social reality through celebrity leads to a re-valorization of class authenticity that can be marketed in an attempt to generate identification with consumers and forestall potential charges of social inequality, worthlessness and idleness. Price is presented as being “like us” in wanting to be a celebrity, working hard to become one and “keeping it real” once she has climbed her way up the social ladder.

In some ways, the focus on groundedness can be seen as a reinforcement but also reversal of certain gendered class assumptions evident in media criticism of celebrity “trashiness.” Katie Price’s class identity can clearly be read in terms of discursive constructions of “White trash,” which in a British context takes the form of “chav”—a concept that, as Imogen Tyler has shown, has become a “ubiquitous term of abuse for [British] white working-class subjects” (2008, 17). As a “celebrity chav,” Price maintains many of the key aspects of this typically socially and economically disadvantaged underclass—most notably an “excessive participation in forms of market-oriented consumption which are deemed aesthetically impoverished” (Keith Hayward and Majid Yar 2006, 14), and an overt, exaggerated sexualization that is in direct contrast to middle-class passivity and propriety (Skeggs 1997). Price herself has been the target of much class-based censure that depicts her as excessive and out of control. Vulgarity is a prominent theme here, allowing the audience to disidentify with working-class norms and reassert class difference by affirming, as Tyler and Bennett put it, “I am not that” (2010, 380).

The “Katie Price” brand tackles and to some degree overturns this class-based antagonism by taking advantage of Price’s mediated working-class persona to both connect with her audience and authenticate the “real Katie” whose more conventional femininity is structured around romance, marriage and motherhood. In particular, Price adopts the media-friendly, aspirational persona of the “yummy mummy”—common in neoliberal postfeminist culture as a modern representation of motherhood (Baker 2009)—to present the image of a well-groomed and high-consuming mother (Angela McRobbie 2006). Price’s brand of motherhood is thus in marked distinction to traditional chav (single) mothers who have been vilified in the British press as over-fertile, slovenly, sexually promiscuous, and dependent on social welfare (Tyler 2008). Contrastingly, Price’s self-brand promotes a “self-help over state-help” approach and her autobiographies in particular can be read as case studies in reframing and overcoming difficulty—exemplified by abusive
relationships, rape, miscarriage-abortion and post-natal depression—which is consistent with the individualizing rationality of neoliberalism and the imperative to improve and self-care. The “Katie Price” brand thus becomes a conduit for neoliberal values of entrepreneurship and postfeminist norms of femininity, exploiting affective bonds with like-minded consumers/mothers and catering to their demands with a wide range of commodities.

Entrepreneurial/Plastic Femininity

Price’s enactment of the “yummy mummy” is representative of a dominant neoliberal/entrepreneurial attitude towards femininity that encourages enterprising women to exploit and market their “assets” through “self-work.” In Price’s case, this labour of femininity includes the creation of a surgically enhanced feminine body which is presented as an “authentic” expression of the branded self, in line with the neoliberal focus on self-actualization. Here, authenticity is gendered and tied to a specifically postfeminist/neoliberal version of femininity—or “postfemininity” (Genz 2009)—that combines notions of (sexual) freedom and agency with capitalist incitements to consume and political/ideological calls for self-regulation and self-improvement. Feminine self-work is thus upheld as a route to neoliberal success and respectability—based on accumulated wealth and celebrity—which supersedes more traditional paths open to women, such as marriage and education (Skeggs 1997). While this model of achievement is intrinsically linked to consumer culture, it also allows working-class women like Price, who historically have been denied access to “respectable” middle-class femininity, access to social/economic esteem and “glamour [which] is about a performance of femininity with strength” (Skeggs 1997, 111).

Price can undoubtedly be discussed as a “sexual entrepreneur” who makes use of the currency of the female body to construct a lucrative multi-media image (Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill 2011). The former glamour model’s early attempts at self-branding can be read in the context of the normalization of self-sexualization grounded in the idea that women using their bodies for profit is empowering (Maddie Coy and María Garner 2010). A key vehicle through which this self-sexualization/branding is articulated is Price’s surgically enhanced body whose artificiality is not only acknowledged but paraded. Price has never denied her recourse to fakery and her openness about the use of such artifice has gained her the reputation of being frank and direct. She embraces and even stages her “trashy” look and articulates a vision of an “authentic” self through artifice—“I like the ‘fake’ look: big hair, big make-up, big boobs . . . I wasn’t trying to impress my fans, or a man: it was just for me” (2005, 91, 93). In this instance, authenticity acquires a range of different meanings, being at once an indicator of individual agency and neoliberal/postfeminist entrepreneurship while also being linked to consumerist/heteronormative ideologies and postmodern visuality that privileges surface over interiority. The performativity of plastic/silicone fakery is offered as a marker of affective resonance with the audience who can engage in similar self-branding practices and exercise sexualized feminine labour. In this sense, the “Katie Price” brand also allows us to interrogate the political and cultural landscape that gives rise to this marketed brand of femininity and that validates glamour modelling as a vocation and job aspiration for some young women (Coy and Garner 2010).11

While at the beginning of Price’s career femininity was constructed mainly around (plastic) corporeality, she prides herself in being able to inhabit and (literally) put on a number of different, and at times seemingly contradictory, female/feminine subject
positions: “I’m a mum, girlie girl, a celebrity, a model and a businesswoman, and my wardrobe tends to reflect all those different sides to me. I can be anything from classy and ladylike, to slutty and sexy, to pure chav” (2009b, 14, 7). Such claims can certainly be interpreted in the context of postmodern analyses that stress performative or parodic aspects of gender identity as well as postfeminist discussions that define femininity as a “site of contest” that brings various layers of meaning into contact and conflict (Genz 2009, 31). Price’s flaunting of femininity can also be interpreted as an integral element of her celebrity status that is upheld by her exhibitionism and her willingness to self-display. This celebrity femininity is inherently “plastic”—promoting Barbie as a “style icon” (Price 2009b, 14)—and, both despite and because of this, can be marketed as part of a discourse of commodified authenticity that characterizes the majority of Price’s self-branded products. Fake femininity becomes a trademark sign of “individuality” and “honesty” as well as of entrepreneurial knowhow, of “making the most of your own look” (Price 2009b, 7, 10). Though the production and commodification of femininity can be read in terms of Price’s entrepreneurialism—her “job”—the self-brand also provides a mode/model of femininity for female consumers that can be pursued and emulated through self-work, not despite but because of its fake artificiality and plasticity. By following, for example, Price’s “ten style commandments” in her lifestyle guide *Standing Out* (2009)—“4. Keep it comfy … 5. … But suffer to be stunning” (21)—women/girls are taught to engage in their feminine project of the self as a means of “looking good, living life and . . . [being] confident about the woman you are and the woman you want to become.”

While the mastery of this feminine labour promises empowerment and creativity, the practice of this self-branding exercise nonetheless amounts to a self-disciplining regime that constructs a tightly regulated—hyper-stylized, heteronormative, consumerist—feminine body. The spectacle of female subjugation and discipline that Price offers both works with and denies the entrepreneurial logic that frames her brand—as putting women in charge of their own feminine self-branding is likely to engender perceptions of proficiency and self-care while at the same time recreating a thoroughly classed, sexed and commodified female norm. Reinforcing the fact that celebrity is restricted to those who can perform femininities in highly specific ways (Tyler and Bennett 2010), Price’s self-brand re-installs gendered stereotypes of female beauty and sexuality while redefining these limiting images around a capitalist entitlement to consume and neoliberal imperatives to improve and transform the self. As Michelle Lazar suggests in relation to beauty advertising, “women are encouraged to take care and pamper themselves . . . [but] the key to unlocking these entitlements is through consumption” and hetero-normalization (2009, 380).

**Conclusion**

Price’s example fits comfortably in a postfeminist, neoliberal framework that ties female success to the entrepreneurial construction of a feminine celebrity image (and body) and the relentless pursuit of individual power. As an entrepreneur of celebrity femininity, Price complicates existing conceptions of value and work that are often at odds with celebrities in general who are criticized for being talentless and famous for “nothing.” Here, we need to re-phrase the well-known adage as in this case, the celebrity is no longer famous for doing *nothing* but famous for doing *something out of nothing*. Price’s multi-million media empire points towards new modes of work linked to commodified gendered authenticity and affective labour that have become increasingly valuable in a world where
the mass production and consumption of objects causes consumers to question the plausibility of that value. The entrepreneurship, artifice and work ethic that underlie Price's authenticity/subjectivity also allow consumers to congregate around the self-brand and take on an active role in the production of consumption. Despite the distinctly individualist and exclusive nature of celebrity femininity, the “Katie Price” brand provides consumers with a model of feminine identity that can be bought and imitated while being owned and experienced as “authentic.” Price’s fans repeatedly comment on the affective bonds and the sense of belonging created by her brand/self—as two female fans note, she is “brilliant, just dead down to earth, just a really nice, normal girl,” “she’s just someone you can relate to. She’s been through such a lot but she’s just a real role model in the way she’s dealt with it” (quoted in Carole Cadwalladr 2006). The polarizing content and affective resonances generated by Price’s self/products reinforce the need for nuanced understandings of gendered/classed practices in contemporary postfeminist/neoliberal cultures that rely on self-branding as a means of empowerment through subjugation.

Price’s case also bears witness to the layering and stratification of authenticity discourses that rely on commercial logic for validation. Price’s performance of fake femininity is always counterbalanced by further confessions and instances of “the real me” that emerges the more the consumer engages with the brand. In her autobiography, she admits that certain details about her life—like the illness of her son and her then-husband—are just “too personal” and should be kept from the public. Being followed around by cameras for her ITV2 series proves to be disconcerting and forces her to acknowledge her motivated performance of authenticity—“I had to put on an act in front of the cameras that I was fine when I wasn’t” (264). What this indicates is a meta-hybridization of authenticity in the course of which different “realities” are played out, at times against each other. The combination of “real” fakery and “reality” highlights the complexly hybridized discourse of branded authenticity that is at play here and allows us to further interrogate the gendered, classed, commodified and celebritized identities that emerge in its wake. If the self has indeed become a brand that is produced in consumption in neoliberal societies, then the limited space and freedom available to this branded self, and the affective experiences that tie it to its own limits, highlight the need for continued critical vigilance.

NOTES
1. As Banet-Weiser (2012) highlights, in this context branding becomes a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy and therefore can be differentiated from marketing strategies like commodification that transforms social and cultural life into something that can be bought and sold (4–5).
2. As Hearn (2008) suggests, self-branding involves “work on the production of a branded ‘self’” that creates “a detachable, saleable image or narrative, which effectively circulates cultural meanings. This branded self either consciously positions itself, or is positioned by its context and use, as a site for the extraction of value” (164–165).
3. The notion of labour also connects with the field of affect studies—in particular, groundbreaking work by feminist sociologists like Arlie Hochschild who in the now classic text The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (1983) suggested that feelings themselves are subject to “management” in both private and public contexts, and
that such “emotion work” could be commercially exploited as “emotional labour” (Hochschild 1983).

4. If as Banet-Weiser notes “brands are actually a story told to the consumer” and “the setting around which individuals weave their own stories” (2012, 4), then postfeminism can undoubtedly be described as a branded context weaving stories of female independence and empowerment to the neoliberal market values of entrepreneurship and self-care.

5. The concept of “immaterial labour” derives from Marx’s notion of “living labour” and refers to the idea that individuals are primarily workers in the sense that they actually build the substance and meaning of their daily lives, regardless of their status as employees (Cova and Dalli 2010).

6. To paraphrase Foucault’s liberal formulation of freedom in The Birth of Biopolitics (2010), authenticity is in itself consumed and therefore in need of being re-produced: “the new [liberal] art of government consumes freedom. It consumes freedom, which means that it must produce it. . . . Liberalism formulates simply the following: I am going to produce what you need to be free. I am going to see to it that you are free to be free” (63).

7. First screened in 2002 and broadcast on British television network ITV, I’m a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here is a reality TV game-show in which celebrities live in jungle conditions and have to undergo a series of trials until public voting decides on a “jungle king/queen.”

8. Urban musical genres like hip hop in particular have drawn on the concept of the authentic as a sales tactic to demarcate racial, social and gender boundaries (see Kembrew McLeod 1999).

9. Here, Price can be distinguished from other British working-class celebrities like Kerry Katona who in My Fair Kerry (ITV 2005) was taken to an Austrian castle to be tutored in etiquette, deportment and table manners in an attempt to “make over” her working-classness (see Tyler and Bennett 2010).

10. In this sense, Price exploits what Emma Bell calls “the bad girl/mad girl-redeemed script” in which a new breed of boisterous and scandalizing female celebrities renounce their apparent transgressions and embrace a more “acceptable” femininity (2008, par. 4, 7).

11. A 2005 UK online survey of almost 1000 girls aged 15–19 years found that 63 percent considered “glamour model” and 25 percent “lap dancer” their ideal profession from a list of choices including teacher and doctor (see Coy and Garner 2010, 664).

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