CHAPTER 11

Keeping Up with the Kardashians

Fame-Work and the Production
of Entrepreneurial Sisterhood

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The Kardashian family vaulted to stardom on a litany of reality shows beginning in 2007 and airing on E!—the U.S. cable channel focused on entertainment culture. These programs have molded sisters Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé into complex feminine ideals for a postfeminist consumer-audience. As Rosalind Gill suggests, postfeminism is a sensibility that privileges individual empowerment alongside pressure for women to “choose” to live up to sexualized ideals of femininity through careful consumption and self-monitoring. To this end, the Kardashian sisters are exotically hypersexualized, yet family-oriented; they are shrewd businesswomen who love to clean house. Capitalizing on this image, the Kardashian sisters have promoted an array of products intended for feminine self-fashioning, including clothing, perfume, makeup, nail polish, and diet systems, and their younger half-sisters Kendall and Kylie Jenner have been groomed to follow in their footsteps and usher in the next generation, offering style and beauty tips to Seventeen Magazine readers and helming a clothing line of their own for the juniors market.

Contrary to earlier modes of reality TV celebrity (which separated “real” people desiring fame from “real” celebrities exposing their everyday lives), the prized early-twenty-first-century mode of reality celebrity has become self-branding, wealthy, and entrepreneurial, epitomized by the Kardashians and several of Bravo’s Real Housewives. When the show debuted, Kim was the only semifamous sister, thanks to her red carpet appearances with socialite Paris...
Hilton, her dates with newly divorced singer Nick Lachey, and her leaked sex tape with ex-boyfriend/musician, Ray J. However, the Kardashian name was familiar to viewers old enough to remember the 1995 O. J. Simpson murder trial, where Kim’s father Robert Kardashian made up part of the famed defense “Dream Team.” Since then, the Kardashians have come to occupy a liminal space of reality celebrity—between ordinary fame-seekers and “real” celebrities showing that they’re “just like us.” Icons for postfeminist self-entrepreneurship, the Kardashians capitalize on and brand their most intimate moments—Kim’s sex tape, the births of Kourtney’s children, even Khloé’s ob-gyn appointments.

The Kardashians have become models for young women seeking success through self-branding, a practice Alison Hearn describes as “involving an outer-directed process of highly stylized self-construction, directly tied to the promotional mechanisms of the post-Fordist market.” With its emphasis on style and self-fashioning, self-branding is a deeply gendered process; as Julie Wilson claims, following Angela McRobbie, “In the postfeminist, neoliberal milieu women must perform as self-entrepreneurial, self-promotional workers on equal footing with their male colleagues yet still be invested in and appear willing to perform traditional gender roles.” While engaging in aggressive branding and self-promotion, the Kardashians simultaneously have avowed their devotion to heterosexual love and motherhood, with Kim and Khloé both desperate to provide Kourtney’s children with cousins. Indeed, the very structure of the Kardashian-Jenner family as represented on Keeping Up with the Kardashians mirrors the postfeminist life cycle that Diane Negra identifies, with Kendall and Kylie, ages 12 and 10 when the series began, representing the “accelerated consumerist maturity of girls,” Kim, Khloé, and Kourtney representing “the necessity of marriage for young women and the glorification of pregnancy,” and their mother Kris Jenner representing “midlife women often cast as desperate to retain or recover their value as postfeminist subjects.”

Although the themes of self-branding and self-entrepreneurship saturate much early-twenty-first-century reality television targeted at young women, the Kardashian empire incorporates a novel twist—sister-branding and sister-entrepreneurship. This twist provides some relief from the social costs of entrepreneurial individualism, which, according to Anita Harris, brings with it “a sense of change, insecurity, fragmentation, and discontinuity within communities and nations, as well as a new emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals.” In contrast to the potentially alienating individual empowerment ideal of postfeminist neoliberal culture, wherein Sarah Banet-Weiser claims, “feminism fades from vision, the individual entrepreneur takes its place,” the Kardashians privilege sisterhood, a fact that might account for their massive
popularity among young women and girls. Though the Kardashians clearly exemplify postfeminist culture, they also fill in some of its shortcomings, which may be central to their appeal. Whereas postfeminist entrepreneurial culture tells young women they don’t need to build connections with other women, the overwhelming popularity of the Kardashians’ investment in sisterhood suggests that young women do value and desire bonds with each other, even though those bonds may be in the name of a brand. While many postfeminist texts suggest that bonds between women can be emotionally fulfilling (e.g., *Sex and the City, Desperate Housewives*), *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* positions sisterhood as a vital part of career success. Rather than simply providing women with a supportive social circle, the Kardashians model sisterhood as entrepreneurial and productive—an antidote to the potentially alienating culture of neoliberalism that demands enterprising individualism. The intimacy that the sisters share not only nourishes them emotionally, it also plays a central role in their professional ambitions.

Much of the Kardashians’ appeal lies in the virtual extended sisterhood they have fostered by establishing intimacy with female fans not only through their televisual omnipresence and array of self-fashioning products, but through social media. In contrast to earlier postfeminist texts focused on sisterhood, the Kardashians invite fans to participate in their sisterhood in a variety of ways, for instance, addressing fans as “dolls” on Twitter, just as the sisters address each other on the shows. Of course, the primary goal of this extended sisterhood is profit, but nevertheless, the practice suggests that connections among women are valuable, emotionally and financially. As of late 2013, Kim had over 18 million followers on Twitter, and 9 million followers on Instagram, where she promotes her media empire, rendering even her most diminutive musings worthy of monetary value. Although Kourtney and Khloé have half as many Twitter followers, the three sisters often tweet among themselves and other family members, at once shoring up their brand and extending their sisterhood to millions. As Alice Marwick and danah boyd point out, “If we accept that Twitter creates a sense of ongoing connection with one’s real-life acquaintances and friends, following a famous person’s tweets over a period of time may create an equally valid feeling of ‘knowing’ them.” Kim in particular takes the “performativa intimacy” that social media fosters seriously. Her devotion to Twitter was a rumored catalyst of her divorce from NBA player Kris Humphries, as his reluctance to tweet and garner followers was incommensurate with Kim’s brand-building.

Such doomed efforts to combine work and family define each sister, despite, or perhaps because of, how carefully their brand has been built on their familial
bonds. Kourtney has had a tumultuous relationship with her boyfriend, yet achieved blissful motherhood, Khloé achieved heterosexual matrimony, yet has struggled to conceive and keep her marriage together, and Kim has found herself twice divorced, yet finally started to raise the family she had long desired. These intimate struggles make the Kardashians exemplars of postfeminist celebrity brand culture, where successful professional women are set up to fail in the realms of love and family. Yet these same struggles make them compelling points of identification for young women who want to “have it all,” but fear they can’t—in this way, the Kardashians function as a fantasy sisterly support network, suggesting the importance of sisterhood in a neoliberal entrepreneurial culture preoccupied with self-branding.

Their meticulously maintained brand depends upon the seamless combination of entrepreneurship and family, best exemplified in Kris Jenner’s now trademarked title, “momager.” Thus, familial tensions threaten the brand as much as they threaten to upend the sisters’ so-called work-life balance, and so family members often resolve squabbles through business deals. At the same time, the Kardashians point to one way out of the work-life conflict in combining the two—their work is precisely to maintain their branded family, and the sisters support each other by sharing both familial and professional labor. The narrative of Keeping Up with the Kardashians and its spin-offs mirrors the postfeminist lifecycle, with early seasons focusing on work (primarily Kim’s), followed by weddings (Khloé’s and Kim’s), child-rearing (Kourtney’s), and failing marriages (Kim’s and Khloé’s). The thread that remains constant, and which distinguishes the Kardashian programs from other postfeminist media texts, is their insistence on the primacy of sisterhood as a means to both personal and professional success. Whereas the sisters may struggle to combine their careers with romantic relationships and children, their sisterhood, which is the basis of their collective career, remains intact. For young women who have been sold the postfeminist ideal of individual empowerment over collective political action, the Kardashians reconcile a continued desire for connections between women with the pressures of neoliberal postfeminist culture, promoting not a self-brand, but a sister-brand.

Kim’s Work-Life Balance

Keeping Up with the Kardashians carries the process Melissa Gregg describes as presence bleed to the extreme. Here, work “invade[s] spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence…. firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply.” For the Kardashians, virtually...
every minute of every day could be constituted as work, and Kris laments in her memoir and to *Us Weekly* the difficulties of relating to her children as both their mother and their manager. The most intimate, private moments become work: When Kourtney prepares to go to the hospital to give birth to son Mason, E! cameras capture the puddle of amniotic fluid on the floor of her bedroom. When her boyfriend Scott Disick inquires why she is putting on makeup to give birth, she explains, “There’s pictures involved!” Likewise, *Us Weekly* described the birth of Kourtney’s daughter Penelope as a “red carpet event.” As Leigh Edwards notes,

> Many Kardashian series stories [have become] meta-commentaries on reality stardom. Kris worries about her appearance in front of cameras and gets plastic surgery, Kim and Khloé fight about who is more famous or more jealous of the other, Kourtney’s boyfriend Scott Disick grows weary of always being placed in the villain role on TV… By engaging with the meta-narrative of the family’s media celebrity, these plotlines allow the series further to market themselves and the family brand, engaging in saturation and excessive branding.

While Edwards frames this as a newer phenomenon in the series, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* has always narrativized fame-work, with its pilot episode revolving around Kim debating how much to reveal about her sex tape in her first television interview with Tyra Banks and the second episode focusing on Kris struggling to manage all of Kim’s work commitments. Kim’s ambitions threaten her romantic relationships, with the program using her as a cautionary tale of the ill-fated work-life balance.

In the fourth season, Kris and Kim debate the presence bleed, as Kris had turned down a party-hosting gig on Kim’s behalf so that Kim would not have to work on her birthday. However, Kim is shocked to hear of this development, and explains to the viewer, “I’ve always worked on my birthday in Vegas. This is work—I’m not going to turn it down.” When Kim confronts Kris, demanding that she reinstate the booking, Kris remarks, “Kim makes it sound like I’ve cancelled her birthday celebration, when in fact, it’s an appearance. She’s gotta be on schedule, she’s gotta do a red carpet, she’s gotta do a meet and greet, she’s gotta stay for a certain amount of time, and Kim has been working so hard, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.” When the whole family goes to Las Vegas, their intention is both to celebrate Kim’s birthday and to work—Scott and Rob Kardashian get extremely drunk and belligerent, and Kris struggles to contain them, exasperatedly telling the viewer, “This is a major business dinner, and I’m trying to get our products sold across the country.” Once she
believes she has sent them up to sleep it off, she rejoices, “Finally, we can just have our business meeting, and celebrate Kim’s birthday.” For her part, Kim is exhausted the whole day, flopping on the couch of her suite upon entering and proclaiming, “I literally just want like ten minutes” (see Figure 11.1). Just as she curls up with a pillow, the hotel’s public relations director comes in and runs down her schedule. As the public relations director leaves Kim to squeeze in a nap, the episode cuts to Scott and Rob at a bar, where they down multiple beers and tequila shots at two o’clock in the afternoon (see Figure 11.2). As if the constant dialogue about how hard Kim works were not sufficient, the episode’s structure of crosscutting between Kim working and Scott and Rob overindulging in leisure activities emphasizes Kim’s work ethic while implicitly critiquing Scott and Rob’s freeloading, speaking to women viewers who might feel as though they have to work much harder than their male colleagues to get ahead and be taken seriously.

More than Kourtney or Khloé, the first few seasons of Keeping Up With the Kardashians showcase Kim’s gender-specific struggles to combine success in business and in love. Throughout the third and fourth seasons, Kim’s devotion to her work begins to drive a wedge between her and then-boyfriend, NFL player Reggie Bush. Kim narrates a montage of her many business undertakings, telling the viewer,

So much is going on, my life is so crazy busy. I’m doing everything from great photo shoots to magazines, another calendar, my shoe company with Robert Shapiro, ShoeDazzle, I just finished filming a movie, my career is just on the up and up and I’ve got this momentum going, so no matter what it is in my life, Reggie, my friends, right now everyone’s gonna have to understand
that I am on this train that’s not gonna stop, and I need to be dedicated and focus on my career right now.

As soon as she speaks these words, her comanager asks to book her on the same day as Bush’s first game, setting up a literal work/love conflict. Kim tells her manager to book it, because, “Work comes first,” only to have Bush tell her later, “That’s not cool.” When Kris convinces Kim to take time for her personal life, Kim flies to New Orleans, but as she spends time with Bush and makes “I Heart Reggie” signs in preparation for his game, her voice-over belies her anxiety over missing work, as she worries about “burning bridges” as a result of backing out of her contract. Still, at the end of the episode, Kim comes to the revelation that she needs to “switch gears a little bit, and balance everything out,” and make Bush her “number one priority.”

This choice appears bound to fail, however, as Kim lovingly cuddles up to Bush and tells him about all the sacrifices she’s prepared to make to be with him while he stares at the television. Despite her devotion to Bush, this episode marks his last appearance on the show, and early in the next season, Kim deals with their breakup, at first blaming her career, but then reclaiming it, remarking, “I don’t need a relationship to define who I am.” Kim’s subordination of her own career to Bush’s undoubtedly speaks to many women who find themselves pressured to support their partners’ careers at the expense of their own. The episode sets up this conflict by juxtaposing Kim’s hectic schedule and obvious passion for her work with Kris lamenting the fact that Kim takes little time for her personal life and Bush being disappointed by Kim’s inability to spend time with him. The viewer feels the same pressure that Kim does, thanks to fast-paced montages that underscore her hectic life and the slow-paced, uncomfortable scenes that emphasize her guilt and desire to spend time with Bush.

The doomed E! special, *Kim’s Fairytale Wedding*, exposed the inherent contradictions of postfeminist female celebrity by positioning Kim’s dedication to her fame-work as jeopardizing her commitment to marriage. Susan Douglas suggests that celebrity culture’s “ideal women” “are independent—they have their own professions, money, and sources of success—and yet are completely reliant on the love and approval of men. And they get that approval because their economic independence is tempered by their hyperfemininity.” Though Kim has the hyperfemininity bit down pat, the backlash she endured after the divorce suggests her economic imperatives were not properly mitigated by a feminine commitment to marriage. Throughout the wedding special, Kim focuses more on bolstering her brand through excessive displays of wealth than she does on cultivating “fairytale” romance.
One central source of conflict in the wedding special is the issue of whether or not Kim will change her last name upon marrying Kris Humphries. Though Kim makes all the clichéd remarks about Humphries being traditional, and wanting to change her name to make him happy, she seems most excited about the prospect of her new initials enhancing her own brand, through conspicuous additions to her Hermès collection. She delights in all Hermès apparel that sports an H logo, registers for Hermès china, and totes several Birkin bags, suggesting her consideration of changing her last name has as much to do with further marking her connection to luxury brands as it does with pleasing Humphries. Kris Jenner is distraught over the possibility of Kim changing her last name, primarily due to the challenges it poses to the Kardashian brand. Her exclamation, repeated over and over in previews and at ad-break teasers, “You are incorporated, Kim Kardashian, Inc.,” reinforces the threat Humphries poses to the brand and privileges Kardashian as a businesswoman over her status as a soon-to-be wife. Jenner further flexes her momager muscle, telling the viewer in a direct address interview, “I can’t believe Kim is talking about how she’s going to change her name to Humphries. She needs to be Kim Kardashian. There is no way that I’m letting Kim change her name.”

To seal the deal, Jenner brings Kim into her office to show her the branding hurdles she faces if she were to change her name. Pitching the couple’s branded identity as “Hump,” Jenner unveils product mock-ups of the “Hump Rope,” a fragrance called “Hump” and butt pads. Interestingly enough, all of these products reference Kardashian’s famous butt in their design, thus the shift in branding appears more seamless than Jenner lets on. Yet Jenner’s presentation of this overtly sexualized branding suggests that the lifestyle brand she has worked to establish is a departure from Kim’s original claim to fame. She thrusts the portfolio at Kim, telling her, “I want you to take this with you, and show it to your hubby, with an H, and then think about what you’ve given me to work with!” In the end, Kim decides that for business documents, she needs to be able to sign “Kardashian,” thus she retains her last name not as a feminist statement, but as a postfeminist entrepreneurial necessity. At the same time, Kim’s decision also maintains her primary bond with her sisters, choosing to share a last name with them and their collective brand instead of with her future husband, putting sister-entrepreneurship above all else.

In the reality show narrative, Kim’s commitment to her postfeminist lifestyle brand and fame-work presents the most obvious rift between herself and Humphries. Humphries grows increasingly weary of being mobbed by the paparazzi and, following a sequence of the couple wading through a crowd of photographers on their way into a restaurant, Humphries voices his discomfort
with Kim’s work and lifestyle. He tells her their lives would be different if they moved to Minnesota and started “pumping out babies,” pointing to an image of factory-style domestic motherhood obviously out of step with Kim’s glamorous workaholic image. Kim counters his vision, telling him, “I think the reason I fell in love with you was ‘cause you could handle my career, like my career wasn’t an issue for you.” When she says, “career,” he starts laughing, and the camera zooms in, pointing to his refusal to take Kim’s fame-work seriously. When they fight again later, Kim tells Humphries that he knew what he was getting into. When he asks, “With what?” Kim replies, “with my work ethic, with everything that I do,” and he parrots back sarcastically, “my work ethic,” and laughs, again ridiculing Kim’s commitment to her career. Though Humphries’s jabs may appeal to a viewer who has animosity toward the Kardashians and their success, the wedding special carefully guides the sympathetic, aspirational Kardashian fan to support Kim. Although Humphries plays for the NBA and comes from a wealthy family, *Kim’s Fairytale Wedding* works hard to define Kim and the rest of the Kardashians against him. Instead of the exterior shots of L.A. traffic and high-end shops that scream Kardashian, the program signifies Minnesota, and by extension, Humphries, with establishing images of quiet streets and close-ups of a cobweb. When they head to the grocery store, Kardashian opines, “Even the grocery carts in Minnesota are weird.”

Humphries’s refusal to take Kim’s career seriously came back to bite him as the Kardashian publicity machine dealt with the fallout from their divorce. Though he continued to mock her fame, notoriously telling her in an episode of *Kourtney and Kim Take New York* that by the time she has kids, no one will care about her anymore, gossip magazines like *Us Weekly* and *Star* quickly moved to Kim’s defense, accusing Humphries not only of being a lazy freeloader but also of verbally abusing Kim. *Us Weekly*’s December 5, 2011, cover screamed, “Husband from Hell,” with the subtitle, “He called Kim FAT and mocked her family” (see Figure 11.3). The accompanying article claims, “It had become a familiar pattern in their short-lived marriage: Kim Kardashian hung back at home or worked, while Kris Humphries and his friends enjoyed his newfound VIP status, including free meals and booze at the trendiest hot spots. . . . When Kim’s unemployed husband returned to her $4.8 million Beverly Hills mansion after a night out with buddies at pricey restaurant STK, the newlyweds had a huge blowup.”

Numerous articles note the cost of Kim’s home (notably not referred to as “theirs”), alongside the disparity in her and Humphries’s earnings, but perhaps most egregiously, *Us Weekly* quotes “a Kardashian insider” as relaying that, “He would say truly terrible things. One time, he said she had no talent and her fame wouldn’t last.” While *Us Weekly* has long been
sympathetic to the Kardashians, its coverage of the divorce helped E! shift the popular discourse from outrage over whether or not the marriage was a sham to sympathy for unlucky-in-love Kim.

According to Su Holmes and Diane Negra, “Female celebrity models for managing the (feminized) ‘work-life balance’ are often positioned as only precariously and temporarily stabilized; we are invited to play a ‘waiting game’ to see when their hard-won achievements will collapse under the simultaneous weight of relationships, family, and career.” Indeed, the aftermath of Kim’s failed marriage, as well as the wedding special that barely preceded it, has become a cautionary tale that is an integral part of her working-girl persona. Just one year prior to her divorce announcement, Kim appeared on the cover of *People* looking wistful, with the headline, “I thought I’d be married by now.” In the season finale of *Kourtney and Kim Take New York*, during which Kim’s marriage to Humphries unravels, Kim cries to Kourtney, “At 30 years old, I thought I’d be married with kids, and I’m not. I failed at this.” Kim’s failure to succeed in love (later magnified by tabloid reports that Kanye West spent most of her
pregnancy overseas), combined with her eminently successful self-branding career, could easily vilify her as a cold, calculated businesswoman, one who would turn her own wedding into an opportunity for profit. Yet the fact that Kim’s sisters repeatedly expressed their doubts about Humphries both before and during their marriage has helped recuperate Kim’s image, while validating their sisterhood.

The Intimacy of Can-Do Sisters

Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé all embody what Anita Harris has termed “can-do girls,” who “are identifiable by their commitment to exceptional careers and career planning, their belief in their capacity to invent themselves and succeed, and their display of a consumer lifestyle. They are also distinguished by a desire to put off childbearing until ‘later.’”17 Delayed childbearing, of course, brings with it a postfeminist “biological clock” panic, or what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra refer to as a “temporal crisis.”18 Despite the fact that Khloé is the youngest of the three eldest sisters, and would thus seem to be the least implicated in the postfeminist temporal crisis, her narrative on the shows and in gossip media was defined throughout her marriage by a struggle to conceive. In the seventh season of Keeping Up With the Kardashians, Khloé and Kim visit a fertility clinic, and the episode includes a flashback to previous footage of Khloé undergoing a pelvic exam. Khloé explains to the viewer that she would rather be at the doctor with Kim than with her husband Lamar Odom, which places the viewer in the position of surrogate sister, learning the details of Khloé’s fertility before she even tells her husband. The end of the episode goes one step further, showing ultrasound images of Khloé’s ovary (see Figure 11.4). The camera zooms in on the ultrasound image as the doctor moves a cursor to show Khloé (and the viewer) that she may not be ovulating. Khloé

FIGURE 11.4. Khloé Kardashian, getting an ultrasound of her ovaries in her quest for fertility. Keeping Up with the Kardashians, “Cuts Both Ways,” season 7, episode 17, E!

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takes this news very hard, seemingly seeing it as a challenge to her femininity and helplessly sobbing to the viewer in a direct address interview, “Who doesn’t ovulate!” The narrative parallel between Khloé’s struggle with infertility and Kourtney’s multiple pregnancies embodies both the anxieties produced by the postfeminist work-life balance, and the ideal of the can-do girl, with Kim positioned squarely between the two.

At age three-o/two, Kim is also already feeling the pressure of the postfeminist temporal crisis. She undergoes an ovary ultrasound as well, in order to begin the process of freezing her eggs. In a later episode, we see her injecting herself with hormones to further the process, the camera providing extreme close-ups of the needle penetrating her flesh. Though the Kardashians’ bodies have long defined them and their fame outside of their television programs, Kim, Kourtney, and Khloé appear throughout the run of their E! shows in various states of undress not so much for an erotic male gaze, but for an intimate, sisterly one. Kourtney and Khloé have both taken home pregnancy tests on the show, complete with images of them sitting on the toilet and afterward brandishing the pee stick. Not only has each sister appeared naked (albeit blurred out) at one time or another on the series, but the viewer has accompanied each of them to the doctor’s office on multiple occasions—an intimate space most often reserved for immediate family. By providing the viewer with access to these intimate moments and spaces, the series addresses the viewer as another sister, who anticipates and experiences deeply personal moments along with the Kardashians.

Kim’s decision to freeze her eggs, alongside Khloé’s long-standing fertility struggles, speaks to postfeminist concerns about delaying pregnancy in favor of work, while the show celebrates Kourtney’s pregnancies, accompanying her to multiple ultrasound appointments. In one such episode, a close-up of the ultrasound monitor reveals Mason’s penis in utero to the viewer and every family member with the exception of Khloé, as the family cheers. Seeing Kourtney’s fetus at multiple stages of development cements viewer interest in and connection with a new Kardashian generation, while branding Kourtney’s familial, reproductive life. Kourtney’s successful transition to blissful motherhood further marks her as an exemplary “can-do girl,” because

[c]hildren are important accessories to the successful can-do life. . . . Can-do girls are thus encouraged to delay motherhood until their careers are established; then they can treat it as both an essentially feminine moment of fulfillment and a consumer lifestyle experience that enhances an image of success.19
Indeed, several episodes revolve around baby showers and shopping excursions for nursery decorations and baby supplies. *Us Weekly* delighted in reporting Kim’s expenditures for daughter North, listing a $4,000 crib and $1,170 stroller to add to her shopping spree at a Paris children’s boutique. Yet many of the baby-themed episodes are also tinged with a sense of empathy and even pity for Khloé, as in a season eight episode that revolves around Kourtney and Kim bonding over baby purchases, which leaves Khloé feeling left out.

The siblings are often jealous of each other, and Kris is constantly under attack for favoring Kim, with Khloé referring to Kim as Kris’s “prized possession.” Yet, as Kris reminds them during a fight over the name of Kim’s perfume, “You guys have to stay united and realize that anything that either one of you does builds the whole Kardashian brand.” When Kim tells Khloé and Kourtney that she has an opportunity to do a lingerie line in the Philippines, she meets resistance for her desire to be an individual entrepreneur unbridled by the sisterhood. Kourtney tells Kim, “It’s rewarding if we’re all there together to experience it,” and Khloé agrees, saying she could also work alone, but would rather work together. In a season three episode of *Kourtney and Kim Take Miami*, Kourtney tells Kim and Khloé that she’s scheduled to appear on QVC, but she feels like flying there with two kids is too much of a hassle and wants to cancel. Khloé and Kim are aghast at that suggestion, and Kim agrees to go, since it’s her day off. In the same episode, Kourtney leaves a photo shoot early, and Kim tells Khloé, “Maybe I’ll have a baby and then I won’t have to do as much work.”

The conflict explodes when Kim’s friend Jonathan accuses Kourtney of “collecting Kim’s money as it falls out of her ass,” and being “pregnant and doing nothing” while Kim works “365 days a year for the last four years.” While this particular fight speaks to the postfeminist trials of the work-life balance, in fact, Jonathan is wrong, as Kourtney’s motherhood and willingness to film her pregnancies, births, and children’s lives for the shows became a major part of the Kardashian brand, epitomized by an *OK! Magazine* collector’s issue cover story and 10-page spread titled, “Growing Up Kardashian,” revolving around Mason and Penelope. Even if Kourtney did reduce the amount of time she spent shilling products, the contours of the Kardashian brand are such that she is constantly working. In fact, the presence and visibility of Kourtney’s children may be even more important to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* since Kim and husband Kanye West have claimed that they will not allow their daughter North to appear on any of the shows. This pledge is particularly dubious, however, given the intimate nature of the Kardashian brand. After all, as West noted of Kim’s rise to fame via sex tape, “My girl famous all from a home movie.”
Extending the Sister-Brand

The Kardashians reveal the secrets of the sisterhood in their 2011 bestseller, *Kardashian Konfidential*, and invite the reader to become a part of it, telling her, “You’re pretty much just like us.” Despite the jealousy-fueled feuds that provide narrative tension on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, the sisters declare, “Our attitude is, there’s plenty to go around, we say, ‘Yay!’ when something good happens to one of us, because it’s kind of like something good happens to all of us.”

This attitude pervades both work and family life. In addition to reminding the sisters that each of their individual endeavors builds their collective brand, Kris also announces when Kourtney and Khloé attend Kim’s ultrasound, “[sic] pregnant, you’re all kinda pregnant. We’re all in this together,” a sentiment Kourtney takes to heart when she announces that she wants to join Kim in eating the placenta after North’s birth. Just as the Kardashians’ media empire has worked to extend their sisterhood to include female fans, in later seasons, Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé have expanded their sister-brand to include Kendall and Kylie, thus promoting their branded sisterhood to an even broader audience.

A season eight episode of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* finds Kourtney and Khloé passing on their sisterly affirmation to their younger sisters, who spend much of the episode at odds with each other. Kendall and Kylie appear to be off on the right foot in building their own entrepreneurial sisterhood, as the episode shows them attending a meeting for their clothing line and modeling at a photo shoot together. When Khloé has to break up an argument between her younger siblings and remind them that they should “be on each other’s teams,” she schemes to help them repair their relationship, bringing them together with Kourtney and Kim for a sisterly pep talk. Khloé tells the next generation of entrepreneurial sisters, “Just ’cause you’re sisters doesn’t mean you have to be friends, but we’ve all chosen to be best friends ’cause we respect, envy, love, and honor one another, just like you two do, deep down. There’ll be no other friend like your sister.” A few scenes later, Kendall and Kylie mark their reconciliation through scouring family photo albums and helping each other post old snapshots to social media sites, thus healing the rift in their branded sisterhood by extending it to their fans. Although postfeminist culture has often encouraged young women to eschew connections to other women, this episode offers an appealing affirmation of sisterly bonds, while entrepreneurializing them through social media sister promotion.

As the younger Jenner sisters have grown up, they have come to occupy a more prominent position in the family brand and have begun to infiltrate Kim, Kourtney, and Khloé’s primary entrepreneurial sisterhood. In a season eight
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episode, pregnant Kim frets over "losing her cool" and fawns over Kylie, who, she tells Khloé, is "the end all, be all of cool." Setting Kylie up for the viewer as the last up-and-coming member of the sisterhood (that is, at least until Penelope and North enter their tween years), Kim explains in a direct address interview, "Kylie has this amazing Tumblr that just like is such an expression of who she is. She'll post these fashion pictures and the style that she's into, and I just know that, like, she's really cool." Halfway through this utterance, the episode cuts away from Kim's interview to a montage of images from Kylie's Tumblr, introducing this personal "expression" directly to the viewer, and inviting her to check out Kylie's mediated persona as Kim's most recent endorsement. Kim's obsession with Kylie continues throughout the episode, as she interrupts a clothing design meeting to recommend changes to a garment based on what Kylie would wear. She refers the designers to Kylie's blog, promising, "It's just like so her soul, and it's what I want our line to be."

Kim even seeks Khloé's advice for becoming more prominently featured on Kylie's Tumblr. When Khloé wonders if Kylie posts pictures of her older sisters out of sympathy, Kim snaps, "No! She doesn't do anything out of sympathy. She only does what's cool, that's why I love her, 'cause she, like, is so authentic, she's like the real deal." To further validate her claim to Kylie's authentic cool, Kim reveals that Kanye West seeks Kylie's opinion on his album artwork. Whereas the rest of the Kardashian family has long faced criticism for the calculated nature of their personas, Kim attempts to set Kylie apart. Yet Kim also seeks to participate in and commodify Kylie's (already) commodified authenticity. As Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, "Rather than representing the loss of authentic humanity, the authentic and commodity self are intertwined within brand culture, where authenticity is itself a brand." While up to this point, Kim's authenticity has largely resided in her body, as that body changes during her pregnancy, Kim seeks a different, more holistic authenticity, which, the episode suggests, can be found in her younger sister. As with every Kardashian endeavor, branding the next generation is both hard work and a family affair.

Diane Negra and Maria Pramaggiore argue that Keeping Up With the Kardashians is “Dedicated to repairing the contradictions between a neoliberal economic structure and idealized family life,” seeking to “reassure us that the intense, relentless commodification of identity need not threaten family solidarity and intimacy.” While this dynamic is undoubtedly a large part of the Kardashian television narrative, it is also a dynamic that attracts wide derision. Us Weekly is by and large sympathetic toward the Kardashians, but it regularly slips in jabs about the commingling of business and family, as when an article notes that Kris Jenner is “the mother of six brands, er, children,” or refers to North as Kim’s “little spin-off,” and her prospective marriage to
Kanye West as a “West-Kardashian merger.” The promotional extravaganza that was Kim’s Fairytale Wedding, and the scorn Kim briefly experienced when she announced the divorce, exemplifies the limits of public tolerance for the Kardashians’ monetization of their “private” lives. Despite this backlash, the Kardashians have retained millions of young female fans who idolize them and aspirationally identify with them. Kim, Kourtney, and Khloé have all experienced setbacks in their attempts to successfully navigate the so-called work-life balance. The fact that their personal lives are interwoven with their work lives has both helped and hurt, but what has remained consistent throughout the years that their lives have been televised is their sisterly bond. As they tell their readers in Kardashian Konfidential, “The most important thing about being the Kardashian sisters . . . is being sisters.” Kourtney and Khloé helped Kim through her divorce, Khloé and Kim helped Kourtney through multiple breakups and reconciliations with Scott, and despite an Us Weekly story that reported that Khloé broke the “first rule of the Kardashian sisterhood” by lying about Lamar Odom’s drug use, two weeks later, the magazine ran a photo of Khloé and Kourtney holding hands in sisterly solidarity. This emphasis on family, and, more importantly sisterhood, as a vehicle for both professional and personal success sets the Kardashians apart from some of the confines of neoliberal postfeminism. While each sister has her own branded identity, the greater Kardashian brand is built upon the close relationships the sisters (and to a lesser extent, the rest of the family) have with each other. Postfeminist culture sells female viewers an image of can-do individualism dependent upon each going it alone, apart from any literal or figurative sisters, and especially when it comes to their professional success. Yet even as they serve as brand ambassadors for postfeminist entrepreneurialism, the Kardashian sisterhood highlights and depends upon bonds between women that appear essential to both their personal well-being and their professional accomplishments.

Notes
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8. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 56.
17. Harris, Future Girl, 14.
23. Ibid., 103.

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