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"I will always 100% be a tomboy, even underneath all this": A multimodal critical discourse analysis of the commodification of female masculinities in *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*

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Abstract

This study explores how female masculinities, specifically tomboy identity, are represented and commodified within The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (RHOBH). Drawing on Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), we examine how tomboy self-identification is constructed through language, visuals, and genre-specific conventions in reality television. Although RHOBH is grounded in hyper-feminine aesthetics and neoliberal values, several cast members refer to themselves as tomboys in confessionals, childhood retrospectives, or while performing masculine-coded activities. These expressions of tomboyism are typically brief, self-declared, and context-dependent, reflecting personal and enacted layers of identity while bypassing relational or communal affirmation. Our findings suggest that tomboy identity functions as a protective and performative strategy used to portray relatability, critique femininity, and reinforce authenticity without disrupting the show's hyper-feminine norms. Through analysis of temporal-spatial identity constructs and visual semiotics (e.g., canons of use, instantiation, eyeline vector), we show how tomboyism is commodified to maintain viewer appeal while reinforcing heteronormative and consumerist ideals. Ultimately, tomboy discourse in RHOBH allows cast members to symbolically challenge gender norms while materially upholding them, revealing the complex ways reality television negotiates gender, identity, and power through mediated performance.

Keywords: Real Housewives of Beverly Hills; tomboy; hyper-femininity; multimodal critical discourse analysis; communication theory of identity

1 Introduction

The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (*RHOBH*) is the sixth installment in the hugely popular and profitable Bravo network *The Real Housewives* franchise (2006 - present). *RHOBH* (2010 - present) follows the lives of affluent women, providing an inside look at their day-to-day lives, which include

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glamorous lifestyles as well as heavier topics such as addiction and domestic violence (Quinn, 2021). As such, their lives exist as both aspirational and cautionary (Levy, 2018; Leonard, 2020). Sporting a distinctly feminine focus, the narratives focus on the trials and tribulations of 'marriage, motherhood, and female friendship' (Lieber 2013, p. 114). Among the many series, *RHOBH* is one of the most widely viewed (Cox et al., 2014) and discussed in academic research. However, as discussed below, the literature lacks in-depth analyses of the language used in (gender) identity constructions on the show, particularly in relation to female masculinities, including tomboy identity.

The literature on tomboyism is scarce, and this identity formation – and its representation – is one of the most overlooked female gender identities (Abate, 2011). A few studies have recently explored tomboy identity in the East-Asian context, however (e.g., Li, 2022; Zhao, 2022). Hyper-femininity and tomboyism are often conceptualised as opposites in terms of gender performance. On the one hand, girly-girls refers to exaggerated performances of femininity through the enactments of symbols (glitter, pink, fluffy, etc.), behaviours (compliant, narcissistic, submissive, etc.), and language (tentative speech, high pitch, etc.), as well as lacking personality and intelligence (Paechter, 2010). These stereotypes are tied to – and reinforce – capitalist and patriarchal understandings of the role of women in society. As such, hyper-femininity also possesses class, race, and sexual connotations – namely, girly-girls are said to be localised within the 'symbolic capital' of being wealthy, white, and straight (Allan, 2009; Holland & Harpin, 2015) – a hegemonic representation that normalises this type of femininity as an aspirational standard. Importantly, hyper-femininity is also associated with meanness, aggression, and cruelty towards other women, particularly those who are not feminine (Ringrose, 2006). Furthermore, the cultural image of the hyper-feminine, girly girl is one that is also vilified, socially despised, and considered old-fashioned (Holland & Harpin, 2015).

Within *RHOBH,* the commodification of hyper-femininity is also argued to maintain gendered, raced and classed status-quos and promote neoliberal values and a deliberate apolitical stance concerning social issues relating to class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity (Cox et al., 2014). Furthermore, the women display topic avoidance of taboo social topics such as race and class inequalities that "momentarily threaten Housewives' enactment of culturally elite identities" and threaten their status and notion of "having class" (Squires 2014, p. 33). As such, hyper-femininity is central to analysing gender identity within this show.

Conversely, tomboyism is defined as "a way of being, performing, or understanding oneself as female [who] has significant elements that are stereotypically associated with masculinity" (Paechter 2010, 233). Tomboys, therefore, tend to differentiate themselves from hyper-feminine girls and women – that is, they are not interested in enacting or behaving in stereotypically feminine ways, opting for either neutral or masculine ways of gender performance. This form of 'female masculinity' (Halberstam, 1998) is said to be common and at times encouraged in childhood – where it is often associated with a 'natural' desire for the freedom and independence enjoyed by boys and if it does not extend to more extreme male identification (e.g. refusing 'girl' clothing and 'girl' names), it remains linked to a "stable sense of girl identity" (Halberstam 1998, p. 6) – but tends to dissipate during puberty, as gender conformity descends on girls in full force and tomboyish behaviours are socially discouraged through remodelling, rewards and punishments, and peer-pressure (Halberstam, 1998; Carr, 1998). The construction of a tomboy identity, therefore, is dependent upon cisnormative and heteronormative societal demands. As such, tomboyism is rare among adult (straight) women, as social pressures stigmatise female masculinities (Halberstam, 1998). However, even though certain women on *RHOBH* employ and commodify a different type of non-traditional femininity or female masculinity (such as tomboy), no studies have examined how female masculinities are employed to stand out in a hyper-feminine context and gain social capital both on and off the show.

Furthermore, the present study examines the employment of tomboy identity within the context of *RHOBH*. As previously mentioned, tomboyism is generally an overlooked identity in research (Abate, 2011), and, as such, it has not been studied within the context of this show despite it being employed frequently by multiple cast members throughout the seasons. Research has primarily focused on hyper-femininity and its consequences, constructions, and often non-deliberate transgressions. Yet, no research has explored deliberate transgressions of femininity like tomboyism, especially in terms of its usage, purposes, status, and other productions and performances of identity. Therefore, this paper explores the re-production of female masculinities in the form of tomboy personal identity within *RHOBH*. We also explore how the show's deliberate apolitical stance and lack of criticism of capitalism interacts with the employment of such non-traditional feminine identities and their commodification for social and monetary capital.

2 Literature review

2.1 About RHOBH

According to Bravo (2023, n.p.), RHOBH shows how affluent women in Beverly Hills, California, "balance their ever-evolving friendships with the demands of family life and growing business ventures." However, the 'friendships' often take precedence over their family ties on the show and frequently devolve into superficial and transactional, often acrimonious, popularity competitions to remain on the show and continue their career as a 'housewife' (Leonard, 2020). The infamous fights between housewives are transparently, yet disingenuously, criticised by production via reaction shots, flashbacks and sound effects (p. 282), as Bravo conspires with viewers to "mock and discipline their out-of-reach consumption and out-of-bounds" behaviour (Lagerwey 2016, p. 53) whilst staking their fortune on the commodification of said behaviour. The rather active audience primarily consists of gay men and straight women, connecting with the 'housewives' via social media, an activity which also elevates the women's celebrity status (Leonard, 2020).

Each season of *RHOBH* typically consists of 20 regular episodes and a 2-4 part season reunion (hosted by Bravo's Andy Cohen). Each season has 6-8 cast members who are all paid different amounts based on their popularity/star status. Cast members can leave the show of their own volition, or contracts can be terminated by production. Screen time and popularity among the show's fans are, therefore, highly valuable. A typical episode contains confessionals (filmed in their own homes) where cast members discuss the show and activities such as (staged) shopping trips, fine dining, celebrations, and promotions of their business ventures. Narratives within an episode are often based on the women's past interactions and changing relationships throughout the seasons. As such, alliances are negotiated within an episode and throughout a season/multiple seasons. Additionally, confessionals and flashbacks are dotted throughout the episodes to emphasise and clarify past and present interactions or to refresh the audience's memory.

In some ways, the Real Housewives franchise has helped redefine the term 'housewife,' going beyond the 'feminine stay-at-home wives' and 'masculine women who are successful at professional ventures' binary (Johnson & Trelease, 2018; Leonard, 2020). For instance, most of the women on the show work in the entertainment industry (e.g., Kyle Richards and Lisa Rinna, women's full names are displayed once only; first name onwards), in fashion (e.g., Yolanda Hadid) or in music (e.g., Erika Girardi), and engage in virtually no housework. It has also forged a new career path for affluent women as 'housewives' selling themselves and their merchandise, which remain bound to the concept of "aspirational femininity" (Leonard 2020, p. 279). This testifies to "an impulse to use an already wealthy lifestyle in service of both

profit and exposure… turning their professionalization of wifedom into a profitable business enterprise" (p. 279).

Nevertheless, *RHOBH* is primarily known for the glorification of performative, hyper-feminine 'Hollywood' standards of commodified and commercialised femininity via plastic surgery, fashion, expensive 'girl trips', "nouveau riche values" (Brzenchek & Castañeda, 2017), and "conspicuous consumption, privileged and pampered excess, and self-interest bordering on solipsism" (Leonard 2020, p. 278), thereby valorising consumerism as well as neoliberal (Cox, 2012; Cox et al., 2014) and conservative heteronormative values (Johnson & Trelease, 2018). It is for this reason that the show has been deemed as "problematic from a feminist political economic perspective" (Cox & Proffitt, 2012, p. 299), "designating women as [merely] shoppers" (p. 295). The show is said to promote consumption, placing a great emphasis on appearance and perpetuating heteronormative gender roles (Johnson & Trelease, 2018; Silverman, 2015; Wilhelm, 2013), which highlights patriarchal failures in wealth equity (Cox & Profitt, 2012). Hughes (2012) also argues that the show displays internalised sexism and promotes a discourse where women have become their own oppressors, and scorn rains down on women who transgress the "traditional gender roles of supportive friend, nurturing mother, doting wife, and ceaseless caretaker" (Lee & Moscowitz 2013, p. 65). According to Leonard (2020), *RHOBH* "formalizes the[se] themes and intensifies the currents that comprise *The Real Housewives* franchise writ large" (p. 278), making it a prime site for study.

2.2 Theoretical background

We will employ Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as our theoretical framework to explore the nuances of tomboy identification within *RHOBH*. CTI conceptualises four layers of identity: (a) personal, (b) enacted, (c) relational, and (d) communal (Hecht et al., 2001). At the individual level, the personal identity layer reflects a person's self-identification and self-concept (who am I?). Similarly, the enacted identity layer pertains to how individuals perform and express their personal identity to other people (who am I to others?). At the social level, the relational identity layer allows individuals to construct their identity in relation to other people, a mutual process of identity construction wherein people internalise how others see them (how am I different from others?). Lastly, the communal identity layer conceptualises how shared values, histories, affiliations, languages, etc., contribute to the construction of larger social identities (how am I similar to others?) (Motschenbacher, 2016, p. 55).

These four layers of identity affect and are affected by one another in a fluid and ever-changing production of identity. CTI emphasises communication (linguistic and para-linguistic), as misalignments in a person's personal and social identities can result in identity gaps and inconsistencies which may lead to feeling misunderstood, misinterpretations, and ultimately conflict (Hecht & Lu, 2014). These identity tensions can result in feelings of belonging (in-group) or estrangement (out-group); however, identities are not stable categories – they involve a process of co-construction that is guided by discursive interactions and performances (Motschenbacher, 2016). It is for this reason that Butler's (1990) concept of *performativity* is also a useful tool to understand how individuals use communication (language and other symbols) to *perform* particular social identities which may or may not align with the individual layers of identity and self-understanding, thus rendering these identities (un)recognisable and (il)legitimate.

CTI offers a useful, fluid model of both individual and social productions of identity that can help disentangle the representations of tomboy identity on reality television: the individual and social purposes of this employment. Van Leeuwen (2022, p. 20) highlights that identity is shaped and communicated within "communities that share their understanding of the world, their affiliation with certain values and attitudes, and express it through similar ways of dressing and grooming, and through the interests and activities they

share." This perspective is particularly useful for analysing RHOBH, where such shared aesthetic and behavioural codes often sustain traditional notions of hyper-femininity. Furthermore, we will draw from Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) concept of *communities of practice* to explore how the cast of *RHOBH* construct a communal identity – one that possesses a particular set of common practices, artefacts, language, etc. In the present research, the community of interest (typically defined as a group of people sharing similar interests and objectives) is characterised as cast members.

Lastly, tomboyism, as a social identity, has been found to offer women a number of personal benefits, such as being more egalitarian, accepting of gender diversity, and displaying lower levels of intergroup biases (Ahlqvist et al., 2013). Tomboyism has also been theorised to be a protective identity for women, offering social benefits and protections such as "(1) sexual reputation protection for heterosexual girls and women; (2) protection for lesbians who are closeted; and (3) protected access to male privileged spaces, activities, and conversations." (Craig & LaCroix, 2011, p. 450). The concept of tomboy as a protective identity will also be used as a theoretical lens through which we will analyse our data.

2.3 Analytical framework

Alongside CTI, the present study employs multimodal critical discourse analysis or MCDA (Mayr, 2016; Kress, 2011) to explore the use of the word *tomboy* alongside the visual context (the video footage) in which these linguistic representations occurred within *RHOBH*. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a form of critical social analysis of power that views language as discourse, an element of the social process that is dialectically related to other linguistic and material forces. Its focus is not just on power *in* discourse but also power *behind* discourse (see Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

In the study of the interconnectedness of discourse, power and ideology, MCDA incorporates visual and auditory modalities to CDA such as "voice, gestures, facial expressions or aspects of self-presentation" (van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 447) as well as text in its interpretation of discursive practices and in explaining how these practices are involved in the re-production of broader sociocultural processes. Furthermore, a multimodal analysis of power and ideology suggests that the meanings created "by any mode are always interwoven with the meanings made with those other modes co-present and co-operating in the communicative event" (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010, p. 184).

Multimodal analysis posits that meaning and identity are co-constructed through the dynamic interplay of multiple semiotic resources – such as visual, gestural, spatial, and material modes – rather than through language in isolation. This perspective underscores the importance of analysing how various semiotic modalities collaboratively contribute to meaning-making and the construction of social identities (van Leeuwen, 2022; Lemke, 2009). In the RHOBH context, these multimodal elements – captured through screenshots, photographs, and videoclips alongside transcripts – can therefore enable a deeper interrogation of how identity, power and ideology are performed, resisted, or reinforced within the franchise. In particular, we aim to examine how visual styles (e.g., fashion choices, body language, settings, etc.) function as identity markers that can either align with or subvert dominant discourses of femininity.

Furthermore, we draw upon the notions of 'instantiation' and 'canons of use' to analyse semiotic artifacts such as photographs, screenshots, and videoclips (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014; Ledin & Machin, 2019). We treat these artifacts as 'instances' or types of established canons of use: conventions, traditions, and contextual frameworks that dictate how specific forms of communication – such as photographs, texts, or other semiotic materials – are used and understood within wider discourses, particular social practices and context. They frame how texts and images are contextualised, produced, and understood within wider social frameworks. Finding out these "canons of use and [the] social practices involved, is crucial for a critical

multimodal analysis" (Ledin & Machin, 2019, p. 502). This contextualisation of treating images at the micro (the image), meso (the canon(s) of use) and macro (social practice) level, also bears a resemblance to Fairclough's (1992) seminal notion of three-tier discourse which is also embedded within social practices, production and consumption. Therefore, in alignment with the recommendations regarding the importance of canons of use, this study also considers how established conventions and contextual factors influence the interpretation of both linguistic and visual elements within RHOBH, providing a richer understanding of cultural norms surrounding female masculinity.

Therefore, the present study uses *RHOBH* transcripts (language) and screenshots, photographs, and clips (images) to assist the intersection of these modes of communication with (gendered) power and ideology, whilst using CTI as a framework to understand these processes. Whilst visual imagery is not the sole focus of this research, such visual representations were useful in understanding the reproduction of female masculinities in *RHOBH*, as well as the juxtapositions, absences, and failures of critiquing hyperfemininity whilst enacting it. To do this, the transcripts based on subtitles (comprising twelve seasons of *RHOBH*) were downloaded for this project using the Subslikescript (2023) database. The transcripts were complemented with visual data (screenshots, photographs, and clips from the show) which occurred when the word *tomboy* was used by cast members.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection

All transcripts from twelve seasons (268 episodes) of *RHOBH* (2010-2023) were downloaded in full from Subslikescript (2023), including the episodes' titles and synopses. We then searched for *tomboy* as we noticed that the use of these expressions tended to juxtapose with the women's visual and situational contexts (e.g., their clothing, environment, and storylines). Given the researchers' familiarity with the show and initial interest in female masculinities, this portion of the data collection was done deductively. No other keywords or further analyses were conducted, as our main focus was the employment of the term *tomboy,* which informed us about discourses of female masculinities in the show, rather than the language employed in the show. We then correlated the instances in which these expressions were used with the video footage and the storylines by re-watching those episodes in full, noting their context, gendered appearance, and how identities were communicated vis-a-vis discourse and visual representations using MCDA and CTI. The exact instances in which these expressions were used were screenshotted and will be included in the analysis section.

3.2 Analyses

Both researchers have seen all episodes of the show and have since re-watched every episode in which the target word was employed. This part of the analysis was done inductively (data driven), allowing us to explore the multimodal data freely, and to reflect on the multifaceted discourses embedded within the story lines, as well as the absences and the juxtapositions between and within these modalities. In doing so, we paid close attention to *who* is seen, *how* they are seen, and *who* is viewing, and how these perspectives are used to re-produce specific versions/visions of social categories and identities (Haraway, 1991), thus paying attention to the 'eyeliner vectors' – that is, the direction a person depicted in an image looks, which can indicate various meanings and relationships between the depicted subjects or between the subjects and the

viewer. This concept is crucial for understanding how visual communication constructs meaning and directs the viewer's perception and interpretation of the text (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). We also applied MCDA notions of instantiation, forms of expression, eyeline vectors, and canons of use to analyse various contexts like confessionals, spontaneous speech, production, audience, interactions, flashbacks, etc. We then categorised our data in terms of CTI, attending to gendered performance, and the failures and absences of commodified femininity.

4 Findings

The term *tomboy* was uttered in self-identification a total of nine times in eight separate episodes in six (out of twelve) seasons of *RHOBH*. Table 1 below displays the context and frequency of the occurrences. Interestingly, the latter half of the seasons (2016-2022; eight mentions) include more instances of tomboy identification than the first half of the seasons (2010-2016: one mention). Erika Girardi and Crystal Kung Minkoff are the only cast members who use *tomboy* in more than one episode.

Season	Episode	Cast Member	Instances
1	3	Camille Meyer (then Grammer)	1
7	14	Erika Girardi	1
8	22	Erika Girardi	1
9	13	Erika Girardi	1
9	18	Teddi Mellencamp-Arroyave	1
11	7	Crystal Kung Minkoff	2
11	8	Crystal Kung Minkoff	1
12	2	Diana Jenkins	1

Table 1. Tomboy utterance sources

The women mentioned in Table 1 appear to disregard the aforementioned differentiation between tomboys and girly-girls by explicitly stating they identify as tomboys whilst overtly enacting a hyper-feminine gender performance. This modal juxtaposition in their identification does not appear to be at odds for these women, as the examples and analyses below will show. In fact, the hyper-feminine and tomboy aspects of their identity seem to exist on different yet interacting planes of their identity. They enact hyper-femininity to others in the majority of the scenes of the show, and reserve the enactment of their tomboyism for very specific contexts. These contexts can be divided into four different temporal-spatial settings (see section 4.1.). Two of these relate to the spatial context in which they use the tomboy personal identity: 1) in a confessional setting, and 2) whilst engaging in stereotypically feminine activities. The other categories almost always overlap with the confessional setting and relate to the editing tools used, including: 3) footage of them engaging in stereotypically masculine activities; and 4) in retrospective childhood images of them as tomboys. These settings, with their own canons of use, also display three different separate types of temporal identity constructs (see section 4.2.): tomboyism as an identity of the past, tomboyism as a mitigated identity of the present, and tomboyism as a celebrated identity of the present. We will now elaborate on these categories using textual and visual modalities from the show.

4.1 Temporal-spatial settings

4.1.1 *Confessionals*

The confessional types, for which we analysed screenshots as this setting is very static and almost picture-like, comprise seven (out of nine) tomboy self-identifications on the show. They also represent perhaps the sharpest modal juxtaposition between the hyper-feminine and tomboy-enacted identities on *RHOBH* (see figures 1-6 below). Camille Meyer (fig. 1), Erika (fig. 2-4), Crystal Kung Minkoff (fig. 5) and Diana Jenkins (fig. 6) all display a hyper-feminine look, including elaborate hairstyles, heavy make-up, and expensive clothing and jewellery. They are seated alone, away from the main footage and narrative of the show, in front of lavish and perfectly manicured backgrounds (their homes), like perfect Stepford Wives (Levin, 1972), emphasising their wealth and the lack of consumerist and capitalist criticism on the show. These images do not only exist within the show, but also within wider social practices and traditions of constructing women as hyper-feminine 'barbies' (Paechter, 2010), and wealthy women as separated from society in their palaces (Holland & Harpin, 2015). We also see an eyeline vector emanating from these women, as reactors to the camera and a producer off-screen, which does not point at another participant (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Instead their eyeline points at us, the viewers, separating them from the other women and the show, but a canon of use in reality television which creates intimacy and direct connection to the audience (Cummins, 2005; Skeggs & Wood, 2012). As such, this framing both separates them from the other women, and connects them to us, the viewers, which helps the women identify as a tomboy in a relational manner (for the audience).

Figure 1. Camille, S1 E3

Figure 2. Erika, S7 E14

Figure 3. Erika, S8 E33

Figure 4. Erika, S9 E13

Figure 5. Crystal, S11 E7 & 8

Figure 6. Diana, S12 E2

In this capitalist, hyper-feminine dreamscape setting, they go on to explicitly self-identify as tomboys (see excerpts 1-7 below). This self-identification is perhaps a personal identity, but it is only enacted toward the audience – everyone except for Crystal mentions it only in the confessional setting. Tomboyism was therefore enacted in relation to the other women on the show, as they compare and emphasise their sport-loving ways (ex. 1, 4 & 6), their toughness (ex. 2, 3, 4 & 7), their outdoorsy ways (ex. 2 & 4), and their supposed lack of fashion sense (ex. 5) – and are framed as behaviours that the other women do not display. The fact that the women primarily do this in front of the audience, addressing the viewer, and away from the other women, could hint at them wanting to escape criticism or being called out due to the clear modal juxtaposition between their looks and overall hyper-feminine performance on the show (e.g., shopping, girl trips, etc.) and their tomboy identification. The fact that these self-identifications either happen in their first season on the show (i.e. Camille, Crystal and Diana's) or when they are re-establishing themselves (i.e. Erika, in seasons 7, 8 and 9) also implies that the tomboy personal identity is a deliberate choice to present and endear them to the audience. To stand out by appearing more 'normal' and relatable to the audience, and (supposedly) less concerned with wealth and appearances than the other women – whilst looking exactly the same as the other women. Their hyper-feminine gender performance works as an armour that shields them from the negative consequences and stigmatisation that commonly apply to female masculinities.

1. ***Camille:*** *"I'm a bit of a tomboy. I like sports" (Season 1, Ep. 3)*
2. ***Erika:*** *"I am a Southern girl. I grew up having a go-kart. I like to fish. I will always 100% be a tomboy, even underneath all this. It's easy to do both. When you're camping, you're camping. When you're glamming, you're glamming" (Season 7, Ep. 14)*
3. ***Erika:*** *"It's fun being a boy's mom. You know, I like it, because I'm a tomboy, so." (Season 8, Ep. 22)*
4. ***Erika:*** *"Everybody thinks, you know, "Erika wouldn't wanna go camping. Bitch, I been camping all my life. I am a fishing, camping, go-kart riding, gun-shooting, tomboy." (Season 9, Ep. 13)*
5. ***Crystal:*** *"Growing up, I was always a tomboy. But, you know, when you're married to a director and you have to go to all these events and wear these fancy clothes, luckily, he always has a stylist around, so I don't have to do any of the work. Like this, I did not buy [points at her black dress]." (Season 11, Ep. 7)*
6. ***Crystal****: "Yeah, I'm totally a tomboy. Super into sports." (Season 11, Ep. 8)*

7. ***Diana:*** *"Growing up I was definitely a tomboy, yes. I only hang out [sic] with boys, I was very, like, tough and got into fights." (Season 12, Ep. 2)*

4.1.2 *Retrospective childhood photographs*

Crystal and Diana's confessional identifications were also accompanied by photographs of them as children which they or their team provided themselves (fig. 7-8). These are instances of a canon of use for reality TV producers to either prove or disprove a participant's claims with supposedly more believable evidence from outside of the show's context (Nunn et al., 2005), in this case to essentially provide 'proof' for their claims of tomboyism. Thus, providing these childhood images of Crystal and Diana, as well as Teddi Mellencamp-Arroyave (fig. 9-10), can be seen as trying to prove their inherent, personal identification as a tomboy by showing them as having shorter, masculine haircuts (fig. 7-9) and boyish fashion (fig. 7-8) – and perhaps explaining the current hyper-feminine modal juxtaposition as being a result of societal pressure (Carr, 1998). However, the childhood appearance of these women can be explained both by these pictures' production taking place off-show in the private sphere, without 'glam teams', production or self-marketing and self-commodification pressures being present, and by less strict rules for gender expression in childhood and the fact that they or their parents could not yet afford the privileges of commodified femininity. Diana specifically mentions that she came from "extreme poverty," having to flee the Bosnian war and work odd jobs to get by. Diana provided images of her alleged impoverished childhood to support these claims (fig. 8).

Figure 7. Crystal (front), S11 E8

Figure 8. Diana, S12 E2

Figure 9. Teddi, S9 E18

Figure 10. Teddi, S9 E18

Additionally, Teddi, the only woman to call herself a tomboy retrospectively outside of the confessional (communally with other women, whilst in full glam on a cast trip to a vineyard in France) (fig. 10; ex. 8), revealed that her childhood nickname was "Butch," which could be linked to her being labelled (by others) as queer growing up. However, no discussion of sexuality takes place in this episode. The apolitical nature of the show routinely steers clear of such discourses and revels in the quiet assumption that everyone is heterosexual. In this case, Teddi is a married woman with children, so this is never questioned. Explicit female queerness has occurred on the show (e.g., former cast members Brandi Glanville and Carlton Gebbia are bisexual). Still, queer cast members do not tend to last long and are bullied (Quinn, 2021), whilst identity discourse, and sexual identity discourse in particular, are generally disregarded.

8. ***Teddi:*** *"But my nickname was Butch.*
   Erika: *What? Butch? [laughs] Don't ever give us that kind of material. How did you get Butch?*
   Teddi: *I think because I was pretty tomboyish." (Season 9, Ep. 18)*

4.1.3 *Stereotypically masculine activities*

Aside from the childhood photographs, retrospective images and earlier footage from the show are also used to emphasise and provide proof for the women's more recent masculine behaviours, and how their tomboy identification grants them 'protected access' to male-privileged activities (Craig & LaCroix, 2011). Figures 11 & 12, which accompany excerpts 2 & 4 above, show off-show photographs of Erika engaging in the stereotypically masculine activity of fishing and instances of the canon of use of a fish being held as a masculine trophy (Gustavsson & Riley, 2019). These images are interspersed with her confessionals (fig. 2 & 4) and highlight her tomboyish ways and the current modal juxtaposition in her gender performance. These self-provided photographs of 'frozen moments' also come with affordances that moving footage from the show itself would not provide (Sontag, 2004). For example, we do not know whether these fishing pictures are part of an actual activity or whether they might be posed/staged. Erika also explicitly identifies the juxtaposition by stating that people think that "Erika wouldn't wanna go camping" (ex. 2) but that she is "100% a tomboy" and that "underneath it all" (i.e., the hyper-feminine look); she can do it both, as demonstrated in excerpt 4. The juxtaposition is present to her but does not interfere with her tomboy identification. It is unclear, however, what "100% a tomboy" exactly entails for Erika and the other tomboy women, as they never venture into specific identity discourse. They employ tomboy as a personal identification but rarely expand on its usage.

Figure 11. Erika, S7 E14

Figure 12. Erika, S9 E13

Furthermore, Camille and Crystal's tomboy confessionals are also interspersed with footage of them playing sports, lending credibility to their identification. They are playing tennis (screenshots of these clips are seen in fig. 13-14), displaying instances of a sport commonly associated in society with wealth and social status, yet it is still classed as unfeminine by other women on the show (i.e. Kyle Richards), whilst Crystal's is also interspersed with boxing (fig. 15), an instance of a canon of use of a sport associated with lower social and monetary status. This, in combination with the fact that it is Crystal alone who is shown to actively participate in these sports (fig. 14, 15), while Erika and Camille are present but less active (fig. 13, 14), making Crystal stand out as perhaps the more sporty and down-to-earth cast member. Crystal also mentions she's been described as the "most hideously competitive person" which she disputes, but she goes on to jokingly call whoever called her that a "loser" (ex. 9 below). This denial and joking agreement subsequently straddle both tomboyism and femininity stereotypes. She is competitive, but not too competitive, whilst also playing coy, but not too coy.

Figure 13. Camille, S1 E3

Figure 14. Crystal (& Erika), S11 E8

Figure 15. Crystal (& Erika), S11 E8

9. ***Crystal:*** *"Yeah, I'm totally a tomboy. Super into sports. I've been told I'm the most hideously competitive person and I don't think that. But then, you know, whoever said that's probably a loser, so." (Season 11, Ep. 8)*

4.1.4 *Stereotypically feminine activities*

Whilst the confessionals already show the modal juxtaposition between the tomboys' gender performance and deliberate, enacted self-identification, there are also two instances in which they actively

identify as a tomboy in the confessionals, or their behaviour as tomboyish, whilst engaging in hyper-feminine activities with other non-cast member women in other parts of the show. Just like the confessionals, the context of these activities and utterances is still away from the other housewives. Crystal states that she is a 'drag-looking' tomboy who cannot wear heels all night whilst her glam team is doing her make-up and hair, implying levels of hyper-feminine appearance maintenance that fit within the canon and traditions of the housewives universe, but juxtapose her supposed tomboy identity(fig. 16; ex.10), which is interspersed with her confessional (fig. 5; ex. 5). A similar situation occurs in season 8, episode 6, as self-professed tomboy Teddi claims she's a "non-girly girly" whilst getting a very expensive facial (fig. 17). These situations both link femininity or lack thereof to how much you can spend on your appearance, whilst they also provide the women with opportunities to appear more relatable by stating this is not normal for them away from potential criticism or disproval of their claims from the other housewives – even though the show visually documents them engaging in such behaviour often.

Figure 16. Crystal, S11 E7

Figure 17. Teddi, S8 E6

10. ***Crystal:*** *"You know I'm just a tomboy. just looking all drag right now. [after getting dressed] Oh, my God. I don't think I can wear these shoes all night." (Season 11, Ep. 7)*

The women appear to deliberately explore and exploit the opposition between hyper-femininity and tomboyism, thereby differentiating themselves from other women, from a safe distance, whilst engaging in the wealth-facilitated hyper-femininity they are critiquing. However, explicit criticism of societal gender stereotypes and capitalist practices are wholly absent.

4.2 Temporal identity constructs

The temporal-spatial settings discussed in section 4.1. (e.g. confessionals, retrospective photographs, retrospective show footage of them engaging in both stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine activities), their canons of use and embeddedness in social practices, also display three separate types of temporal identity constructs: tomboyism as an identity of the past (4.2.1.), tomboyism as a mitigated identity of the present (4.2.2.), tomboyism as a celebrated identity of the present (4.2.3.). All these women describe themselves as tomboys during their time as out-group members or new members of the show. All of these women, except for Erika, also do not last longer than three seasons and never fully become part of the in-group of housewives. They all enact their tomboy identities via different strategies and identity constructions to appeal to the viewers and mitigate their newness, how they will fit into the hyper-feminine standards of the show, and their overall unsurety around their place on the show.

4.2.1 *Tomboyism as an identity of the past*

Teddi and Diana, who are both in their first seasons describe their identities by means of past-tense (ex. 7, 8) as well as childhood photographs (fig. 8, 9). Their tomboy identification is very much a thing of the past, yet employed in the present to either mitigate their hyper-femininity and make them seem more relatable and less wealth-obsessed in their first and only season (Diana) or endear themselves to the group in their second out of three seasons (Teddi). As mentioned, they both do not last long on the show and never become part of the in-group or popular with viewers (Donnellan, 2023), but they do enact their tomboy identities as (failed) strategies of relatability.

4.2.2 *Tomboyism as a mitigated identity of the present*

Camille, although she is part of the original cast, never becomes a core member of the show's in-group, and leaves after three tumultuous seasons. Camille is in fact the main outcast in season 1. Furthermore, whilst she enjoyed wealth and was married at the time, she was often portrayed as promiscuous and unfeminine for her tomboyish behaviour – enjoying the company of men and playing sports. The way she then enacts her tomboy identity is as a part of her current identity, but not one that she wants to claim in full. She offers one mention of her being a sporty tomboy in the third episode of the first season (ex. 1), but she never mentions it again – unlike Erika and Crystal who, as will be discussed below, employ their tomboy identities in multiple instances. This utterance comes at a time on the show where there are fewer established group dynamics, or clear ways to appeal to the audience, outside of the genre's clear focus on wealth and appearances. Within the first few episodes of the first season, the women are making judgments about the other cast members, thus (in)validating their in-group status as part of this community of practice – one that is defined by wealth, class, and relationships to other girls, women and, in some cases, feminine gay men. The women then try all kinds of strategies to mitigate their insecurity about their place on the show and in the group, and to see which appeals to the other women and the show's viewers. As such, most women in the cast, including Camille, tend to mainly uphold their femininity in order to maintain their membership in the show, thereby upholding hyper-femininity.

4.2.3 *Tomboyism as a celebrated identity of the present*

Crystal and Erika, who are the only ones to employ their tomboy identification more than once, also both enact their tomboy identities as part of their present identities, but instead of it being mitigated, they celebrate their tomboyishness. Even though Crystal only stays on for three seasons, she repeatedly mentions her tomboy identity throughout those seasons (ex. 5, 6, 9, 10) and participates in stereotypically masculine activities (fig. 14, 15) and feminine activities whilst downplaying her hyper-femininity (fig. 16). She describes her identity as always having been a tomboy, that she still wants to be one (ex. 5), and that she is proud of her identity, calling other non-competitive people "losers" (ex. 9). Erika, who is the only one out of the tomboys who is still on the show and now a member of the in-group, also repeatedly and proudly employs her tomboy identity (ex. 2, 3, 4; fig. 11, 12, 14), going out of her way providing proof of her fishing ways (fig. 11, 12). However, Erika does stop enacting her tomboy identity after season 9, her fourth out of 9 seasons and counting on the show. Even the celebrated identity of the present does not seem to be deemed useful within the show's setting after the initial seasons of being a new cast member having to find their way within the show and with the audience.

5 Discussion

We found that the women's tomboy identification appears based on sporadic masculine behaviour in both the past and the present, appearances (primarily in childhood), and short statements that do not go in-depth regarding their self-identification. These utterances instead reflect what Hecht et al. (2001) describe in Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as limited to the personal and enacted layers. Therefore, tomboy, in this context, is almost always self-identified, but it appears rather superficial, temporal-spatial context-specific, or merely a temporal identification of the past, and performative if still claimed in the present, either in a mitigated or celebrated sense; it was typically mentioned within the context of confessionals, in front of the audience only, rather than in front of other women (as relational or communal identities). It is unclear whether it encompasses their self-concept or if it is deliberately enacted and relational concerning the other *RHOBH* cast members to solidify their fan base and their place on the show by appearing more relatable and down-to-earth (e.g. activity or class-wise growing up). Their identity is mainly expressed relationally to the audience in these women's first seasons on the show when we first get to know them (Camille, Crystal, Diana) or when they are reinventing themselves (Erika) and appear commodified for screen time.

Using MCDA, we examined how identity performances on RHOBH were structured by canons of use (Ledin and Machin, 2019) or the genre-specific, culturally embedded conventions that shape the interpretation of visual and linguistic signs, in this case, reality television. Confessionals, for example, adhere to a canon of personal revelation, where cast members reflect directly to the camera when calling themselves tomboys. However, this "intimacy" is visually complicated by stylised displays of hyper-femininity such as high glamour, makeup, and jewelry, which contrast the masculine-coded tomboy identity being verbally claimed. These aesthetic choices produce a modal juxtaposition, whereby identity is layered, contradictory, and selectively presented depending on context and audience.

The confessional setting also activates what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) define as the eyeline vector, or a visual cue wherein cast members address the viewer directly. This gaze constructs a semiotic relationship that positions the audience as confidant or witness to the speaker's identity claim. Crucially, this bypasses the relational and communal dimensions of CTI (Hecht et al., 2001), suggesting that tomboy identity is projected outward rather than negotiated interpersonally. Thus, tomboyism becomes a carefully curated identity performance targeted at the audience, functioning more to foster relatability or authenticity towards the audience.

This performative alignment is further supported by instances of instantiation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), wherein cast members use visual and verbal cues, such as childhood photographs, sports footage, or outdoor activities, to instantiate a tomboy identity within recognisable social scripts. These curated representations function as "proof" of toughness or authenticity, reinforcing the legitimacy of their identity claims. For example, childhood images showing short haircuts or boyish clothing are mobilised not just as personal memories but as semiotic resources that compensate for the hyper-feminine performances the women enact. The show's editing further legitimises these identity claims through strategic visual framing, continuity, and intertextual reinforcement, allowing tomboyism to function as a socially legible and commercially viable identity.

We argue that the co-production of tomboy identity within RHOBH operates through four distinct temporal-spatial settings, each shaped by genre-specific canons of use and production practices. First, tomboy identity is frequently performed in confessional interviews, where cast members, despite being dressed in high-glamour fashion, reveal their masculine-coded traits directly to viewers. Second, tomboy references occur during stereotypically feminine activities, such as glam sessions or spa visits, where cast members verbally reject or minimise their femininity to heighten relatability. The third and fourth settings,

often overlapping with confessionals, include archival footage of the women engaging in masculine-coded behaviours (e.g., camping, fishing, boxing) and retrospective childhood imagery, which may be staged or selected to align with tomboy claims. These instances serve as instantiations of socially recognisable gender scripts, reinforced by visual editing and framed within RHOBH's neoliberal, consumerist aesthetic.

Furthermore, the women can freely identify with this form of female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998) without suffering negative consequences and stigmatisation that are commonly related to transgressions of traditional gender roles because they also actively appear hyper-feminine and perform hyper-femininity and its associated canons of use (Ledin & Machin, 2019). Both in their confessional looks, which are part of the 'traditions' of the format of the show, their participation in stereotypically feminine activities, and their further involvement on the show, which can be described as a competitive battlefield in which women have to often defend their femininity, as well as their career as a 'housewife,' vis-a-vis meanness, aggression, and cruelty towards other (out-group) women (Ringrose, 2006).

We therefore argue that the women seem to draw upon tomboyism to appear more relatable and critical – and perhaps more political (e.g. tomboy Crystal, the only Asian-American cast member and one of two cast members of colour at the time, calls out white cast member Sutton Stracke for saying that she 'does not see colour' (Mauch, 2021, n.p.)) – but that the ultimate goal is to keep their position in the show by commodifying a queer-adjacent identity position. Tomboy discourse also allowed the women to draw upon queerness as a protective identity (to critique hyper-femininity) whilst upholding cis- and hetero-normativities by not discussing their sexuality, which may end their contracts (Quinn, 2021), and by assuming their heterosexuality is understood based on the 'symbolic capital' of their hyper-feminine appearance (Holland & Harpin, 2015). Tomboy was therefore a protective identity (Craig & LaCroix 2011) which also granted them access to male spaces and activities, helping them reshape the meaning of 'housewife' as they continue to uphold consumerist ideals: "aspirational femininity" (Leonard 2020, 279).

6 Conclusion

The present study employed MCDA and CTI to examine the re-production of female masculinities in the form of tomboy self-identification within *RHOBH*. Using *RHOBH* transcripts, our MCDA focused on the employment of *tomboy* and the context in which this expression was uttered. We paid particular attention to the modal juxtapositions between the women's visual and situational contexts (e.g., their physical appearance, environment, activities, and storylines) and their choice of words. We also explored how the show's deliberate apolitical stance and lack of criticism of capitalism interact with the employment of such non-traditional feminine identities and their commodification for social and monetary capital.

These analyses also showed how the commodification of a non-traditional female identity, be it as an identification of the past or the present, mitigated or celebrated, allowed the women to maintain an apolitical stance. There was an overarching absence of discourse relating to gender identities, queerness, or criticism of capitalist and patriarchal structures, which is unsurprising due to the nature of the show and audience. Furthermore, we argue that tomboy discourse was drawn upon (particularly after 2016, in light of the hostile and reactionary US political climate), as a tool to quietly critique hyper-femininity and its associations with capitalism (Allan, 2009; Holland & Harpin, 2015) whilst, paradoxically, symbolically enacting them through their appearance, thus upholding hegemonic femininity. The tomboy identification, therefore, can be seen as a more covert way of criticising the consumerist and neoliberal nature of the show, but it is never made explicit. It also appears to be primarily self-serving, as these women are all relative outsiders and not (yet) part of the in-group during the quoted scenes, so they both need to stand out to the audience (as *tomboys*) and fit in with the other hyper-feminine cast members, which might prompt an

identity gap (Hecht & Lu, 2014) in which their personal and social identities were at odds, resulting in feeling misunderstood, misinterpretations, and ultimately conflict. We argue that these apolitical, invisible discourses are seemingly employed in a reactionary, yet opaque fashion, with the apparent purpose of appearing relatable and aware, particularly in light of the political climate in the US at the time of filming. However, these invisible discourses seem to be changing slightly, especially with the addition of cast members of colour, which may change the landscape of (a)political discourse on the show.

In sum, we found that this show continues to perpetuate hegemonic gender roles, as hierarchical structures are still prevalent despite its apparent portrayal of women as business owners who are no longer engaged in home labour. Its apolitical, consumerist, and neoliberal stance makes it so that attempts at critiquing these power structures is vague and obscure, as is the case with the use of *tomboy* which, as we argued in this article, was used as a linguistic tool to distance themselves from these power structures whilst simultaneously enacting them visually.

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