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Private jets and blingy sandals: An analysis of the figure of the "rich woman" in contemporary audiovisual culture

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to analyse the media representation of a figure at the heart of contemporary popular culture: the "rich woman". Taking a cultural studies approach, this article uses thematic analysis to study a sample of reality TV formats which have spotlighted this figure, including *Bling Empire*, *Soy Georgina*, *La marquesa*, *First Class*, *Selling Sunset*, *Sálvese quien pueda*, *Young, Famous and African* and *Dubai Bling*. The study identifies how this figure personifies tensions and ambiguities associated with the idea of inequality. Thus, these programmes encourage the audience to feel both aspiration and disdain for this figure, foregrounding social debates on legitimate and illegitimate ways of climbing the social ladder. The article also explores the connection between these representations and a classist, colonial mindset which maintains the stereotypes through which oppressions survive under the guise of critiquing inequalities.

KEYWORDS

Gender, celebrity, reality TV, class, cultural capital.

Introduction

In recent years, media representations of the "super-rich" have proliferated in everything from films and series like *Triangle of Sadness* (Ruben Östlund, 2022), *The White Lotus* (HBO, 2021-22) and *Succession* (HBO, 2018-23) to docu-reality[1] shows like *Bling Empire* (Netflix, 2019-). Indeed, Netflix is where we find a plethora of reality TV formats, overwhelmingly featuring women, that showcase the lives of privileged individuals. These formats tend to mix people whose wealth comes from different sources and who come from different social backgrounds, creating an array of gender and class identities which encourages viewers to identify with them while simultaneously disdaining them.

The goal of this article is to analyse media representations of the figure of the "rich woman" on contemporary reality TV shows in order to ascertain how this figure is connected to gender and class stereotypes, in what positions these programmes ask viewers to situate themselves and how these representations are related to contemporary anti-elite discourses, given that these figures are blatant proof that we are living in a profoundly unequal society.

Theoretical framework

The media offer representations and discourses in which certain identities are constructed as "normal" and others as "deviant". We draw from these repertoires to construct our own identity (Lawler, 2008: 2-8) and that of others through classification and naming processes (Tyler, 2015). Gender and class are crucial in these processes.

Even though the idea of class seems to have lost its centrality as a concept that explains social relations in recent years because of individualisation and reflexivity processes (Giddens, 1995), authors like Imogen Tyler (2008, 2013), Beverly Skeggs (2004; Skeggs & Wood, 2012) and Stephanie Lawler (2004, 2005, 2008) have upheld the importance of this concept in understanding how inequalities are articulated and maintained. The notion of capital (Bourdieu, 2012) is crucial within this context to understand how these identities are constructed and how the idea of value is unequally distributed. Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes between four kinds of capital: economic capital (wealth); cultural capital, which includes academic degrees, cultural assets, knowledge and tastes (1997: 47); social capital, that is, "possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (1997: 51); and symbolic capital, meaning prestige, authority and having a "a known, recognized name" (1993: 75). Thus, different social positions are associated with different capital configurations, and

1. Docu-reality series are reality TV formats organised into series that blend elements of documentaries and fiction. The events are partly scripted, and the actions staged are often rigged by the programme (Oliva, 2013).

notions of legitimacy and status are built around cultural capital. For example, the figure of the "nouveau riche", which is at the core of this article, is characterised by the accumulation of economic capital without the cultural and symbolic capital expected of that position. As a result, these figures are often viewed as laughable and ridiculous.

Media figures personify certain gender and class identities which are assigned a value (Tyler & Bennett, 2010) and become "social types" that represent "typical ways of being, feeling and thinking" (Dyer, 2001). That is, they are discursive constructions that end up working as stereotypes and "diagnostic figures" that enable us to understand our own era. These labels and figurations also tend to be projected onto certain social groups (Ege & Springer, 2023a) and thus act as a form of classification and symbolic violence.

During the recession which came in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, two figures who personified the era's tensions appeared in the popular imaginary: the "chavette" (known in Spanish as the *choni*), a stereotype representing working-class women; and the "rich woman" (*The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* [Bravo, 2010-], *Mujeres ricas* [LaSexta, 2011] or Carmen Lomana as a celebrity). But the "chavette" soon became the figure that turned into the centre of the popular imaginary.

It is no coincidence that the "chavette" came to the fore during the time of economic crisis, austerity policies and cutbacks in the welfare state. It is a figure that fits the neoliberal ideology, in which inequalities can be explained in individual terms through a discourse that blames citizens for their social status and ignores the structural causes of inequality. As Negra and Tasker state, "popular culture helps to mobilize emotion and to allocate blame, frequently redirecting resentment and anger at structural problems away from elites and toward class peer groups" (2014). Thus, the "chavette" became a figure that helped to build a consensus against the welfare state, which was "reimagined as fostering toxic forms of 'welfare dependency' amongst citizens, itself considered to have a stagnating effect on economic growth and national prosperity" (Jensen & Tyler, 2015: 472) and helped to identify poverty and inequality as the outcome of "about 'bad' cultural choices ('lifestyle'), worklessness and social reproduction" (Jensen, 2012).

Thus, this stereotype depicted working-class women as vulgar, tasteless and uneducated figures marked by an aesthetic associated with excess and artificiality (hair extensions; tight-fitting, tacky clothing; too much makeup and jewellery; and a sexualised appearance), who are characterised by eating and drinking in excess, by lacking self-discipline and self-control, and by being bad mothers (Lawler, 2004, 2005; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008, 2013; Oliva, 2014). All these arguments have to do with simultaneous perceptions of excess and yet lacks (Skeggs, 2004: 99-105) and an "inability to perform femininity correctly" (Tyler & Bennett, 2010: 381).

Skeggs, Lawler and Tyler claim that using taste, knowledge and behaviour to disdain a group is a way of concealing the real argument against them: class. In contrast to this figure, middle-class identity is construed as "normal", "universal" and "invisible". Disgust plays a key role here as a

way of maintaining distances. Through expressions of disgust, social distinctions are personalised and naturalised and a shared identity is created: a consensus is generated that maintains the social order and invokes public recognition, given that we are not alone in feeling disgust (Lawler, 2005).

However, in recent years the figure of the "chavette" has lost its centrality, partly because it has been reappropriated and defended in different spheres. Instead, the figure of the "rich woman" is currently front and centre, reemerging after the above-cited examples from the early 2010s. This figure can be associated with the emergence of anti-elite discourses which harness discomfort with inequalities. As Ege and Springer (2023b: 8) state, contemporary anti-elitism is a complex discourse that connects with opposing political ideas in a contradictory fashion: from movements agitating against the "one percent" and "caste" during the recession (from Occupy Wall Street to 15M and the emergence of Podemos in Spain) to alt-right[2] discourses, in which the elite are personified by the middle classes with university degrees and progressive ideologies. In recent years, different representations have focused on what are called the "super-rich".

If we look at media research, media representations of the super-rich are often contradictory and ambivalent, poised between celebration and disdain (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2017). The "nouveau riche" with working-class roots are most often the target of this type of scornful discourse. In fact, this figure connects with the "celebrity chavette", that is, figures like Kerry Katona (Tyler & Bennett, 2010) and Belén Esteban in Spain (Oliva, 2014), who may have reached a position of economic privilege and media visibility but are nonetheless depicted as embodying the stereotype of the working-class woman, highlighting the misalignment between their economic and cultural capital. The middle class's taste is reaffirmed through these figures, who also serve as the targets of the disgruntlement caused by an unequal, unfair society. Another articulation of this figure is found in what Lee and Moscowitz (2013) call "the rich bitch", referring to the main characters in the docuseries franchise *The Real Housewives*. The stars of these reality TV programmes are represented as women who are "undeserving" of their fortune, stressing the idea that what they do has nothing to do with legitimate notions of "work". They are represented as bad or absent mothers who leave their children's upbringing in hands of domestic servants, as women with poor taste who adore ostentation and transgress gender roles by showing "emotional excess" and engaging in vicious fights and arguments, thus failing to fulfil class expectations. Once again, cultural capital is at the core of this type of representation.

Finally, other authors have identified how these class discourses are joined with colonial discourses. For example, Smith Maguire (2019) shows how there has been a proliferation of news items in the press focused on the "nouveau riche" in non-Western countries, especially China and Russia, which show a concern with a "new world order" in which Western countries and

2. The term *alt-right* refers to the "alternative" right wing, which draws from libertarian, conservative ideas combined with an anti-establishment discourse. Donald Trump is a good example of the alt-right.

their middle classes may lose their primacy. Thus, these news stories once again focus on their lack of cultural capital and stress their vulgarity, poor taste, predilection for ostentation, greed and lack of scruples. These stories connect cultural capital, the middle class, the West and civilisation, maintaining and reinforcing existing inequalities and oppressions.

Methodology

The goal of this article is to analyse media representations of the figure of the "rich woman" in contemporary reality TV shows. Our research questions are: What are the characteristics of this figure, and how are they associated with gender and class stereotypes? From the standpoint of which social class is the discourse constructed in these programmes? How do these representations relate to contemporary anti-elite discourses?

This research is situated within the context of cultural studies, a discipline which is interested in the role of culture in social "production" and "reproduction" (Fiske 1992, 284-85), and particularly in maintaining or questioning social relations of domination and subordination. Within this context, culture is understood as "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, [or] a group", including significant practices (Williams, 2010). That is, cultural studies are interested in the generation and circulation of meanings in industrial and post-industrial societies and the relationships between these meanings (harnessed via representations and stories) and the social structure. Thus, cultural studies believe that the existing social conflicts and tensions arise not only around material and economic issues (distribution of wealth) but also around cultural matters. Thus, media representations are one of the core arenas where this battle over social control is played out.

To perform this analysis, a sample of eight docu-realities broadcast on the streaming platform Netflix between 2019 and 2024 were chosen: *Selling Sunset* (2019-), *Bling Empire* (2021-), *Young, Famous and African* (2022-), *Dubai Bling* (2022), *Soy Georgina* (2022-), *La marquesa* (2022), *First Class* (2022) and *Sálvese quien pueda* (2023).

This sample was studied through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Gibbs, 2007), a qualitative method that enables us to identify and organise patterns of meaning. To code the sample, we performed an inductive-deductive analysis. In the first phase, we analysed the sample to identify recurring topics. These codes were compared with the key concepts from the literature review, and the main topics were established. We subsequently identified subtopics for each of the categories in successive rounds of analysis. Finally, the topics and subtopics were grouped into four clusters of meaning, based on which we present the results of the analysis (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 **Topics identified**

Clusters	Topics	Subtopics
Luxury	Display of what economic capital enables one to accumulate: mansions, private jets, luxury cars and yachts, clothing	Excess and ostentation
		Desire and aspiration
		Cultural capital and lack of taste
		Global elite
Deserving the privileged position or not	Forms of socioeconomic ascent	Work and hustle culture Competition
		Marriage
		Old money / new money
	Practices	Production / consumption
Social relations	Friendships	Conflict and competition
		Moral judgement
		Emotional excess
	Motherhood	Absent mothers
		Good mothers Mothers who fight for their children
Colonial gaze	Racialisation Elites from the Global South	Excess and ostentation
		Somewhat dishonest ways of earning money
		Lack of morality

SOURCE: Author.

Results

In this section, we will present the main results of our analysis, organised into four sections which correspond to the four clusters of meaning or macro-topics identified (see Table 1): the representation of luxury and cultural capital; the idea of deserving or not deserving privilege; social relations; and the colonial gaze.

Luxury, taste and ostentation

One of the main themes of the programmes analysed is the representation of luxury, primarily by showing spaces, vehicles and clothing. Regarding spaces, mansions are the central visual motif of these programmes: huge, lavishly decorated homes which are shown with sweeping camera shots that highlight their spaciousness, leading audiences to grasp that they cannot be captured with just a single shot. In this sense, as Thurlow and Jaworski (2012) state in their study of the semiotics of luxury, plentiful space is one of the markers of wealth.

Spaces are clearly front and centre in *Selling Sunset*, a docuseries featuring the real-estate agents from the Oppenheim Group, which specialises in luxury homes in Los Angeles. One scene that is repeated in each episode and serves as a backbone for the series is a tour of each home for sale, which the main characters show to buyers and other real-estate agents. They are multi-storey homes with large living rooms, windows with panoramic views of the city, swimming pools, gyms, private screening rooms and terraces. These images always come with figures showing the home's square footage, the sale price and the real-estate agent's commission. Thus, the series encourages viewers to situate themselves in the buyer's position, creating a desire to aspire to these unaffordable homes.

Private transport also plays a core role in these series: luxury cars, yachts and private jets are presented as class markers, especially in the initial sequences of the series when the characters are being introduced (*Soy Georgina*, *Selling Sunset*, *Young, Famous and African* and *Dubai Bling*). Following the same device identified above, a camera movement shows us the vehicle and connects it with the main character. The stress on transport is used to represent the main characters in these series as members of a global elite that travels from one country to another.

Finally, clothing is another element that serves as a marker of class and luxury. Sequences are often introduced with a sweeping view that scans the main characters from head to toe to show their body and clothing, following the same visual treatment applied to mansions, cars and private jets. Thus, they are presented as a visual spectacle, stressing the traditional association between femininity and "to-be-looked-at-ness", common to visual culture (Mulvey, 1975). At the same time, the main characters embody a hyper-femininity characteristic of the post-feminist sensibility, in which attractiveness and youth are the markers of privilege and power (Gill, 2007, 2017). The importance of clothing is not only found in the sequences where the plot is developed but also particularly in the "confessionals", where the characters speak directly to the camera about their experiences and verbalise their thoughts and feelings. Even though this is a device associated with the ideas of honesty and authenticity (Balló & Oliva, 2024), in these sequences we see a high degree of performativity underscored by the fact that the interviewees are often wearing exaggerated, theatrical attire: ballgowns with plunging necklines, spectacular hairdos, obvious makeup and jewellery.

The representation of luxury in the programmes analysed is profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, through high-contrast, saturated photography, camera shots and upbeat music, these markers of luxury are presented as worthy of admiration and aspiration. Thus, the audience is

encouraged to put themselves in the position of "desiring privilege". Yet at the same time, if we look at the markers of cultural capital and the aesthetic shown (the diamonds, the sexualisation of the clothing, the artificiality of the hairdos and wigs), they challenge the middle class's criteria of good taste and do not fit the ideal of naturalness that is a part of its *habitus*. This emphasis on ostentation and excess pinpoints the main characters as "nouveau riche" (that is, figures whose cultural and economic capital are misaligned) and places the spectator in a position that facilities distance and disdain.

Deserving or not deserving privilege

One of the key aspects of the programmes in the sample is how the articulation of the main characters' different kinds of capital is represented, that is, what type of capital they have and whether they are shown as "deserving" or "undeserving" of their privilege. As seen in the previous section, the main characters are represented as figures who accumulate economic capital, as well as social capital and visibility, thus highlighting the fact that we live in an unequal society. However, do these programmes legitimise or question this inequality?

One fundamental aspect of the programmes is the balance (or imbalance) between the representation of work and leisure, where the main characters display their economic capital (holidays, restaurants and especially parties and celebrations). However, we find significant differences among programmes. On the one hand, the stars of *Selling Sunset*, real-estate agents for luxury homes, are depicted explicitly connected to the notion of *work*. The programme highlights the fact that they earn salaries and work on commission, and in their discourses they present themselves as personifications of "hustle culture", that is, the culture of tireless work and ambition. Thus, they are represented as entrepreneurs who not only sell homes but also develop their own businesses, thus embodying and naturalising the "desire for privilege". Therefore, they are figures to aspire to, yet also figures that aspire to ascend economically. On the other hand, in other shows (*Young, Famous and African*, *Soy Georgina* and *First Class*), the main characters work in the creative industries (singers, actresses, influencers, stylists, designers, artists), so the discourse about work is more complex. However, they are primarily shown involved in free time activities and consumerism, not working.

Alongside the people represented as connected to the idea of work in the public sphere, in programmes like *Bling Empire*, *Dubai Bling* and *Young, Famous and African* the origin of some of the main characters' fortune is explicitly associated with marriage, a type of story that is quite clearly gendered and lies outside legitimised discourses of meritocratic social ascent. In this case, the programme's discourse dissociates the characters from the realm of work and openly associates them with consumption, thus delegitimising their worthiness of possessing their financial assets. In fact, in many of these programmes, people with different social backgrounds are brought together so the story creates a conflict between "self-made" women and those who reached a position of privilege through marriage.

A good example of the complexity of the articulation of these discourses is *Soy Georgina*, a documentary series featuring Georgina Rodríguez, a model and the partner of the footballer Cristiano Ronaldo. In the first few minutes of the series, Georgina presents herself as follows:

> Thanks to love, my life is a dream now. I've gone from selling luxury to showing it off on red carpets. I have millions of followers [on Instagram], and I'm the wife of the man with the most followers in the world [...] I know what it is to have nothing, and I know what it is to have it all.

As we hear these words being spoken in voiceover, we see images of Georgina on a yacht, stepping out of a private jet, on different red carpets wearing luxury gowns and defiantly looking at the camera, shot from below. Thus, we can see how different discourses associated with the idea of climbing the socioeconomic ladder are staged: first she tells a rags-to-riches story, which is common in celebrity culture (Gamson, 1994), and secondly, her marriage is identified as the way she was able to climb socially (Lawler, 1999), but her work as an influencer is also foregrounded, presented here as a way of defending the fact that she deserves the space of privilege where she currently dwells.

Throughout the series, we see Georgina repeating and recounting her humble background and performing the figure of the celebrity "who never forgets where she comes from" (Littler 2003) through her verbal story, and more importantly through visual contrasts: Georgina eating sausage on her private plane or walking through Jaca, her home town, and entering a butcher shop. She is also presented as a good mother, in contrast to the figure of the absent mother common in this type of series (Lee & Moscowitz, 2013). Therefore, *Soy Georgina* is situated in an ambiguous space: on the one hand, there is an attempt to legitimise the figure of the main character (Georgina is the executive producer of the series), yet the comical tone of the confessionals and the excessive performativity of the way she is represented simultaneously delegitimise her. Thus, Georgina is situated in a liminal space, somewhere between the "celebrity chavette" and the deserving celebrity.

A comic tone is common in these programmes, in some cases ridiculing the main characters and spotlighting their lack of cultural capital, in other cases mocking their inability to realise their own privilege. The articulation of an anti-elitist sentiment which seeks to ridicule these figures who personify extreme privilege is clearer in the latter. This connects with the idea of *Schadenfreude*, that is, happiness at another person's misfortune, a core feeling in contemporary fame culture which harnesses a sense of grievance and anxiousness about inequality but does so via personal attacks (often targeted at women) instead of questioning the structural causes behind this inequality (Cross & Littler, 2010; Oliva & Pérez-Latorre, 2019).

Another of these delegitimisation mechanisms is contrast, whereby wealthy people are put in situations where they do not fit. For example, in one episode of *First Class*, we see the main characters in fancy clothing walking amidst farm animals as they visit the estate that one of them owns. Another example is the representation of the main figures in *Sálvese quien pueda*

looking for work in Miami. This format falls much more clearly within the sphere of *Schadenfreude*. In this reality TV programme, the former hosts of *Sálvame*, a Telecinco programme often held up as a paradigmatic example of trash TV, went to Miami to "look for work" after the programme was cancelled. Thus, the main characters are put in embarrassing situations that serve as a kind of humiliation for having accumulated economic capital which they apparently do not "deserve".

La marquesa, in turn, which features the daughter of Isabel Preysler and the Marquise of Griñón, is different from the other formats analysed. Because she is a member of Spain's aristocracy, Tamara Falcó personifies old money; she is therefore anything but "nouveau riche" because she also has both cultural and symbolic capital. However, she is represented in a slightly ironic tone in the programme by underscoring her accent, which is clearly upper-class, and her lack of knowledge about basic everyday life, with a point of view that situates her as pretentious and not "having her feet on the ground". However, the plot of the docuseries also follows her as she works on a project to open a pop-up restaurant in her mansion in order to put her cooking knowledge into practice, after she studied in France and participated in *Masterchef Celebrity* (TVE1, 2016-). This, then, is a story that legitimises her position of privilege by connecting her with the sphere of work and entrepreneurship, which is positively viewed from the middle-class vantage point.

The debate over deserving or not deserving privilege leads us fully into the realm of discourses that negotiate the existence and maintenance of inequalities. The discourse of the meritocracy (Littler, 2013) has traditionally been used to legitimise inequality: by upholding equal opportunities and unequal results according to talent and effort, this discourse has presented inequality as fair. Thus, figures who have accumulated several different types of capital without apparently "deserving it" cast doubt on this discourse and consequently sow unease and are symbolically attacked for it. However, here we have to ask how we define work, effort and talent, and what identities and social groups have access to these different configurations of capital.

Social relations and emotional excess

In addition to showing the main characters' material goods, the programmes also show a (stylised and controlled) representation of their private lives. In many cases (*Bling Empire*, *Dubai Bling*, *Selling Sunset*, *First Class* and *Young, Famous and African*), the chapters relate different encounters among the main characters, many of them characterised by conflict. Following the model set by *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and the other series in that franchise (Lee & Moscowitz, 2013), we see how the figure of the "rich bitch" is also crucial in these new formats that are part of the sample. In fact, one of these programmes' favourite narrative devices is bringing together people who did not previously know each other, often with different kinds of capital (as we saw in the previous section), invariably leading to open conflict. The narrative structure is based on the use of the omniscient viewpoint common in soap operas, in which first a conflict is recounted (usually an argument or malicious comment) and then dialogue is used

to show how this conflict has impacted the main characters and is morally assessed by their companions in sequences in which the same event is retold several times.

The main social relations represented in these formats are friendships, more than family members or lovers, which is an interesting feature because it has the potential to show structures of sisterhood. However, these relationships end up being framed within dynamics of competition more than cooperation or sisterhood, connecting and furthering the gender stereotypes of contemporary heteropatriarchal society. The participants are often shown arguing fiercely, displaying an "emotional excess" which contrasts with their privileged position and what would be expected of the *habitus* of the class to which they belong. Thus, the programmes situate these figures in a contradictory space that is far from the notion of "civility" and politeness (with the sole exception of *La marquesa* and *Soy Georgina*), creating a distance with the viewer, who can then take the position of "I'm not like that".

The colonial gaze

Finally, the fourth theme that stands out in the sample analysed is the colonial gaze, in which the gender and class representations we find in the programmes intersect with race. The programmes where this happens the most are *Bling Empire*, *Dubai Bling* and *Young, Famous and African*, whose main characters are racialised people.

Bling Empire stars Asian-Americans, bringing together people from different geographic regions (China, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia) without bearing cultural or linguistic differences in mind. *Dubai Bling* and *Young, Famous and African* are two reality TV programmes set in Dubai and South Africa, respectively, which also bring together participants from different geographic regions. The beginning of *Young, Famous and African* is revealing. The first chapter begins with a party organised by the South African actress and model Khanyi Mbau to introduce the main characters in the series and put them in touch with each other. The participants come from different African countries (Ghana, Tanzania and Nigeria). Looking at the camera, the main character claims that in the party (held in a sumptuous building) "we're celebrating the continent [Africa] because it is our time and we want the world to know that we're also a First World, even though they call us the Third World". It is interesting to see how the programme's gaze is constructed; even though it is produced in South Africa, it is clearly addressed at a Global North gaze to challenge the stereotypical ways the African continent is usually represented by a display of the characters' economic capital. Yet at the same time, the programme's depiction of its main characters is also associated with several negative stereotypes, not only through a mise-en-scène that clearly connects with the idea of excess, outside normative aesthetics and taste, but also by portraying the source of the main character's money outside the realm of work (by presenting her as a "gold digger") and associating her with unscrupulous figures ("I may be a girl who likes gangsters").

Therefore, these programmes reveal a concern with establishing a "new global order" in which the Western countries may lose their predominance, as Smith Maguire (2019) had identified,

demonstrating the illegitimacy of the main characters by representing them as ostentatious, excessive and vulgar.

Conclusions

If we go back to our analysis questions regarding the gender and class characteristics of the representations of the "rich women" in the programmes analysed, we can see how the emphasis is usually on showing economic capital via luxury markers associated with the idea of excess and ostentation. In this sense, we should bear in mind that excess is constructed in opposition to an identity defined as "normal" or "unmarked", and therefore invisible. This emphasis on excess and ostentation thus shows us in which class-based vantage point these programmes situate us as viewers: the middle-class, an identity that has become invisible and universal (Lawler, 2004).

The middle class, as "the dominated part of the dominant class", is situated in an ambiguous position in relation to the axes of oppression, and the representations in the programmes analysed reflect this ambiguity: on the one hand, they appeal to an idea of aspiration and social mobility, but on the other hand they invite viewers to distance themselves from and disdain the main characters because either they are shown to be lacking sufficient cultural capital or they did not achieve their position through legitimised forms of work and talent.

Thus, the proliferation of this type of programmes may connect with a kind of irritation at viewing the profound social inequalities that characterise contemporary societies in the years since the age of austerity. Yet at the same time, it is a type of representation that is profoundly classed and gendered. What makes the characters laughable is the fact that they are constructed as stereotypically feminine (geared at the private sphere and consumption, hyperfeminine figures that work really hard on their looks, emotions represented as unrestrained) and the fact that they are presented as people who "do not deserve" their status, as they are often associated with the stereotype of the "nouveau riche". In fact, excess connects the representations of the "chavettes" in the recession years with those of rich women today, as they are both constructed as the "constitutive outside to middle-class existence" (Lawler, 2005: 431).

Therefore, we should ask to what extent this critique of the upper classes is based on an egalitarian spirit or whether they are representations that actually do not question the idea of inequality since they determine who "deserves" to be privileged on the basis of traditional definitions of cultural capital, merit and work.

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