Programming Class Ideology in Tween Sitcoms: An Analysis of Disney Channel and Nickelodeon

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Abstract

This thesis uses the lens of class to analyze tween sitcoms from Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. In recent decades, Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel have recently produced some of the most popular live action sitcoms for young people. In fact, these programs have helped define and popularize the concept of 'tween' in modern popular culture. In these sitcoms, the protagonists are tweens or teens who seem to have very comfortable lives in very comfortable homes. However, little research has looked at the concept of materialism or class ideology implicit throughout these networks that specifically target tween consumers. Recent studies have been written about how young people have become increasingly immersed in a culture of consumption and obsessed with the idealization of fame. At the same time, young people are instilled with an entrepreneurial spirit that is implicit from the American Dream. While culprits like advertising and reality television are often cited as ideological agents to idolize fame and conspicuous consumption, an examination of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel sitcoms also reveals an ideology of materialism and socioeconomic hegemony can be found throughout their programming.

Through an analysis of six Disney and Nickelodeon programs, the representations and ideology of class are analyzed to reveal a clear socioeconomic hegemony present on these networks. By looking at these series as case studies that serves as representative signature series across multiple eras of tween television, I argue that argue that the tween sitcom has always been inextricably linked to class fantasy. While I argue that class ideology is inherent throughout tween sitcom programming, and part of the brand identity of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, there is a surprising lack of scholarship that examines social class within this genre, so this thesis calls attention to the need to examine class further within the tween sitcom genre.

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Acknowledgment

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Author's Declaration

This thesis represents the original work of Robert Gabriel, unless otherwise stated in the text. The research upon which it is based was carried out in the Film, Theatre, and Television Studies Department at the University of Glasgow under the supervision of Dr. Amy Holdsworth and Dr. Lisa Kelly during the period of October 2017 and November 2021.

1. Introduction

In my thesis, I use the lens of class to analyze tween sitcoms from Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, sitcoms that are also known as tweencoms, a term that Patrice Oppliger (2019) uses for the live-action sitcoms on these two networks. By looking at multiple series as case studies across multiple eras of television, I argue that these tweencoms privilege middle-class representation and upper-class aspirations and that class, therefore, becomes a signifying presence within these sitcoms. Class privilege, consumption, and self-empowerment are embedded throughout this genre, often constructing tweencom protagonists as neoliberal subjects. In several case studies, I have adopted, adapted, or invented a few key terms to explore class dimensions and class ideology. The phrase class fantasy is used as a general term to describe how tweencoms are often themed around class aspirations and/or place characters in upper-class environments. I use the phrase 'class blindness' to explain how economic realities are unmentioned or ignored throughout series that choose to engage in such class fantasy. I use the term 'class-floating' to describe how some series revolve around the concept where characters live either vicariously or temporarily in wealthy settings and/or with wealthy friends, allowing them the privilege to practice class blindness. Finally, I use the term 'class-crossing' to describe class floating as a more permanent or fixed state by showing how a character can inhabit and/or move between two classes, living in a world of joint custody of different classes. Since class-crossing acknowledges class difference, though, I find it to be a rare concept within tweencoms that I find only in my final case study as I look at how more recent tweencoms have attempted to acknowledge and address class realities. The terms that I have just coined and defined highlight some of the key themes of the tweencom genre, as I believe class needs to be more thoroughly examined in tween television.

By examining numerous tween sitcoms from Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, one trope is particularly noteworthy: many series with young protagonists are set in workplaces or portray young characters embarking on a professional career path. Even though these series include main characters who are either teens or pre-teens, a number of these shows let young characters roleplay as adults. For example, in *Game Shakers* (Nickelodeon, 2015-19), middle schoolers turn a class assignment into a multimillion-dollar gaming company. In *True Jackson, VP* (Nickelodeon, 2008-11), the teen protagonist becomes a VP of a major fashion company named Mad Style and subsequently hires her best friend, Lulu, as her assistant. Their other friend Ryan enjoys hanging out with them around the office until he eventually lands a

job as the company's website editor. In the episode "True's New Assistant" (S1E18), True hires her science teacher as her temporary assistant, offering a role reversal that privileges 'kid empowerment.' In *Austin & Ally* (Disney, 2011-16), the titular duo seeks to become musicians, employing friends as their managers. Along with these workplace fantasies, other recurring themes throughout tween sitcoms necessitate an examination of class ideology on these two networks. Tween sitcoms overwhelmingly portray characters with comfortable upper or middle-class homes and consumption habits, idealize upper-class lifestyles, and portray the entrance into the upper class through celebrity or business savvy as easy and accessible. As I explore these topics in my case studies in the subsequent chapters, I argue that tween sitcoms are inextricably linked to class fantasy.

After conducting a search on Amazon of books published since 2010, I note that many titles address young people as economic actors – as potential entrepreneurs or investors. There is even an entire book category for Children's Money. Best-selling reference titles in this category include *Investing for Kids: How to Save, Invest and Grow Money* (Redling & Tom 2020) and *How to Turn $100 into $1,000,000: Earn!, Save!, Invest!* (McKenna, Glista, & Fontaine 2016). Another how-to-guide *Kid Start-up: How YOU Can Become an Entrepreneur* (Cuban, Patel, and McCue 2018) is co-authored by Mark Cuban, the billionaire entrepreneur and television personality who is well known as one of the principal 'shark' investors on *Shark Tank* (ABC, 2009-). Teens can also read *Notes to a Young Entrepreneur: Everything a High School Student Needs to Know about Turning an Idea into a Successful Business* (Nealon 2018). Along with these reference books, young readers can find chapter books about adolescent entrepreneurship on the fiction shelves. For example, author Luke Sharpe has written twelve books in a series titled *Billy Sure, Kid Entrepreneur* (2015-2017) about a young CEO and inventor.[1] The ideology from this literature mirrors what I find in tweencoms as I

[1] Other fictional book series in this genre include *CEO Girls Club* (2020-2021) from Kristina Renee and *The Startup Squad* (2019-21) from Brian Weisfeld and Nicole Kear. Even picture books for the youngest readers (books that are less than 40 pages and designed for readers aged 4-8) include *Jasmine Launches a Startup* (Karroum 2018), *JT's Big Plan: An Entrepreneur Kid* (Prather, 2020), *Kane's Big Picture: An Early Intro to Entrepreneurship for Kids* (Fernandez Jr. 2019), *A Boy, A Budget, and a Dream* (Paul 2020), and *Sunny and the Seven Streams of Income* (Pope 2020). Another niche of these 'kidtrepreneur' books includes books written as autobiographies or testimonials by young people themselves. Jack Rosenthal has authored *Teen Entrepreneurship* (2021), *Teen Investing* (2019), and *Teen Investing 101* (2021). On the jacket of his books, Rosenthal is described as an eighteen-year-old college student who has been an entrepreneur for the past ten years. Seventeen-year-old Moziah Bridges recounts his story about starting a home business making bowties in *Mo's Bows: A Young Person's Guide to Start-Up* Success (2019), while fifteen-year-old lemonade entrepreneur Mikaila Ulmer has authored *Bee Fearless: Dream Like a Kid* (2020).

recognize the extent to which young people today have become increasingly addressed as economically productive subjects. The fact that young people can become investors, bosses, small-business owners, and entrepreneurs affirms how young people are now 'empowered' as neoliberal actors. This theme builds upon previous academic studies around children's role as consumers, which I will review further in Chapter 2. In academic studies of Nickelodeon in the 1990s (Hendershot 2004, Banet-Weiser 2007), the economic role of young people as consumers was understood as the source of their agency and 'empowerment.' In my thesis, I contend that tweencoms from Disney Channel and Nickelodeon helped model new neoliberal subjectivities, in which young protagonists were represented not just as consumers but increasingly as economic, entrepreneurial agents who self-branded and self-fashioned themselves through their class-based aspirations.

Conducting a study of the programming history of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, I use Heather Hendershot's *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids* (2004) and Sarah Banet Weiser's *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (2007) as foundational texts of tween sitcoms. Banet-Weiser's examination of Nickelodeon's programming of the 1990s offers an account of the commercial ideology of Nickelodeon. Banet-Weiser argues that Nickelodeon "addresses its child audience as empowered citizens who are able to make decisions about politics, culture, and relevant social issues, by virtue of membership in the [Nickelodeon] brand identity" (pg. 71) and uses the term 'consumer citizenship' to refer to how Nickelodeon targets an adolescent audience through the discourses of agency. Consumer citizenship is defined by Banet-Weiser as a "willingness to participate in consumer culture through the purchase of goods as well as a more general affirmation of consumption habits" (pg. 72-3). Young people have agency precisely because they have spending money and purchasing power. "The rise of tween buying power," according to Oppliger (2019), "propagated a new genre of programming" from the competition between Disney Channel and Nickelodeon for this growing demographic (pg. viii).

Reviewing Banet-Weiser's claims around the 'consumer citizenship' messaging from Nickelodeon, Angela McRobbie (2008) intervenes with a harsh critique of consumer culture, particularly for young girls, in her essay "Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention." McRobbie writes, "This style of consumer culture mobilizes children to an ethic of gendered individualization which is competitive, self-seeking, and based on an ethic of instant gratification through access to the world of goods" (pg. 545). In my own analysis of

tweencoms, I reach a similar conclusion as I argue that middle-class representations, upper-class fantasies, and an inherent class ideology persist throughout the tweencom genre. By looking at tween programs from the 1990s to the 2010s on the two networks, I offer insights into what has – or hasn't – changed within tween television from the early assessments made by Hendershot and Banet-Weiser. I trace how tween sitcom characters through the 2000s became increasingly obsessed with achieving career success, either as entertainers or as business entrepreneurs, a contrast to the narratives of the 1990s when kids were portrayed and addressed as 'ordinary' kids. Building upon the concept of 'consumer citizenship,' I add the term '*producer citizenship*' to suggest how young characters in contemporary tween sitcoms are increasingly assessed as productive subjects, exemplified by the fact that many possess career aspirations that already define their identities - from True Jackson's aspiration of being a fashion designer to Austin and Ally's goals of being musicians. Examining these series, Doyle Greene (2012) concludes that these narratives ultimately foster "ideological positions concerning individualism, self-determination, and social mobility," a subjective positioning that needs to be contextualized in an era of neoliberalism (pg. 10).

1.1 A (Very) Brief History of Neoliberalism and Capitalism

The suggestion that young people are now often interpreted as productive subjects necessitates a brief discussion of neoliberalism and capitalism.[2] According to David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007), neoliberalism became an ideology of late capitalism defined by a belief in free trade, free markets, private property rights, and a retreat away from public assistance. Originally used as a term referring to market intervention and governmental policy, neoliberalism has since also become a discursive term for social interactions "to the extent that the entirety of our everyday life is financialized" (Vermeulen 2019, pg. 331). Wendy Brown refers to how neoliberalism 'construes subjects as market actors everywhere' in which all activity becomes 'practices of self-investment' (Brown 2016, pg. 3).[3] According to Brown, neoliberalism advocates individual agency and self-reliance, which then allows the state to divest from funding social programs and to support the rights of big corporations to intercede in public life (pg. 6-7).

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[3] Wendy Brown (2016) writes, "One crucial signature of neoliberalism is its extension of what Caliskan and Calhoun term economization – the conversion of non-economic domains, activities, and subjects into economic ones – to all spheres of life" (pg. 3).

In his history of neoliberalism, Harvey (2007) summarizes how neoliberalism's goal is to reduce everything into economic terms. According to Harvey, neoliberalism originally proposed that human well-being can be advanced by encouraging individual entrepreneurship through strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is then to create and preserve the institutional framework to encourage these practices. As Harvey points out, though, the turn towards neoliberalism since the 1970s has emphasized deregulation, privatization, and the withdrawal of state funding from social welfare programs. Harvey argues that the neoliberal discourse around freedom, efficiency, and individuality is a fallacy that hides its true nature: to restore the class power of economic elites. As a result, the United States has experienced growing class inequality since the 1970s (Gilbert 2020).

In my thesis, I contend in my thesis that neoliberalism has successfully interpellated tween characters as productive subjects, as I refer to this interpellation as 'producer citizenship.' On Disney and Nickelodeon, tween characters imbibe a model of identity formation that is tied to thinking of themselves as economically constructive citizens by branding themselves as self-entrepreneurs or aspiring entertainers. At the same time, scholars of political economy (Ewen 1976, Cook 2004) have long pointed out how capitalism's main goal is essentially colonization, the access to new material resources to exploit and new opportunities for markets to sell their goods. The economization, or colonization, of childhood has long been recognized by scholars of political economy. Stuart Ewen, in *Captains of Consciousness* (1976), notes the value of young people to capitalism since they become consumer markets and are essential to the continuation of capitalism. Daniel Cook (2004) sums this idea up by writing that childhood extends capitalism 'over the long haul.' Childhood becomes a province for economic colonization, as Natalie Coulter writes about in her essay, "From Toddlers to Teens: The Colonization of Childhood the Disney Way" (2012). In this essay, Coulter looks at how Disney both discursively frames and demographically fragments young people as consumers. Similar scholarship around this 'commercialization of childhood' considers how children are constructed as consumers almost from birth.[4] Drawing from this scholarship, I employ an ideological analysis around class in six case studies to consider how these twin sides of capitalism, production and consumption, are prominent narrative themes and discursive frames in the tweencom genre.

[4] Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (2004).

1.2 Why Class and Tween Television?

While I argue that class ideology is inherent throughout tween sitcom programming, and part of the brand identity of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, there is a surprising lack of scholarship that examines social class within this genre. Following the initial and foundational work on the network history and programming strategies of Nickelodeon from Hendershot and Banet-Weiser, scholarship of tween television has accelerated in recent years. Between 2015 to 2020, published titles on tween sitcoms include Blue's *Girlhood on Disney Channel*, alongside Patrice Oppliger's *Tweencom Girls* (2019), Melanie Kennedy's *Tweenhood*: *Femininity and Celebrity in Tween Popular Culture* (2018), and Christopher Bell's *Disney Channel Tween Programming* (2020). In addition to these studies of television, Fiona MacDonald's *Childhood and Tween Girl Culture: Family, Media, and Locality* (2017) looks at how tweens use and consume other aspects of popular culture, especially social media. I note that the focal point of many of these books often privileges an analysis of gender, so I aim to interact with this scholarship by focusing on how class analysis can be weaved further into an intersectional analysis of race and gender in these series.

In the following chapters, I locate the tween sitcoms broadcast on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel within American television history. I examine both the institutional context and the wider cultural context that surrounds this genre. By understanding the tween sitcom a*s a sitcom*, I argue that tween sitcoms can be viewed as a continuation of the most conventional of all traditional sitcoms: the domestic sitcom. As one scholar who has often written about class, Richard Butsch has found that middle-class over-representation or hegemony has been present throughout the history of America's domestic sitcoms. I propose that the tween sitcom continues this class hegemony.

In *Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (1992), Gerald Jones also reminds us, "The sitcom is a corporate product" (pg. 4). By emphasizing the commercial imperatives and institutional setting of these networks, I consider how American cable television relies on branding and how the television industry affected tweencom development. As Amanda Lotz (2018) claims, branding became especially prevalent and important as the number of cable channels increased and cable channels narrowcast to a niche or target audience. At the same time, the notion of the tween became a demographic linked increasingly to consumer culture. Nickelodeon and Disney Channel targeted middle-class adolescents with narratives built around fantasy and aspiration.

Building on channel brand identity, I analyze the programming history of these two cable networks from the 1990s and 2010s to identify several distinct programming patterns and themes that are either reflected in, or influenced by, 'signature series.' Joseph Turow introduced this term in his book, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (1998), to discuss how cable networks relied upon a few popular series to stand out from other networks. I argue then that these signature series, and the larger programming patterns built around them, were always deeply embedded in class fantasy.

Recognizing that an exhaustive study of Disney Channel and Nickelodeon is beyond the scope of this thesis, I use the lens of class to contemplate ideological and representational strategies of live-action sitcoms from these two networks. In the end, I consider the following research question: how do these series and networks engage with representing social class and class ideology in an era of neoliberalism? As former Nickelodeon insiders admit, tween sitcoms became increasingly about aspiration or 'wish fulfillment' (Klickstein 2013) that center around narratives of fame and fortune. Young characters, already privileged with middle-class comforts, possess a further sense of aspirational entitlement to follow their dreams through 'productive citizenship.'

I identify two themes that reveal how these tween characters and tweencoms reinforce neoliberalism by broadcasting individual agency, enterprise, aspiration, and self-determination. Each of the case studies that I present can be seen to reflect one of these themes. The first theme traces a DIY element in tween series to consider how young characters construct and build their identities around material culture. This DIY tween identity is based very much around consumption, commercialism, materialism, and is very media-centric – allowing tweens to construct but also broadcast and market their identities. The second theme, a corollary to the first, considers the tween characters' economic independence and entrepreneurial initiatives. Tween characters from Nickelodeon and Disney Channel are given self-determination and agency by possessing adult independence and responsibilities, including having careers. This second theme contradicts the original Nickelodeon branding from the 1990s that proclaimed it was a place for kids and demarcated children from adults, where the slogan "Nick is Kids" was employed in bumper ads (Banet-Weiser 2007). By the 2000s and 2010s, this demarcation across tweencoms became increasingly blurred as tween characters sought to be like adults. As I have pointed out, the independence and self-sufficiency displayed on the television tweeniverse become a reflection of neoliberal ideology. I examine how these themes around material and entrepreneurial identities cut across my case

studies in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Before I address these concerns, though, it is first important to understand both the term tween and the genre of the tween sitcom, or tweencom, in more detail.

1.3 Defining the Tween

In this section, I will look at how the concept of the tween became discursively constructed. The tween has been variously defined as an age demographic, a consumer/market demographic, and a gendered discursive construction of girlhood at a particular historical moment (Kennedy and Coulter 2018). Natalie Coulter (2014) defines the tween as:

> discursively articulated in the synergistic relations of the mediated marketplace, as advertisers, retailers, and merchandisers try to call her as a customer, as the media attempts to define her as an audience and as marketers work to get to know her as a market (pg. 5).

In tracing the origins and concept of the 'tween,' Nickelodeon and Disney become helped to popularize the term through their media representations. In many ways, the story of the tween mirrors that of the teen, a demographic often linked to their participation in post-WWII consumer culture (Savage 2000). Just as teens were understood to be a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, tweens became the assumed liminal gap years between childhood and teen. The exact ages of this cohort are often in flux, though. Sorenssen and Mitchell (2011) write: "The term tween is a fascinating one, starting out first as part of marketing discourse and now appearing more as an age demarcation to refer to pre-teenage children between the ages of seven or eight (although sometimes as young as six) and eleven or twelve (and sometimes even older)," emphasizing the blurred boundaries of ages (pg. 153). While tweens are often designated as pre-teens, or 8-to-12-year-olds (Siegel, Coffey and Livingston 2004), they are also often overlapping into the next age group. In articles about tween sitcom audiences, Romano (2004) refers to tweens as ages 9-14, while Boorstin (2003) categorizes the age group from 8-14, so these age demarcations can be fluid.

Tweens became the target age audience for Nickelodeon and Disney. Romano (2004) emphasizes how Disney and Nickelodeon's original programming targeted this demographic at a moment when this age category became a growing population cohort. Referring to tweens as a 'lucrative market,' Romano describes how Disney and Nickelodeon executives by the early 2000s consciously courted advertisers by offering them a "distinct, enthusiastic audience with surprisingly high discretionary income' (pg. 17). Sue Zeidler (2007) notes that marketing

firms tracked how tweens in the United States were spending $51 billion annually on their own, with their families spending another $170 billion annually on them.

Considered to be a prized or lucrative market, tweens were first considered a marketing demographic long before they were treated as an audience demographic. While the label 'tween' was not yet employed, Daniel Cook and Susan Kaiser (2004) trace the origins of 'tween' to the concept of 'in-between' in the children's clothing industry of the 1940s as it sought to delineate a pre-teen market. Cook and Kaiser then consider how a new version of 'tween' reemerged in the 1990s, "a time when clothing makers and entrepreneurs of childhood redoubled their efforts to define a market segment space" (pg. 203). At the same time, a *Newsweek* cover story from 1999, "Truth About Tweens" by Pat Wingert, helped popularize the term in the popular press, even though the term had been used earlier in marketing publications.[5] Wingert's article from *Newsweek* recognized tweens was a term coined by marketers. Wingert identifies the market power of the age cohort, as 27 million American children from ages 8 to 14 became the 'largest number in the age group in two decades' and even refers to them as a 'retailer's dream' who could be prized as long-term customers (Wingert 1999). Between 1999 and 2001, one can find numerous articles from business publications such as *Brandweek, Strategy, Retail Traffic, Adverting Age,* and *Entrepreneur* that discuss the importance of tween consumers.

The *Brandweek* article "It's Not Easy Being Tween" (McNeal 2001) captures much of this discourse as it focuses on tween spending power: "Last year, tweens had an average income of $22.68 a week, or collectively, around $23 billion annually…. Quite a windfall in contrast to a decade earlier, when they earned a weekly average of about $6 and a total of $6 billion per year" (pg. 22). In this article, James McNeal, professor of marketing and president of Youth Marketing Consultants, refers to how children at age eight, when tweenhood roughly begins, enter 'the independent stage' when young people select and buy things on their own. In Martin Lindstrom's *Brandchild* (2003), the author further traces how corporations seek to build relationships with young people beyond the initial purchase. In essence, marketers took notice of the growing and influential tween demographic. It's no coincidence then that tween

[5] Carol Hall's 1987 article, "Tween Power: Youth's Middle Tier Comes of Age" from *Marketing and Media Decisions,* is often cited as the place where the term tween was first used. Hall's article is also cited as originating the concept of tween as a marketing niche (Aguilo-Perez 2017). However, the term was only used within industry parlance and was not popularized until the 1990s in the mainstream press, following articles like Wingert's.

television programming grew exponentially at this time or that the two tween networks actively cultivated this audience.[6] As Banet-Weiser (2007) argues, the fact that young people had their own money and were in charge of their consumer decisions meant that advertisers sought to address them directly.

In addition to being identified as middle-class consumers, tweens are often gendered within the field of Girlhood Studies (McRobbie 2000, Douglas 1995, Driscoll 2002). Morgan Blue (2017) points out how Disney Channel programming by the 2000s focused more on representing girlhood and on courting the tween girl audience. Blue writes, "Disney Channel can be said to construct girlhood in particular ways through its narrative representations of girls, its appeals to girl customers, its girl-driven corporate citizenship campaigns, and its promotion of girl celebrities" (pg. 15). In my case studies, I then seek to apply an intersectional approach to studying class with other identity markers, including gender and race.

1.4 Defining the Tweencoms

I employ the term 'tweencom' from Patrice Oppliger (2019) as a shorthand to refer to the live-action sitcoms of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. I argue that these series played a pivotal role in building each channel's identity as these sitcoms became the dominant programming across their primetime schedules.[7] As live-action series, tweencoms are further distinguished from the animated series that are broadcast on these networks. Much like the concept of the tween, an understanding of the tweencom often exists in a state of liminality within media studies scholarship. Thus, there are references to these sitcoms as children's television/media (Banet-Weiser 2010, Holz 2017, Hendershot 2004, Creeber 2015) or as teen television/media (Wee 2010, Greene 2012). These series have then alternately been referred to as either teen comedies or tween comedies or even just as children's television. In *The Television Genre Book* (2015), Jason Mittell refers to Disney Channel and Nickelodeon as children's television, acknowledging that 'children's television' is aptly named because the focus is often on the audience rather than the programs (pg. 113). However, I focus my thesis

[6] Cynthia Maurer (2018) points out how press releases from the shows *iCarly* (Nick, 2007-12), *Victorious* (Nick, 2010-3), *Good Luck Charlie* (Disney 2010-14) and *Jessie* (Disney 2011-14), directly referenced tweens as the targeted audience. For example, *iCarly*'s press release describes the show as being about "grappling with everyday tween problems and adventures" (pg. 26).

[7] In Christopher Bell's edited collection of essays, *Disney Channel Programming* (2020), analysis of sitcoms dominates the text.

on the programs, rather than audiences, as I argue that these live-action sitcoms can be understood as a distinct sitcom subgenre, something not yet acknowledged in *The Television Genre Book* (Creeber 2015). Popular and entertainment industry press, such as *The New York Times* or *Variety,* usually use the term *tween sitcom* to describe these Disney and Nickelodeon family-friendly programs (Hale 2011, Owen 2009). They then reserve the label *teen sitcom* for series that feature teen characters with more mature subject matter and often blends comedy and drama, such as the dramedies MTV's *Awkward* (2011-16) or ABC's *10 Things I Hate About You* (2009-2010).

While an exact definition of the tween sitcom is necessary for the context of this analysis, it is also difficult to designate specific criteria applicable to all series. I define tweencoms as original, live-action situation comedies, either produced or distributed by Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, that are narratively centered around young protagonists. Like the concept of the tween, the exact criteria for defining the tweencom may be fluid with the ages of the protagonists. Lead characters on tweencoms range from all ages: *Nicky, Ricky, Dicky, and Dawn* (Nickelodeon, 2014-18) are eleven; *Andi Mack* (Disney, 2017-19) is thirteen and in middle school; the cast of *Victorious* (Nickelodeon, 2010-13) are in high school; and the boys of *Big Time Rush* (Nickelodeon, 2009-2013) are over the age of eighteen. Even though successful tweencoms have shorter life spans than typical hit series in American television, we can sometimes witness how certain characters move from adolescence into young adulthood over the course of four to five years. For example, *iCarly* (Nickelodeon, 2007-12) and *Hannah Montana* (Disney, 2006-11) both end when the lead characters graduate high school.

Furthermore, tweencoms may be described as comedies that typically cast teen or pre-teen characters as leads but target younger audiences of 8-to-12 (or 14)-year-olds since the networks understood tweens to be their target audience. Rich Ross, former president of Disney Entertainment, explained that in his tenure that Disney shows featured teen-aged actors (Miley Cyrus, for example, was on *Hannah Montana* from ages 14-19) in order to create aspirations for the younger viewers (Romano 2014). While Blue (2017) emphasizes that girls are the primary lead characters and audiences of Disney Channel, I note that several signature-series tweencoms from the 1990s and 2000s employ boys as leads, including *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (Disney, 2005-08). Rather than use the age or gender of protagonists (or audiences) as the designating marker of the tweencom, I find it more useful to simply define

tweencoms as those sitcoms that are produced by Disney Channel and Nickelodeon for their primetime schedules.

Tweencoms need to be understood as a particular genre within a particular context, so I emphasize here that my study of tweencoms from these two networks looks at a particular construction of youth in American television at a particular moment, within the era of neoliberalism. During a conference presentation, I was asked whether tween sitcoms could also refer to earlier American sitcoms from previous decades or those from other networks, ones which also revolved around adolescent characters and attracted young audiences, such as *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, 1957-63) or *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969-74). These domestic comedies have been referred to as 'kidcoms' (Mintz 1985). Tweencoms, like the kidcoms, comprise a particular subgenre of domestic comedies that utilize its generic sitcom trappings: laugh track, episodic plots, and narrative resolutions. I identify tweencoms, however, as solely the provenance of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel beginning in the 1990s, while the earlier series from the major networks served as tweencom forerunners. Channel branding and scheduling becomes key sites for exploring these differences. Network channels sometimes built a one or two-hour programming block of tween/teen television during one or two evenings a week, such as with ABC's Friday primetime TGIF block from the 1990s.[8] For Nickelodeon and Disney, however, most of their primetime schedules, and thus their brand identity, became tweencom programming. Oppliger (2019) acknowledges how Disney Channel and Nickelodeon became linked irreparably to tweencoms due to the popularity of these series and the fact that these series occupy a large chunk of their programming schedules, so I analyze programming trends and patterns as part of my methodology.

1.5 Methods and Case Studies

By looking at the programming history of Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, this thesis shares some of the approaches that Ramon Lobato (2017) identifies as common in the studies of television. Lobato notes that TV schedules are often examined "to measure trends in TV programming, in terms of the prevalence of certain program types, genres, production

[8] TGIF stands for Thank God It's Friday, a relevant expression for American school children who end every school week on Friday afternoon. Alice Leppert (2019) notes how ABC sitcoms like *Full House* (1989-1997), *Family Matters* (1989-1997), *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000), and *Step by Step* (1991-1997) targeted young teens and tweens with 'sanitized' or 'family-friendly narratives.' These domestic sitcoms centered around the family with young characters in central roles.

sources/contexts, or specific textual attributes" (pg. 3). In looking at the scheduling history of these two networks, I focus on one sitcom subgenre, the tweencom, since I note the importance of this subgenre on the networks across three decades of television programming. While I also acknowledge that tween popular culture can be studied across multiple media – film, television, music – and across multiple genres, I narrow my focus this a single subgenre of television to avoid extending my analysis too broadly.

This thesis employs textual analysis by using two case studies from each 'era' of television programming. In *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Sharon Lockyer (2008) summarizes textual analysis as "a method of data analysis that closely examines either the content and meaning of texts or their structure and discourse." The texts I look at include a multitude of tweencoms that I have selected from Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, and I will explain this selection process in more detail in this section. Textual analysis refers to how these texts "are deconstructed to examine how they operate, the manner in which they are constructed, the ways in which meanings are produced, and the nature of those meanings. This thesis acknowledges how textual analysis "is used to identify what interpretations are possible and likely" as a study of ideological construction and interpretation (pg. 2).[9]

As a study of television, my thesis relies on the approaches identified by television scholars Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz in their monograph *Television Studies* (2012). The authors argue that scholarship in television studies should operate by considering at least two of the following elements: programs, audiences, context, and industries. For the purposes of this thesis, I examine three of these elements – programs, context, and industries, with a focus on the programs and industries. I do not include much analysis on tweencom audiences due to the time limitations and page limitations of writing a thesis. I also acknowledge the difficulties of interviewing young subjects. The fact that I am writing about American television outside the United States and am writing about several series from a historical context presents further issues and difficulties around engaging with audience studies.

In analyzing programs, I select a range of tweencoms as my case studies. By looking at a spectrum of original series produced by both Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, this thesis acknowledges that studying television begins with the content. In *Kids' TV Grows Up* (2017),

[9] Methodological models that place textual analysis within cultural studies contexts can be found in Mikko Lehtonen's *The Cultural Analysis of Texts* (2000), Paula Saukko's *Doing Research in Cultural Studies* (2003), and Stuart Hall's *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (2013).

a sociocultural history of American children's television, author Jo Holz suggests, "While much has been written about the possible effects of television on children, much less attention has been paid to the actual contents of the programs that children watch" (pg. 2). As I noted, most studies of tweencoms focus on gender and the construction of girlhood. Therefore, I have found that tweencoms that possess a female lead (*Hannah Montana, iCarly, Clarissa Explains it All*) receive much more scholarly attention than those with boy leads (*Kenan & Kel, The Suite Life of Zack & Cody, Even Stevens, Phil of the Future*). In my case studies, therefore, I focus on a cross-section of content that allows for analyzing intersections of gender and race along with examinations of class.

In selecting certain series as case studies, I refer to the concept of signature series from Joseph Turow (1997). I select my case studies to be programs that may be considered one of those network's signature series within a particular era of programming, or programs that may reflect similar narrative patterns of the network's signature series. I begin with *Clarissa Explains It All* as my first case study by re-examining how it also addresses issues of class. This tweencom pioneer serves as an important case study to reflect on the early tweencom genre and to highlight its legacy portraying tween girlhood. In starting my case studies with *Clarissa Explains it All* in Chapter 4 and ending with *Andi Mack* (Disney, 2017-19) in Chapter 6, I trace the theme of the DIY element that characterized tweencom protagonists through consumerism and neoliberal identity construction. I then look at *Kenan & Kel* as another case study from the 'Golden Age of Nickelodeon' programming to consider the intersections of race and class during this television era.

While *Clarissa* became a representative program for Nickelodeon in the 1990s, the representative series for Disney Channel in the 2000s became *Hannah Montana*. As a signature series, it has received much attention in scholarship (Bickford 2015, Pugh 2018, Kennedy 2014, Mayes-Elma 2011). As I will discuss in Chapter 4, *Hannah* became a noteworthy example of the famecom subgenre that many tween series soon replicated by centering around the career ambitions of young characters seeking to pursue a career in entertainment. Although I label *Hannah* as a signature series for Disney, I decide to select another series, *Shake It Up* (Disney Channel, 2010-13), as a representative of the famecoms since it has received far less academic attention and allows for further discussion of the intersections of race and class. My other case study from Disney in this era includes *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* and its sequel *The Suite Life on Deck*, a signature series that offers much reflection on class but has received very little academic attention.

I select the last two case studies, *Game Shakers* (Nickelodeon, 2015-19) and *Andi Mack* (Disney Channel, 2017-19), to reflect opposing currents of contemporary tweencoms – fantasy and reality. While *Game Shakers* continues the aspirational themes around class fantasy, *Andi Mack* aims to present a more realistic depiction of a coming-of-age narrative. In considering two series that attempt to depict fantasy and reality, I consider how class representations and the element of 'productive citizenship' remain central to both series. In *Game Shakers*, the characters build a gaming empire. Likewise, *Andi Mack* centers around a protagonist who is a creative teen who enjoys crafting. In the end, my selection of case studies tracks the history of tweencom programming. As my focus centers around class, I examine how messages around social class are embedded throughout each of these case studies.

1.6 Chapter Outlines

The purpose of this introductory chapter has been to outline the main aims of this thesis by identifying gaps around class in existing academic literature, to define the terms tween and tweencom that will be used extensively throughout the thesis, and to delineate the scope of the research and its case studies.

In Chapter 2, I critically examine the existing literature around tweencoms and American domestic sitcoms. I look at the body of scholarship around sitcom family dynamics, including parenting styles (Hamamoto 1989, Taylor 1989, Jones 1992, Morreale 2003, Dalton & Linder 2016). They describe family relations as initially patriarchal and alternatively becoming liberal and eventually neoliberal. I also look at the scholarship of Richard Butsch (2003, 2005), who has conducted numerous studies on the middle-class hegemony of primetime American sitcoms. I argue that tweencoms continue this class hegemony as they frequently extol the American Dream. I also examine the body of literature around Disney ideology shapes my thesis with its emphasis on class. By acknowledging the scholarship of ideological analysis from Mimi White (1992) and class framing from Diana Kendall (2011), I argue that tweencoms necessitate an examination of class, especially since this element has not been sufficiently addressed in previous tweencom studies.

Chapter 3 traces the institutional history and context of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel as part of a media industry study. I identify some key players and industry trends that shaped these cable channels. I especially consider issues around television branding and franchising, and I employ Joseph Turow's approach to identify the 'signature series' from each network. In discussing the branding of these networks, I also reference the contributions

made by Catherine Johnson's *Branding Television* (2012) and, especially, Jennifer Gillan's *Television Brandcasting* (2015), which both look at television network strategies for blending content and promotion. In her treatment of Disney Channel as one case study in American television history, Gillan provides one of the few texts that weaves an analysis of this network into American television history. As the tween networks targeted middle-class young people and their families, I argue that, above all, their channel brand and programming have been tied to class representation and ideology.

Chapter 4 examines the tweencom programming of Nickelodeon during the 1990s. My case studies include *Clarissa Explains it All* and *Kenan & Kel* as I consider how these series marked lasting trends that can be found throughout subsequent tweencoms. While previous scholarship examined *Clarissa* by extolling girl power ideology or DIY citizenship (Banet-Weiser 2004, Hartley 1999), I look at how the series still presented class privilege and displayed commodity consumption. These became lasting trends, especially with tweencoms with female lead characters. My next case study is *Kenan & Kel*, a tweencom about two African-American teens. I consider how it presents a workplace sitcom that also serves as a forerunner of the famecoms that soon followed. In addition, the series offers class ideology by engaging in frequent get-rich-quick schemes and altogether presents multiple episodes that emphasize easy access to fame and fortune.

Chapter 5 examines Disney Channel tweencoms. While I argue that Disney Channel gained cultural currency over Nickelodeon on television and popular culture at this time, I refer to the era from 2000 to the early 2010s as the Disney Channel Decade. My main case studies focus on *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (2005-8), its sequel *The Suite on Deck* (2008-11), and *Shake it Up* (2010-13). In *Suite Life* and other tweencoms around this time, I emphasize how these present class fantasies as the characters get to live vicariously in and enjoy the amenities of luxurious settings. For Zack and Cody, they enjoy living in a luxury hotel in the first series and on a cruise ship in the second series. By emphasizing the temporal status of their 'vicarious living,' I refer to these characters as *class floaters*. At the same time, their precarity remains unacknowledged. *Shake it Up* exemplifies a famecom, a prevalent tweencom trope where characters seek fame or careers in entertainment where becoming a celebrity helps them achieve the American Dream. Here I also introduce concepts around *class blindness* to refer to how class realities are often hidden or unexamined across tweencoms.

In Chapter 6, I review tweencoms in the 2010s. This era coincides with the decline of cable viewers and subscriptions. Subsequently there is an overall decline in the ratings and

cultural cache enjoyed by previous hit series of the tweencom genre, such as Nickelodeon's i*Carly* or Disney Channel's *Hannah Montana*. Here I mark this era as 'The Tweencom in Transition,' as audiences increasingly migrated away from watching traditional television. In this era, I identify prevalent themes, rather than signature series, as I look at *Game Shakers* (Nickelodeon 2015-19) and *Andi Mack* (Disney 2017-19). The former continues the trend of class fantasy as it depicts two middle schoolers who launch a multi-million-dollar gaming company with a famous rapper as their business partner and serves as a prime example of the entrepreneurship narrative. I then consider how the dramedy *Andi Mack*, though, offers an attempt to infuse social relevance and realities into the tweencom. Considerations of class representation and ideology similarly become blurred within this series as the main character navigates through lower-middle-class and upper-middle-class homes, reflecting what I refer to as *class-crossing*. And the same time, the main character engages in identity formation through family, friendships, and crafting, employing both the consumptive and productive frames that I referenced earlier.

As I have emphasized, tweencoms necessitate further investigation around class representation and class ideology, and my aim across six case studies and three decades of tweencom programming is to examine the role of class ideology within this genre. Through an examination of a diverse selection of programs and an exploration of the industrial and cultural contexts of these programs, I consider how class ultimately defines tweencoms.

2. Literature Review: Tweencoms, Sitcoms, and Class Studies

Class fantasy is central to tweencoms. Although there is a growing body of academic literature on tween culture and tween television, the centrality of social class within these series has often been overlooked. This is despite the plethora of scholarship that considers the importance of the tween demographic as a marketing phenomenon and as ideal consumers. While Kennedy and Blue address the ideologies of neoliberalism and individualism within Disney Channel tweencoms, their analysis extends only to a few sitcoms from Disney Channel. For example, Blue explores gender within the Disney Channel's *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011*)*, *That's So Raven* (2003-2007), and (briefly) *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-2012). Melanie Kennedy gives an extended analysis of Disney Channel's *Hannah Montana* and *Jonas* (2009-2010) as tweencom case studies in a wider study of tween popular culture. However, I contend that class has been a structuring presence throughout the programming history of both Nickelodeon and Disney. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to intervene in the previous scholarship on tween television with an extended analysis of class with multiple case studies throughout the history of Nickelodeon and Disney tweencom programming.

In this chapter, I begin with a review of the scholarship on tween television and then extend outward. First, I look at how my thesis fits into this recent body of scholarship on tween television, a rather nascent field of study that began with the foundational texts on Nickelodeon from Heather Hendershot (2004) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007). Reviewing this tweencom scholarship, I place these studies alongside the studies of youth studies, sitcom studies, and scholarship on class in the subsequent sections. By considering ideology within Disney and Nickelodeon in my thesis, I reflect upon how my study fits within the academic subfield of Disney Studies or Disneyology, as this field of study has often analyzed the ideological imperatives of the media giant (Dorfman & Mattelhart 1971, Bryman 2004, Giroux 2010). In my review of this literature, I emphasize that representations of gender and race have occupied a large space within this scholarship, but further analysis of class within these intersectional identities needs to be developed.

In the second section of this chapter, I once again extend my analysis of tweencoms outward to understand how my thesis applies ideological analysis to youth media studies and sitcom studies. Within this section, I trace how scholars, including David Buckingham (2003) and Henry Giroux (2009), have critically examined youth culture in contemporary society around issues of consumption. I also look at the ideology of American domestic sitcoms. In

this section, I focus on how families have been depicted in American sitcoms. My thesis on tweencoms then suggests how tweencom families and youth characters either extend or depart from these depictions. Here, I refer to the scholarship of Richard Butsch, who has written several studies on how American sitcoms overwhelmingly privilege middle-class representation and middle-class ideology. My intervention in this section, though, suggests that tweencoms should be understood as sitcoms and as part of sitcom history. Instead, I find that studies of sitcom history and sitcom genre (such as those from Richard Butsch or Brett Mills) rarely reference tweencoms. At the same time, studies of tweencoms rarely consider this genre's placement within the larger context of American television. My focus within this chapter is to consider how tweencoms fit into the American sitcom genre and history as I trace sitcom families through considerations of class and ideology.

In the third major section of this chapter, I review scholarship examining class within media studies and American culture, particularly around the ideology of 'The American Dream.' I understand that there is a long history of scholarship around class within sociology, history, and political science. American scholars who wrote extensively about class in twentieth-century America include sociologist C. Wright Mills (*White Collar: The American Middle Class*, 1951) and economist John Kenneth Galbraith (*The Affluent Society*, 1958). However, this extended history and analysis of class is beyond the scope of my thesis, so I focus on more recent scholarship of class within media and American culture from Diana Kendall's stud of class media framing in *Framing Class* (2011) and Gwendolyn Foster's study of class construction in *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (2005).

It's important to note that all the sections of my literature review look at class and ideology. The first section considers tweencoms with tweencom ideology and Disney ideology. The second section looks at American sitcom ideology. The final section looks at the studies on class. Before I look at these three sections further, I introduce key terms and concepts as they will be applied throughout this chapter and my thesis.

2.1 Introducing Key Terms: Understanding Ideological Analysis

Many early studies of television, including John Fiske and John Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978), looked at the way television influences its audiences, even referring to television as an 'ideological octopus' (Lewis 1991). As I discuss the concepts of ideology and hegemony throughout my thesis, I refer to Mimi White's chapter, "Ideological Analysis and Television" (1992), to summarize the contributions of Louis Althusser (1918-1990) and

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who are often associated with these concepts. In his important essay "Ideology and Ideological Status Apparatuses," Althusser (1970/2006) conceives ideology as a set of values or ideas that a dominant class thrusts into a whole society. According to Althusser, the concept of ideology provides a framework through which we understand everything but functions as a 'false consciousness' by upholding the status quo through structures referred to as 'ideological state apparatuses,' which include mass media. According to Mimi White, Althusser defined ideology as how individuals experience and express their relations to their material. In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1971) conceptualized the notion of hegemony to suggest the dominance one group holds over another. Gramsci was particularly interested in how a dominant group can produce and promote their ideology through the manipulation of such institutions as the media. Gramsci also conceptualized how hegemony depends upon the notions of consent and resistance from those who are governed. The concept of hegemony can refer to complex ways in which a dominant class will maintain its control over society, or "create the conditions most favorable to the expansion of their own class" (Gramsci, pg. 5-6). The notion of hegemony suggests how one group holds power over another through ideology, so that the values and beliefs of the dominant group become accepted. Such ideologies in the United States would include a belief in upholding the American Dream and capitalism.

Mimi White defines ideological criticism as being "concerned with the ways in which cultural practices and artifacts produce particular knowledge and positions for their users" (White 1992, pg.163). Ideological analysis then proposes studying how media such as television reflects dominant values. In her ideological analysis of television, White (1992) suggests how television reflects ideology:

> The cultural artifacts produced within a given mode of production are seen as primarily reflecting dominant class interests… and television [as part of the entertainment industry] would necessarily reflect the belief system, the ideology, of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie. Viewers, then, are seen as buying into the beliefs and meanings expounded on television (pg. 164).

These beliefs and meanings are then presumably the political and ideological interests of Disney and Nickelodeon. Considering the implications of ideology and hegemony, the preponderance of middle-class lifestyles in the television universe works "to instill bourgeois aspirations and values, promoting that personal fulfillment can come through the practices and products of current consumer society" (White, 1992, pg. 165).

Ideology becomes embedded in television through representation. Richard Butsch

(2003), whose scholarship I will elaborate on further later in this chapter, concludes that the overrepresentation of middle and upper classes portrayals on television illustrates "ideological hegemony, the dominance of values in mainstream culture that justify and help to maintain the status quo" (Butsch 2003, p. 576). While bourgeois aspirations and consumption habits are routinely displayed on television programs, the opposite is the case for the lower or working class. Media scholars have commented on the fact that the lower class, or working class, is often dismissed or denigrated in American television and throughout media (Fiske 1993; Butsch 2003, Kendall 2011). According to Lee Artz and Ben Murphy in *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (2000), "middle-class audiences see little of working-class conditions and know even less about working-class views" (pg. 276). Tracking examples of cultural hegemony across race, gender, and class in the practices of late twentieth-century American culture, the authors note how mass media, including television, are implicated in such meaning-making. They point out, "In the United States, meanings are based largely on the ideology of consumerism" (Artz & Murphy, pg. 28). Reflecting on these class representations and ideology of consumerism, I contend that this phenomenon reigns across Disney and Nickelodeon programming history. Throughout their tweencom programming, these two networks thoroughly ignore class diversity and idealize a consumer lifestyle for their audience, and I will trace this in detail in the tweencoms that I will examine in Chapters 4 to 6.

Issues of identity and representation – whether it is class, gender, race, sexuality, etc. – are paramount to media analysis. However, representations of class often prove particularly tricky as class is often implicitly constructed in narratives, so my case studies will look at how class and wealth, and ideologies around class and wealth, are instead often signified on screen. Brett Mills (2005) notes that representation dominates sitcom studies but also acknowledges that studies of representation most often tend to examine race, gender, sex, or sexuality, while the lens of class becomes a more complex issue within television that is not studied as often as other identities (Mills 2005). Highlighting the central role of class within the tween sitcom genre, my thesis attempts one such intervention.

I will refer to the concepts of ideology, hegemony, and representation throughout this chapter and throughout my thesis as I construct an ideological analysis of tweencoms. Nickelodeon and Disney in many ways created a universe that supported the ideologies of commercial culture and neoliberalism. The number of aspirational themes on tweencoms directly supported the ideology of the American Dream, referring to social mobility or getting ahead through hard work. I outline this concept in more detail later in this chapter to link how

this concept becomes a recurring theme in tweencoms. First, though, I highlight the academic literature that has previously examined Nickelodeon and Disney Channel sitcoms.

2.2 Review of Tweencom Scholarship

In the following subsections, I review the academic scholarship around tweencoms and the two tween networks, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. This thesis then builds upon this preliminary scholarship that originated around tween television studies to argue that class has been an essential component of this television genre - but it has also been an under-examined element within this scholarship.

2.2.1 Nickelodeon Studies

While there have been a few excellent studies of Nickelodeon - notably *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids* (Hendershot 2004) and *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Banet-Weiser 2007) - it is necessary to re-examine premises of these studies. After all, both texts focus predominantly on the network's content from the 1990s, referred to as Nickelodeon's 'Golden Age,' but there have been few subsequent academic texts on the network and its programs, apart from Doyle Greene's *Teens, TV, and Tunes* (2012). Written as an oral history, *Slimed!* (Klickstein 2013) provides a nostalgic look at Nickelodeon's growth from the people working behind the scenes. With original interviews drawn from writers, actors, producers, and other Nick staff, the book offers a popular history rather than an academic analysis of the network. However, it still serves as a reference point to the network's history and programming by offering a first-hand perspective from the actual content creators.

An early text of tweencom studies, *Nickelodeon Nation* looks at the history and cultural influence of the network. Edited by Heather Hendershot, the collection of essays is written by scholars across the disciplines of psychology, communication, and media studies and is grouped into four sections: economics and marketing; the production process; programs and politics; and viewers. The book examines how the network succeeded by simultaneously satisfying both children and adults by offering 'kid-tested, mother-approved' content. Using Nickelodeon as a case study to understand both contemporary children's culture and the television industry, the book traces the development and marketing of Nickelodeon's programs and its cultural influence. However, a lot has changed in the network within the past decade. With chapters on Nick at Nite, the nightly schedule of programs on Nickelodeon that

catered to nostalgic adults with syndicated television classics, Nicktoons, which broadcasts animated series and films, and the network's animated programs, the book largely overlooks the live-action sitcoms (or tweencoms) that have become central to Nickelodeon's production since the 1990s. The research provides insights into the history and growth of Nickelodeon as a cable network.

In *Kids Rule*, Sarah Banet-Weiser meticulously researches how Nickelodeon built relationships with its audiences. She investigates Nickelodeon's brand strategies and program development that led to its growth as one of the most popular cable channels of the 1990s. According to Banet-Weiser, the key to Nickelodeon's success as a content distributor/creator lies in its ability to speak to and construct children as citizens within a commercial context by offering them choices and treating them as consumers in the marketplace. Within the first chapter, she argues how the network targeted its youth audiences as empowered users with discriminating tastes. On television, Nickelodeon offered a space that young audiences could call their own. At the same time, Nickelodeon's brand identity was built upon this concept of youth empowerment and consumer citizenship within its programs. For example, the character Clarissa from Nickelodeon's popular series *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991-94) illustrates Nickelodeon's concept of youth empowerment and consumer citizenship. Banet-Weiser discusses how the character served as an embodiment of girl power ideology. In *The Uses of Television*, John Hartley (1999) also discusses how this character embodies DIY citizenship through self-determination as the character is allowed a great range of independence to construct her identity. As I have previously explored in the introductory chapter, Banet-Weiser's book takes an ambivalent and sometimes affirmative tone toward the network's strategies around the notion of 'consumer citizenship.' On the other hand, Angela McRobbie (2008) offers a more pointed critique of commercial culture that is supported by neoliberal and post-feminist ideology. Other media scholars and cultural critics similarly criticize how Nickelodeon and Disney programs have contributed to a culture of consumption for young audiences (Giroux 2010, Mayes-Elma 2011).

While Banet-Weiser and Hendershot applauded Nickelodeon's 1990s programs for their attempt to address race and gender – with examples from *Kenan & Kel* and *Clarissa* – I argue that class issues or class diversity remained largely unaddressed. After all, both foundational texts devote chapters to addressing gender and race but not to class. By looking at the history of tweencoms, I consider what trends have emerged since Nickelodeon debuted tweencoms in the 1990s. Nickelodeon's brand identity has moved away from its earlier

models of marketing to 'kids as kids', as industry insiders have discussed in Matthew Klickstein's *Slimed!: An Oral History of Nickelodeon's Golden Age* (2013). In my thesis, I look at a wider history of tweencom history to note how trends in programming have moved away from Nickelodeon's targeting 'kids as kids.' As I will trace in Chapters 4 and 5, Disney's and Nickelodeon's tween characters increasingly were marked as exceptional, endowed with magical powers or natural talents that set them apart from their peers. As Klickstein notes, aspirational ideology became a more prominent theme of Nickelodeon and Disney tweencoms once Disney began developing and aggressively marketing tweencoms in the 2000s.

In his book *Teens, TV, and Tunes: The Manufacture of American Adolescent Culture* (2012), Doyle Greene examines how Disney and Nickelodeon's network identities and ideologies often competed and collapsed into one another. For instance, Disney Channel debuted *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011) about a teenage pop star and tried to replicate this formula in *Jonas* (2009-2010). Nickelodeon subsequently responded by offering its own series about a boy band in *Big Time Rush* (2009-2013). Throughout the text, Greene looks at the relationship between teen culture, television, and popular music and relates them to broader issues of American politics, history, economics, and ideology. The fact that the protagonist of *True Jackson, VP* (Nickelodeon 2008-2011) is an African-American teen who succeeds in the corporate world is related to the political discourses of race and gender at a time when Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama competed to become presidential candidates. Greene provides other case studies, like those cited above, to consider the prevalence of fame and performance across the tween networks following the popularity of Disney's first *High School Musical* (2006) and Fox's reality show and ratings juggernaut, *American Idol* (Fox, 2002-16). As I consider the frequent portrayal of kids as talented performers/ musicians/entertainers on tween sitcoms further in Chapter 5, this thesis demonstrates how these series, centered around aspiration, relate to class fantasy and ideology. I also point out how versions of these aspirational series, replete with class ideology, are found throughout Nickelodeon and Disney Channel programming.

2.2.2 Disney Channel Studies

Only in the past five years has Disney Channel generated the kind of academic inquiry that Hendershot and Banet-Weiser first leveled at Nickelodeon. As I have already reiterated, these studies of Disney Channel inevitably focus on gender (Blue 2017, Kennedy 2018,

Oppliger 2019). In the text *Girlhood on the Disney Channel* (2017), Morgan Genevieve Blue explores how Disney brands its girl performers and exemplifies a post-feminist sensibility in its construction of girlhood by focusing on the series *Hannah Montana, That's So Raven*, and *Wizards of Waverly Place,* along with the series stars Miley Cyrus, Raven-Symone, and Selena Gomez. Blue considers how each of these stars 'performs' gender as both a fictional character and real-life Disney spokesperson to produce "hegemonic notions of idealized girlhood by franchising girls' performances of girlhood, stardom, and celebrity" with strategies like colorblind ideology and post-feminist discourse (pg. 2). Blue looks thoroughly at both the content of the shows as well as the merchandising and other media paratexts. She looks at how the Disney network uses the characters within the shows and the stars in real life as brand ambassadors who are portrayed as 'citizen-girls' with can-do spirits that suggest individual entrepreneurship and optimism are all that is needed in our world to become a success. In a related study, Patrice Oppliger examines gender on both Disney Channel and Nickelodeon. In *Tweencom Girls: Gender and Adolescence in Disney and Nickelodeon Sitcoms* (2019), Oppliger looks at the representational tropes (including mean girls and cheerleaders) of female characters as well as the leading themes (popularity, friendship, aggression, and girl power) from these series.

Other studies focus on Disney Channel's relationship with the parent company and its political economy. In her book *Teen Media* (2010), Valerie Wee devotes a chapter to charting the growth of the Disney Channel in "Disney and the Youth Market – It's a T(ween) World After All." Wee discusses how increasing market fragmentation and narrower niche markets carved out a need to create content for pre-teens across multi-media platforms, from films to television to music, a topic that I will address further in Chapter 3 when I consider how the tween networks and tween series need to be understood within the American television industry. Jennifer Gillan's *Television Brandcasting* (2015) provides a similar study. In analyzing how the business strategy of Disney Channel works to build franchises and brand identity through short-form content, or interstitials, between its original series and movies, Gillan uses Disney Channel as an example of a successful 'brandcaster' or self-promoter. In discussing how Disney Channel's business strategy successfully reinforces a brand identity unlike any network, Gillan ultimately suggests that analyzing these short-form content such as promos between programs is a better way to assess the channel as a brandcaster because sitcoms between Disney and Nickelodeon often copycat each other (pg. 157). Gillan also

looks at the prevalence of the fame-building formula found in many recent Disney tweencoms, offering foundational analysis that I will reference throughout my thesis.

Another recently published anthology of essays, *Disney Channel Tween Programming: Essays on Shows from Lizzie McGuire to Andi Mack* (Bell 2020), examines Disney Channel's programming. The text serves as a useful companion to my thesis, although it again privileges a study of race and gender. Using a mixed-methods approach with both qualitative and quantitative methods, the book examines the speaking roles and distribution of lines between male and female characters and the distribution of speaking roles, and the distribution of storylines between whites and people of color. While both scholars contribute to a study of Disney Channel's programming, Gillan and Bell acknowledge that studies of Disney Channel series represent a small portion of Disney scholarship. Gillan admits that "academic commentary on Disney mostly overlooks the Channel" simply because "too often, Disney Channel is just treated as the 'bad object' in television studies or as part of mundane television output not interesting enough for academic study" (pg. 149). Therefore, their scholarship, along with my own thesis, suggest the necessities to critically engage more with Disney's television offerings.

As just one part of the Disney media brand, the story of Disney Channel in academic scholarship often gets subsumed into a larger study of the parent company. So far, though, little analysis has been written about Disney Channel's political economy beyond Jennifer Gillan's observation of Disney Channel's successful rebranding efforts in the 2000s. In addition, most studies of Disney Channel tweencoms treat individual series as isolated case studies, particularly with popular series such as *Lizzie McGuire* or *Hannah Montana.* Both tweencoms are analyzed in separate studies as examples of Disney's efforts to market a franchise (Hogan 2013, Mayes-Elam 2011). In her essay on *Lizzie McGuire*, Lindsay Hogan (2013) looks at media institutions and authorship by examining how star Hilary Duff and her mom-ager battled with Disney privately and publicly over the star's contract and career choices in television, music, and motion pictures following the success of the show. In studies of *Hannah Montana*, both Ruthann Mayes-Elma (2011) and Tison Pugh (2018) consider Disney's aggressive merchandising of the program. *Hannah Montana* receives extensive analysis in several academic essays (Bickford 2015, Kennedy 2014, Pugh 2018) that look at the performative roles of gender and sexuality within it. Likewise, other series portraying racially/ethnically diverse characters are examined as a single case study in several other articles. Ramona Bell (2015) examines *That's So Raven*, Angharad Valdivia (2018) examines

Wizards of Waverly Place, and Angharad Valdivia and Diana Leon-Boys (2021) look at *Stuck in the Middle*. Such articles are useful in examining each series as a single case study, but they are limited in the broader claims they can make about the network's programming as a whole.

By looking at both Nickelodeon and Disney across this thesis, I consider how class ideology is prevalent across both networks. By examining several different series across both networks, this thesis also acknowledges how specific themes, representations, and messaging cuts across both networks. While more expansive content and ideological analysis of Disney Channel have only recently been published, they are built upon a long tradition of Disney Studies scholarship, which I will explore in the following subsection.

2.2.3 Disneyology

Disney Studies is a field of cultural scholarship that has developed around studying Disney as a cultural force as the company exerts itself as a global industry and corporate success (Stein 2011, Lipp 2013), a cultural mirror or reflection of society (Davis 2006/2013, McQuillan & Byrne 1999, Brode 2004/2006, Giroux 2010), or as a global conglomerate concerned only with profits (Wasko 2001, Hiaasen 1998). In *Understanding Disney*, Janet Wasko critically examines Disney and its economic operations, looking at how it designs its products and licenses, such as apparel and toys, through the entire manufacturing and consumption cycle as Disney has expanded its global corporation as an imperial empire (Wasko 2001).

An influential critique of Disney's ideology can be found in Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck,* first published in Chile in 1971. Offering a Marxist critique of Disney comics, the text analyzes how Disney promotes capitalism and cultural imperialism with characters like Scrooge McDuck, who travels the world to extract raw materials and adventure from exotic locales populated by 'noble savages' (pg. 48). Within my case studies on Disney Channel in Chapters 5 and 6, series with young entrepreneurs and characters who travel around the oceans on a cruise ship, I find this criticism is still applicable to tweencoms in the twenty-first century.

Academic scholarship within Disney Studies often examines ideology. In *The Mouse that Roared*, Giroux states the need to recognize that Disney is about more than entertainment because it is implicated in realms of power, politics, and ideology (Giroux 2010, pg. 6). Giroux explains how Disney "works hard to transform every child into a lifelong consumer of Disney products and ideas" (Giroux 2010, pg. 27). Therefore, any understanding or critique of

Disney needs to understand how the company operates in the cultural sphere to promote this commercialization of everyday life. Giroux offers a scathing critique of Disney's neoliberal philosophy that encourages passive consumption and counters democratic practices (using international sweatshop labor, turning public spaces into privatized ones, promoting rigid rules for its underpaid theme park staff at the same that it crushes union and labor disputes). At the same time, it presents itself as a wholesome company that promotes American family-friendly, middle-class values. As Henry Giroux states, Disney's products "relentlessly define America as white and middle class" (pg. 47).

Building upon the scholarship of Disney's ideology and Disney's political economy, scholars have coined the term Disneyfication to describe how Disney's ideology and propaganda have pervaded all aspects of culture and society (Giroux 1994; Bryman 2004; Hebdige 2003). One of the main points of Giroux's criticism of Disney is the fact that the company operates within a cultural public sphere where it seems immune to criticism as an "icon of American culture and middle-class values" (Giroux 2010, pg. 27). However, Giroux, Wasko and other critics of Disney argue that Disney's corporatism is by no means innocuous, and they call for the need to engage critically with its products and practices. As a media conglomerate, the Disney Corporation is a prime representative of the culture industry responsible for producing popular culture. As Henry Giroux points out, the ideology produced by Disney's media texts attempts to create a world of fantasy and magic but is simply an attempt to commercialize childhood (Giroux 2010).

Scholars of Disney Studies are especially interested in the ideological messages found in Disney's media products that are consumed by young audiences. For generations, Disney has produced many family-friendly films that have been analyzed for their implicit messages on gender, race, ethnicity, and heteronormativity (Giroux 2010; McQuillan & Byrne 1999; Bell et al. 1995; Hoerrner 1996). At the heart of this critique of Disney narratives lies the notion that the messages embedded in these films express a conservative, patriarchal, and heterosexual ideology. Class ideology also pervades Disney's classic narratives, particularly in tales around social mobility, such as *Cinderella* (1950). In my thesis, I look at how class fantasies in the tweencom genre create new narratives around this desire for social mobility. Just as Cinderella transforms her life by marrying a prince, tween protagonists in Disney and Nickelodeon tweencoms seek to transform their own lives when they get the opportunity to move into luxurious new homes (a theme I explore in vicarious living series) or when they

pursue the opportunity to become famous (a theme I explore in famecom series) or launch a business.

In exploring gender and Disney further, one particularly salient criticism of Disney ideology has noted the phenomenon of the 'Princess Effect' within classic Disney films such as *Snow White, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty,* which focus on storylines of passive princesses and young girls whose identity and purpose is defined through love and marriage (Davis 2007, Rozario 2004, Wohlwend 2009). A similar discourse on both gender and race within later Disney animation can be found in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bell, et al. 1995), where the authors analze animated films, including *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, produced during Disney's second renaissance of animated filmmaking from the late 1980s to 1990s. More recent heroines in Disney/Pixar films such as *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013) serve as counterpoints to the earlier Disney female representations by offering new narratives of active and independent girls exploring their identity, even if they are still cast in a world of heteronormativity and social hierarchy. Scholarship notes that the princess archetype in recent Disney films has changed to reflect a stronger female character (Stephens 2014). For Giroux, Disney's embrace of such representatives absolves the media giant from criticism of its prevalent sexist ideological narratives. Other academics point out how Disney's embrace of 'girl power' narratives and expansion of representations of diversity simply offers the company trends that it can further market and profit from (McRobbie 2008, Leon-Boys & Valdivia 2021).[10]

In discussing some of the currents around Disney scholarship, however, my thesis on class and tweencom ideology leans more heavily on the critique of Disney production as a corporate product. As I have discussed in my introductory chapter, I apply the contributions from scholars Henry Giroux (2010) and Natalie Coulter (2012) around 'the colonization of childhood,' to my study of the tweencoms. Within the following subsection, I consider how tweencom scholarship also necessitates an understanding of youth consumer culture. I also briefly trace how American television has portrayed youth over time, implicating them within commercial culture and neoliberalism.

[10] For example, the series *Stuck in the Middle* (Disney 2016-18) is about an American Latinidad family with a central character Harley Diaz. The star of the series, Jenny Ortega, references how the script initially envisioned the character to be named Hilary with blonde hair but colorblind casting allowed for the family to become Latindad. However, the series still minimized any markers of ethnic identity, according to Leon-Boys & Valdivia (2021).

2.3 Tweencoms, Sitcoms, and Ideology: Class and Consumer Culture

In this section, I reflect on how the scholarship examining children's consumer culture, sitcom representations, and sitcom ideology frames this thesis. I also place tweencoms within American sitcom history by looking at tweencoms as a subgenre of the domestic sitcom. Here my thesis briefly examines the social construction of childhood/adolescence throughout American television history, and I acknowledge that this topic could also be explored more thoroughly in further studies.

2.3.1 Youth Commercial Culture from Consumerism to Neoliberalism

As I noted in the introduction, the concept of the tween as a demographic first emerged and then proliferated as a marketing term. Just as the teen demographic has often been examined through their consumption of leisure time and purchases (Savage 2008, Palladino 1996), childhood and tweenhood have been similarly constructed. In her chapter "Disney and the Youth Market – It's a T(ween) World After All" from her book *Teen Media*, Valeria Wee (2010) posits how the power of a growing youth market created a space for tween media. Her analysis of Disney's entry into this market in the 2000s proposes similar findings to those stated by Sarah Banet-Weiser's study of Nickelodeon in her book *Kids Rule*! (2007).

From Sarah Banet-Weiser's conceptualization of the 'consumer citizen' of Nickelodeon to Henry Giroux's critique of Disney's practices of corporate capitalism, studies of youth culture frequently study young people's relationship to commercial culture. This is especially true within studies of tween popular culture. As Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh remind us in *Seven Going on Seventeen* (2005), "the term tween is derived from the mediated culture of marketing in North America in the first place" (pg. 4). In defining the term, the authors acknowledge that the tween is constructed as a consumer demographic, as the age group possesses "a distinct commodity culture" (pg. 6). In a study of Disney's marketing, Ruthann Mayes-Elma (2011) states that "kids and teens are now the epicentre of consumer culture in the United States" (pg. 174).

In the first decade of the 2000s, many books were written about youth consumerism as the tween demographic became female-gendered and 'crystallized as a market,' a topic I will return to in my case studies in Chapters 5 and 6 (Coulter 2014). In their chapter "Tween-Method and the Politics of Studying Kinderculture," Ingvild Sorensen and Claudia Mitchell (2005) break down these titles into two camps. On one side, texts highlight the

commodification of childhood and critique the marketing industry's power over children. A few of these texts published in the same year include *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (Quart, 2004), *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (Schor, 2004), and *Consuming Kids: Protecting Our Children from the Onslaught of Marketing and Advertising* (Linn, 2004). The second camp proclaims the child consumer more positively. The authors reiterate and simplify the understanding of kids as 'consumer citizens' when they write, "Here the market is presented as an arena for children to be individuals, free to be themselves regardless of parents, teachers, and other authority figures" (Sorensen & Mitchell, pg. 155). Such texts in this camp include *BRANDchild: Remarkable Insights into the Minds of Today's Global Kids and Their Relationships with Brands* (Lindstrom 2003) and *The Great Tween Buying Machine: Capturing Your Share of the Multibillion-Dollar Tween Market* (Siegel, Livingston & Coffey 2004).

This thesis leans more heavily on the scholarship critical of commercial culture. Additional scholarship that engages in an ideology of consumption and the commodification of children may be found in Henry Giroux's essay "Youth in the Empire of Consumption: Beyond the Pedagogy of Commodification" (2009) and Natalie Coulter's essay "From Toddlers to Teens: The Colonization of Childhood the Disney Way" (2012). As I referenced in the introductory chapter, Coulter's essay traces the construction of children as consumers as part of neoliberal ideology as youth becomes understood first and foremost as a market. Another contributive essay is David Buckingham's "Selling Childhood?: Children and Consumer Culture" (2007), which looks at how marketing has constructed the tween and shaped this demographic's subjectivity. Buckingham's essay notes the dichotomy of the literature around children's consumer culture, but he engages more with the construction of children as sophisticated consumers. Discussing Nickelodeon, he writes: "Children are defined here primarily in terms of being *not adults*. Adults are boring; kids are fun. Adults are conservative; kids are fresh and innovative. Adults will never understand; kids intuitively know. In the new world of children's consumer culture, kids rule" (pg. 16). Yet, at the same time, an examination of the history and trajectory of tweencom programs across the programming history of Nickelodeon and Disney reveals how often young characters assume adult roles and responsibilities. This assumption of adult roles, in turn, contrasts with the Nickelodeon marketing campaigns in the 1990s when young people were defined in opposition to adults.

Recent literature on youth culture also looks at the idolization of fame. I will look at this theme further in Chapter 5 as I consider how a number of tweencoms feature young people who are performers, musicians, and entertainers. Around the same time, several authors and studies in the 2000s addressed the idea that young people were currently obsessed with fame and celebrity by focusing on reality television and social media. These include Jean Twenge's *Generation Me* (2006) and *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2010), as well as Jake Halpern's *Fame Junkies* (2007/2021) and Spring-Serenity Duvall's *Celebrity and Youth: Mediated Audiences, Fame Aspirations, and Identity Formation* (2019). In Twenge's *Narcissism Epidemic* and Halper's *Fame Junkies*, both authors extensively cite a study known as "The Rochester Study." Given to middle-school students in Rochester, NY, this study found a correlation between the number of hours of television the students watched "and how badly they want to become famous" (Halpern 2007, pg. 12). Twenge references how other studies suggest young people have become more narcissistic due, in part, to increased media consumption and finds a high percentage of individuals (31%) who stated that they 'expected to become famous someday' (pg. 65). Both authors reference reality television shows, such as *American Idol* and *My Super Sweet 16* (MTV, 2005-16), and other celebrity-focused television shows and publications but not tween programs. As I will note later in Chapter 5, the trend of tweencoms focused on fame became so prevalent in the 2000s that I label a whole subgenre of tweencoms as famecoms.

Recent scholarship on tweencoms also acknowledges the trend of young protagonists engaged in creative labor and professional roles. As I referenced earlier, Doyle Greene (2012) devotes a chapter to the tweencom workplace comedy *True Jackson, VP*. In the series, the protagonist gets her dream job as a teen and throughout the series "represented the 'model worker' who took her job seriously and expressed that dedication through hard work, innovative ideas, and pragmatic adaptability to situations while keeping the job pleasant for herself and her colleagues" (Greene, pg. 93). Melissa Tanti's essay "The Labor of Creativity in Images of Networking Children" (2014) looks at this series, along with the famecoms, to suggest how these programs idealize creative labor. By portraying young people as workers, these series collapse childhood into adulthood – "almost entirely doing away with childhood as child newsmakers, fashion designers, web programmers, and professional celebrities struggle each week to balance the stresses of adolescence with the framework of demanding careers" (pg. 1). In Morgan Blue's study of girlhood on Disney Channel, the author considers how the channel often harnesses affective labor as 'incitements to perform' as girl fans of the

tweencoms are expected to express themselves through creative production. This is all part of Disney's 'can-do' messaging campaign, indicative of post-feminist practices that I will explicate further in the subsequent chapters (Blue 2017, pg. 35).

As I will review in the final chapter's case study of *Andi Mack* (Disney 2017-9), youth identity formation becomes a practice of self-construction through identity entrepreneurship. Similarly, scholarship on reality television often centralizes the goal of self-construction and self-management within the practices of late capitalism and neoliberalism. These premises foreground Laurie Ouellette's *Lifestyle TV* (2016) and *Better Living Through Reality TV* (2009) [with James Hay], where the self is always regulated and cultivated as a project around lifestyle practices. Within my thesis, I trace the history of tweencom programming to consider, in part, how tweencom characters construct themselves as citizen producers as they take on adult roles and responsibilities. To do this, I consider how tween characters have been constructed in American television by examining how adolescence, family roles, and lifestyles have been represented in America's sitcoms.

2.3.2 Sitcom Families and Class

While I traced the construction of tweens as consumers in the last section, here I scan American sitcom history and sitcom scholarship to consider how tweens have been portrayed over time on television. As I have suggested, tweencoms are a genre of domestic sitcoms, so it is necessary to acknowledge the extensive body of scholarship that has examined the representations of families on American television (Leppert 2019, Pugh 2018, Kutulas 2016, Tueth 2005, Lipsitz 2002, Haralovich 1989, Jones 1992, Taylor 1989, Hamamoto 1989).

Sketching the development of the domestic sitcom from the 1950s to the 2000s, Judy Kutulas (2016) examines how family dynamics and parenting styles on television changed over each decade, reflecting a cultural context. Families from the 1950s reflected patriarchal control through prototype families, best exemplified by the series *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954-1960). These sitcom families were imagined and idealized through their 'material affluence,' 'stability,' and 'respect for authority' to achieve the goal of domestic harmony (pg. 18-19). According to Kutulas, the 1950s sitcoms modelled family dynamics in which "parents raised their children to be crowd followers and pleasers, conformist and obedient" (pg. 25). For Mary Beth Haralovich (1989), the domestic sitcoms became dominated by portrayals of white, nuclear, middle-class families as she considers how the homes and spatial layouts of

these family sitcoms would promote middle-class ideology.[11] These 1950s sitcoms effectively mythologized the nuclear family, especially around prosperity.[12] Hamamoto (1989) points out that post-war American television created a 'cult of domesticity' by centralizing nuclear families around an authoritarian patriarch. According to Tueth (2005), the domestic sitcoms from this era followed a simple formula: "Most of the comic problems would revolve around the children, and the husband and wife would be depicted not so much as spouses but as parents, the voice of reason and sources of nurturing affection" (pg. 70). For many of the series of the 1950s and into the 1960s, younger characters were presented within the context of their family 'and certainly never in opposition to their family (Himmelstein 1994).[13]

Considering the sitcom families and young characters in sitcoms of the 1960s and 1970s, Kutulas (2016) suggests that by this time a few sitcoms like *Gidget* (ABC, 1965-66) and *The Patty Duke Show* (ABC, 1963-1966) reflected the points of view of the younger characters. By emphasizing the generation gap between the adults and children, these sitcoms "began to undermine TV parents' authority by privileging the independence of their adult or nearly adult (i.e. teen) children" (pg. 20). By the 1970s, sitcom families often broke the earlier domestic harmony by legitimizing rebellion, questioning authority, and increasingly reflecting social realities such as divorce.

Ella Taylor's *Prime Time Families* (1989) observes how domestic sitcoms reflected changing ideas about the social psychology of family life. As an interaction between society and popular culture, television reflected changes in family structure and relationships in the number of sitcoms from the 1970s featuring families that were troubled or fractured through divorce or division, including *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-79) and *One Day at a Time* (CBS, 1975-84). Taylor then describes how later family sitcoms of the 1980s offered a return to the harmonious family and a reinstatement of the nuclear and harmonious family in many popular

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[11] "The suburban dream house underscored this homogeneous definition of the suburban family. Domestic architecture was designed to display class attributes and reinforce gender-specific functions of domestic space" (Haralovich 1989, pg. 76).

[12] "If there is a single characteristic that unifies almost all the sitcom heroes, it is prosperity," and this is exemplified by the fact that "the houses of sitcom characters seem to be always just a bit better than they could afford in the real world" (Grote 1983, pg. 92-93). Another strategy was the fact that many middle-class families engaged full-time domestic help. This strategy continued through the domestic sitcom *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969-1974) where the family employs a full-time cook/houseworker even while the mother does not work outside the home.

[13] These series include *Father Knows Best* (CBS/NBC, 1954-60), *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet* (ABC, 1952-66), *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS/ABC, 1957-63), *My Three Sons* (ABC/CBS, 1960-72), *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-66), and *The Danny Thomas Show* (ABC/CBS, 1953-64).

series with middle-class to upper-middle-class families, especially with *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92), *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-92), and *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-89). In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, though, the nuclear family was satirized in domestic series about "dysfunctional families", including *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-), *Married with Children* (Fox, 1987-97), and *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97), where family argument rather than agreement was more commonplace. The dysfunction often correlated to the fact that these families belonged to the working class.

For Kutulas and Taylor, the harmonious family sitcoms of the 1980s may have recalled the 1950s sitcom but reflected current gender roles and family dynamics. While they described earlier sitcom families as 'patriarch' with the father in charge, they describe 1980s domestic sitcom families as 'democratic' since both parents work and share household duties, including raising and instructing the children. Kululas emphasizes how parents in these sitcoms, best exemplified in *The Cosby Show*, also helped 'cultivated independence in their children.' Here Kutulas describes how the ideal parents from this era practice tolerance and employ a "personal, democratic style of parenting and emphasized autonomy rather than obedience" (pg. 25).

While families became 'democratic' by the 1980s, scholars who have looked at tweencoms (Banet-Weiser 2007, Greene 2012), have often labelled parenting styles portrayed on the tween programs as liberal and progressive. Banet-Weiser provides a close reading of how one episode of *Clarissa* (S2E6, "The Misguidance Counselor") serves as an inter-textual commentary of earlier television domestic sitcoms like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* by spoofing the concepts of the 'normal family.' Banet-Weiser emphasizes that in contrast to the authoritarian patriarchy from the 1950s sitcoms, Clarissa's parents instead reflect a more liberal, permissive style of parenting by allowing her a great deal of freedom to create her own identity. Clarissa's family dynamics replicate 1980s sitcoms in other ways, particularly with the significance of the parents possessing professional careers and a domestic space that conveys middle-class identity, aspects that I will analyze further in Chapter 4. Doyle Greene (2012) suggests that Clarissa's parents reflect a liberal parenting style by instilling Clarissa with personal responsibility, giving her permission to get a part-time job or pick out her own clothes for her school picture day. At the same time, this liberal parenting style contrasts with

the contemporary discourses of over-parenting in which 'helicopter parents' and 'tiger moms' became overly invested in controlling all aspects of their children's lives.[14]

In examining the history of American tweencom programming, I also look at how youth represented in this genre became increasingly affected by the neoliberal values of consumption, self-investment, and self-promotion. According to Ronaldo Munck in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader* (2005), "Neoliberalism sought to convert the citizen into a consumer," allowing individuals to express their identity through the practices of consumption (pg. 65). As neoliberalism morphed from a political and economic ideology into an ideology of individualism, "the dominant ideological framing of neoliberalism" became understood to be the *self*, where "each individual is asked to draw purpose, fulfillment, and sustenance from skilfully expanding their market value" (Murray 2019, pg. 7). In multiple tweencoms, I look at how the young protagonists either possess a great deal of personal and financial responsibility or strive for achievement and recognition through self-promotion. The narrative independence of these tween characters reflects youth empowerment. As I argue in my thesis, this empowerment simply translates as an engagement in class fantasy as tween characters pursue a professional career or pursue the American Dream, with a focus on achieving financial success, while they are still in their youth.

2.3.3 Sitcom Class Ideology

Having looked at a brief history of American sitcom family representations, I consider how American sitcoms have a deeply embedded ideology around class. Throughout multiple studies of popular primetime networks, media scholar Richard Butsch notes that considerations of social class in television have been neglected factors in research on American television (Butsch 2003, 2005, 2016). Since my thesis highlight class, Butsch's scholarship serves as a starting point to understand class ideology and hegemony in American television.

The study of mass media portrayals of class in primetime network television has been conducted in several studies by Butsch in his analysis of domestic sitcoms. In his reflection on class hegemony in American television, he points out that there have been very few sitcoms built around working-class narratives. In a historical study of American domestic sitcoms broadcast on primetime from 1946 to 2004, Butsch notes an absence of working-class

[14] See Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zillibott's "The Rise of Helicopter Parents" (2019) and Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011).

television families. He notes that approximately 10% of the series ever portrayed working-class or blue-collar households, even though 45% of American families could be categorized as such (Butsch 2005, 2010). The very situation he describes in his study, the underrepresentation of working-class occupations and the minimal visibility of the working class, along with the overrepresentation and idealization of a professional middle-class, reflect a hegemony where "mass media portrayals justify class relations of modern capitalism" (Butsch 2010, p. 101). Gerbner has referred to such marginalization of working-class people to the periphery of television as "symbolic annihilation," as being invisible in the dominant cultural discourse that, in turn, over-represents the upper classes (Gerbner, et al. 1978). Studies have then shown how middle and upper classes are overrepresented on television so that "middle-class audiences see little of working-class conditions and know even less about working-class views. Television characters, in general, live in a professional world of abundance – well dressed, well fed, and for want of nothing" (Artz 2000, p. 276).

One trope that Butsch writes about is the concept of the ineffectual working-class buffoon (Butsch 2003). In Butsch's study of class portrayal in television, he finds that middle-class families consist of competent, mature, and sensible parents while working-class families often contain a father characterized as a buffoon, citing examples from *The Honeymooners, The Simpsons,* and *All in the Family*. However, an alternative argument is that the middle-class family unit becomes inverted in the tween sitcom structure, since kids prove to be more sensible, intelligent, and independent while the middle-class parents often act like buffoons.[15] Richard Butsch's scholarship is critical for discussions of social class in contemporary American sitcoms. However, it is also necessary to note that Butsch only considers family sitcoms on network primetime television, so an update of his study on portrayals of class in television should consider series from the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon networks, among other cable and streaming services.

Like Butsch's scholarship, Lewis Freeman's *Sitcom Society: Social Stratification and Social Mobility in Situation Comedy* (2008) examines representations of social class and social mobility in popular sitcoms. Noting that standard measures of social standing include occupation, wealth, and education, Freeman views multiple episodes from each sitcom to code the occupations and perceived financial status of major characters, finding that 75% of

[15] In *Victorious*, Tori's mother is described in the following manner: "She also apparently has a hard time understanding common sense" (Wikia, Holly Vega). The father in *Drake & Josh* is described as "a weatherman that is almost always wrong about the weather. Because of this, many characters of the series, and even his own family, poke fun or get mad at him" (Wikia, Walter Nichols).

characters possess careers in management compared to 30% of the actual United States population who have such positions (pg. 38). Characters who are small business owners were abundantly represented, as are characters who work in media industries or the performing arts, while lower-level workers are relatively absent (38-40). In total, the majority of the main characters belong to upper and upper-middle classes. The scholarship from both Butsch and Freeman affirms how the middle and upper classes are overrepresented and normalized in American television, reflecting an ideology that I use as a starting point in my analysis of how class fantasy and class ideology pervade the tweencoms.

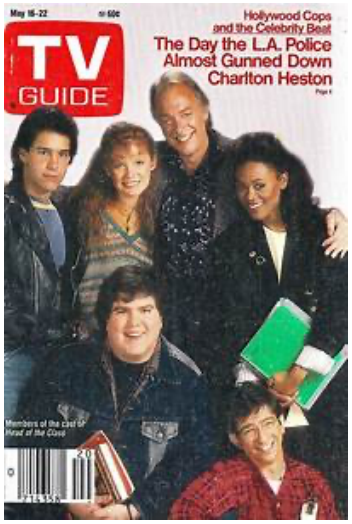

Figure 1 - Promo for *Head of the Class* (Dan Schneider, lower left, wrote and produced many series for Nickelodeon, beginning in the 1990s. Dan Frischman, lower right, starred as Chris, Kenan's employer, in *Kenan & Kel*. Brian Robbins, upper left, pursued a career as a television/film executive, including serving as the president of Nickelodeon. In 2021, he became president of Paramount Pictures).

In *Teacher TV: Sixty Years of Years on Television* (2008), Mary Dalton and Laura Linder examine another sitcom genre, the classroom sitcom, that I find useful as a tweencom forerunner, although these series have not been studied as thoroughly as domestic sitcoms. At the same time, they reflect class ideology that foreshadows the dominance of class fantasy in tweencoms. In their chapter on 1980s sitcoms, Dalton and Linder examine how three classroom-based sitcoms *Fame* (NBC, 1982-87), *Head of the Class* (ABC, 1986-1991), and *The Facts of Life* (NBC, 1979-1988) exemplified the ideology of meritocracy. The settings of the sitcoms, a performing arts school, an accelerated classroom for gifted students, and an elite boarding school for girls, provide useful forerunners for the tweencoms examined in my study. In each sitcom, racial, ethnic, gender, class, and age demarcations are eliminated; everyone possesses an equal sense of belonging within an elite setting. According to Dalton and Linder, the sitcoms aired at a time when the divide between the rich and poor increased. However,

both sitcoms reinforce a myth of meritocracy, the idea that de-emphasizes barriers to upward mobility and instead affirms American Dream mentality that states, "You can go as far as your talents and abilities take you" (pg. 1). In particular, *Head of the Class* serves as tweencom forerunner with its emphasis of representing 'exceptional, gifted youth.' At the same time, it served as a sitcom training ground for several figures who found prominent careers in Nickelodeon [see Figure 1 above]. Since the narrative of the American Dream is an important concept in my thesis, I will reflect on this idea further as I reflect further on class in American popular culture, media, and Cultural Studies.

2.4 Examining Class in American Culture and Media

In this section, I review some of the scholarship on class across the fields of media studies, popular culture, and sociology. The field of British Cultural Studies, referred to as the Birmingham School, where the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was officially established in 1964, took up the study of class as one of its central concerns. Scholars of media and popular culture who were directly affiliated directly with this school (Angela McRobbie) or more generally attached to the larger field of Cultural Studies (John Hartley and John Fiske) are scholars that I reference throughout my thesis as they often interrogate class, youth culture, media, and popular culture. I acknowledge how this scholarly tradition serves as a background to my own analysis of American television as I engage with more recent studies of class in American culture. In their introduction *In Media and Class: TV, Film, and Digital Culture* (2017*)*, June Deery and Andrea Press state that they find a renewed interest in the examination of class within media studies, spurred on in part by the global politics of the 2010s, and they call for further engagement with the subject. My thesis aims to provide a further understanding of this subject by examining one popular genre of American television.

2.4.1 Understanding Class

American scholarship offers several ways to conceptualize class. In *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, bell hooks (2000) refers to *class* as the 'elephant in the room,' acknowledging that while America remains a class-based society, the subject receives little attention, as the country prefers to imagine itself to be a class-free society, despite widening gaps between the rich and poor. Noting this contradiction, hooks writes, "For so long everyone has wanted to hold on to the belief that the United States is a class-free society – that anyone who works hard enough can make it to the top. Few people stop to think that in a class-free society there is no

top" (pg. 5). In recounting her life story, she initially discusses how class is often thought of simply in terms of having, or not having, money. Extending a critique to how capitalism creates class differences, hooks notes how capitalism still affects both the rich and poor alike "by their shared obsession with consumption" as they are taught "the only way out of class shame is through conspicuous consumption" (pg. 46). In *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, historian Paul Fussell (1983) refers to *class* as a 'touchy subject' in which it is often understood, via Max Weber, as "the amount of money you have and the kind of leverage it gives you." To this definition, he adds the notion of *class status* to refer to how class gives a person 'social status' (pg. 24). In *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture*, Gwendolyn Foster (2005) defines class as an identity marker like race, gender, and sexuality, that can be signified through how one acts: "Class is not only about wealth, status, and birth, but also about everyday performance" (pg. 8). Finally, Janet Zandy (1996) provides a working definition of *class* as "an experience of shared economic circumstances and shared social and cultural practices in relation to positions of power." Zandy adds, "What needs to be understood is that although class identity is shaped by income and wealth, money is only a part of that story. It is what economic privilege can purchase in terms of access and power that really marks class difference" (pg. 8).

In my examination of tweencom protagonists, I acknowledge how class is often marked by their background – what their parents provide them – as well as by their expectations. As I contend, the theme of class fantasy frames these series as so many of these series centralize aspirational narratives that idealize class status and class mobility. How is class determined? In my case studies of Disney and Nickelodeon tweencoms, I will indicate the visible markers of class by looking at the homes, bedrooms, parents, possessions ,and other status-markers, as well as by looking at the ideology surrounding young people's desires to possess these markers. For example, one way that class is often denoted and determined by occupation, according to American sociologist Erick Olin Wright (1980), a Marxist scholar who wrote about class and American society throughout his career (1996, 2005, 2015). Wright proposes that "the most common operationalization of class is explicitly in terms of a typology of occupations," where the upper-middle class are professionals, the middle class are white-collar workers, and the working class are manual laborers (1980, pg. 177). In *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*, Diane Kendall (2011) adds, "A class system is a type of social stratification based on the ownership and control of resources and on the type of work people do," in which 'resources' refer to either income or wealth (pg.

13). Fussell, Wright, Zandy, and Kendall each explicate how class can then be structured or measured into different levels or typologies, explicated further in the following section, often through economic data and statistics.

2.4.2 Framing Class in Contemporary America

Class is structured, organized, and categorized. Despite the vision offered by the American Dream that upward social mobility is common, Paul Fussell in *Class* (1983) states that individuals largely remain in the same socioeconomic status that they were born into. Expanding the traditional divisions of American class from three – upper, middle, and lower – Fussell expands this taxonomy into nine different classes, describing how each can be marked through visible signs and customs. In the final chapter, he idealistically describes category X to refer to artists and academics who have found a way out of these class structures, people who represent a 'classless class.' Reviewing the 25th anniversary of the book's publication, Sandra Tsing Loh reflects on the popularity of Fussell's wish to escape class parameters in her article "Class Dismissed" (2009), where she imagines how Category X can now refer to the contemporary category of 'affluent hipdom.' For Loh, the people who are privileged to live outside or not think about class include those individuals who comprise the 'creative class,' identified by Richard Florida (2002) as educated urban professionals. In a study of Wes Anderson's films, Timotheus Vermeulen (2019) notes how Florida's 'creative class' can be thought of as a "distinctly neoliberal type" as they comprise a class without class consciousness, a class that create for a living, live in creative urban communities, enjoy flexible and casual working conditions since they often work independently, and feel tolerance towards others or support progressive politics (pg. 332). I contend that the protagonists of American tweencom embody many of these same markings of the creatives class since they too live in creative urban settings and often work – or strive to work - in creative professions. Therefore, I name this class of tweencom characters the 'creative class minors.'

In *Framing Class*, Diane Kendall (2011) looks at how class is framed and categorized in American culture, employing a hierarchal model developed by Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl (1982, 2011) that divides American society into six classes – the upper class (the capitalist class), the upper-middle class, the middle class, the working class, the working poor, and the underclass (the poor or homeless). This model includes both economic (income and wealth) and status variables, which Fussell also identifies in his analysis of class. According to this model, Kendall writes that the upper class refers to the top 1%. Right below them, the

upper middle class represents roughly 14% of the U.S. population and generally includes educated professionals who are managers or business owners. Next, the middle class includes roughly 30% of the population who are often employed as lower-level managers or employees with supervisors in the workplace. Below the middle class, the working class compose another 30% of the population and often include semiskilled workers in blue-collar jobs such as the service sector. Below the working class are the working poor that include around 13% of the population, as they typically earn minimum wage and live near the poverty line.[16] The underclass then includes the unemployed, the homeless, or part-time workers who live below the poverty line, which includes about 12% of the nation's population.

The concept of framing refers to how individuals see the world, and Kendall makes the case that media in America constructs class for audiences. Kendall notes how American audiences persist in identifying as middle-class because the media helps them to self-identify with this social class. One recent poll showed that more Americans consider themselves to be middle-class than they actually are, as they prefer to think of themselves as middle class rather than working class (Martin 2017). The middle class is idealized in American culture as the heart of American society, as Lawrence Samuel states in *The American Middle-Class: A Cultural History* (2013). On the other hand, media frames of the working class and of working-class labor are often negative, as these individuals are blamed for their lack of class mobility. This framing then limits people from wanting to identify with this social class. Writer and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich provides detailed accounts of the class struggles from a first-person perspective. In *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), the author chronicles her attempt to survive as a member of the working poor by working at a series of minimum wage jobs and trying to make ends meet.[17]

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[16] Kendall states that income differences often distinguish the upper-middle class from the middle class, where the upper class have households where annual incomes average $150,000 while middle class household average $70,000 in annual incomes and the working class include households making an average of $40,000. The working poor then earn around $25,000 as a household income and the poor earn below that amount (pg. 15-17).

[17] As a rebuttal to Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, Adam Shepard wrote *Scratch Beginnings: Me, $25, and the Search for the American Dream* (2009). After college, the middle-class Shepard followed Barbara Ehrenreich's model in trying to pass as working-class and sought a series of unskilled jobs that didn't require a college degree and where he wouldn't disclose his class background or education, attempting to prove that he would get a job, car, and bank account within one year by starting out in a homeless shelter. Although he succeeded in his goals, his premise highlights the racial and gendered experience of class as he benefited by being young, white, male, and able-bodied and that his 'American dream' goals only advanced him into working-class employment but not entry into the middle-class.

In media depictions of the wealthy, Kendall writes about how media often frames this group positively. In addition, depictions of the wealthy offer audiences another opportunity – vicarious living. Kendall describes how this process works:

> Television shows, magazines, and newspapers sell the idea that the only way to get ahead is to identify with the rich and powerful and to live vicariously through them. From sitcoms to reality shows, the media encourage ordinary people to believe that they may rise to fame and fortune; they too can be the next winner of the lottery or American Idol. Constantly bombarded by stories about the lifestyles of the rich and famous, viewers feel a sense of intimacy with elites, with whom they have little or no contact in their daily lives. (pg. 171).

Kendall argues that American media frames vicarious living by constantly showing how the wealthy elite enjoy a lifestyle that audiences are fascinated by and aspire to. These media frames lead audiences to want to identify with this class, affecting how viewers think about class divisions and social inequality, where viewers tend to regard the affluent in positive terms. This leads to the trend where Americans overestimate what class they belong to, as they choose to internalize and identify with the class they *want* to belong to. As I will detail in chapters 4 to 6, this identification with the wealthy becomes a salient feature of the tweencom genre. Richard Butsch's studies on sitcom families and Diana Kendall's study on class-framing both bear this out: Within American media, audiences used to seeing and/or prefer seeing narratives of their socioeconomic superiors.

2.4.3 Television, Class, and the American Dream

As I have referenced in the previous section, Richard Butsch (2005), Mary Beth Haralovich (1989), Gerald Jones (1992), and Ella Taylor (1989) reveal in their scholarship of American sitcom families that American television often reinforces a middle-class ideal by depicting families displaying middle-class comforts and affluence and engages in upward mobility. Sitcoms centered around nuclear families became important in American post-war domestic sitcoms because they were selling an idea and an ideal around the nuclear family and the suburbs. According to Jones, suburbanites were addressed as "prime consumers, prime targets of the manufacturing and advertising worlds," while the suburbs became associated with "freedom, wealth, happiness, personal fulfillment" (pg. 89). Of course, the families who lived in the suburbs and were represented in domestic sitcoms at this time constituted only the White middle class, as Mary Beth Haralovich asserts in her essay "Sitcom and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s homemaker" (1989). In *Laughter in the Living Room*, Michael Tueth (2005) refers to the Nelson family from *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet* as one such

embodiment of "the perfect images of the American family" in which the father never seemed to have to work and the mother always appeared content (pg. 72). Meanwhile, Jennifer Gillan (2015) looks at the series, focusing on how the set design of the series and personas of the actors were used in product pitches for commercials. Gillan argues that the "consumer-orientated suburban lifestyle" was continually reinforced by the series, as the sitcom often and seamlessly integrated product placements and product endorsements. In their analyses of suburban domestic sitcoms, both Jones and Gillan link the notion of the American Dream to a consumer-based lifestyle.

Initially conceived as the belief that upward mobility was achievable by anyone through hard work (Hanson & White 2011), the American Dream became increasingly linked to consumer culture. Embracing materialism allowed one to showcase that they could afford a consumer lifestyle. Achieving the American Dream then became commonly defined simply as being rich (Kamp 2009). June Deery writes, "The Dream implies that the United States offers considerable social mobility so that anyone can be rich or powerful – but especially rich" (Deery 2012, pg. 105). In *Affluenza* (2005), John de Graff, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor introduce the term affluenza to refer to "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more" (pg. 2). The authors critique how commodity consumption became a part America's contemporary society while the term affluenza has been subsequently applied especially to young people engaged with over-consumption.[18]

Reinforcing a belief in social mobility, the American Dream functions as ideology of capitalism and neoliberalism.[19] According to Hanson and White, "The American Dream is deeply embedded in American mythology and in the consciousness of its citizens" (pg. 7). Publishing their book immediately after America's Great Recession (2007-2009), the authors

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[18] The Affluenza teen became a widely reported case where a young man, Ethan Crouch, age 16, killed four people while driving intoxicated. During his trial, his defense lawyers claimed that he suffered from Affluenza since his wealthy parents never corrected his behavior or taught him right from wrong.

[19] Scholars point out how reality programs reflect neoliberal ideology. According to Henry Giroux (2014), neoliberalism "privileges personal responsibility over larger social forces… [and] privileges the entrepreneurial subject while encouraging a value system that promotes self-interest, if not unchecked selfishness" (Giroux 2014, p. 1). In reality television programs, working-class people are often depicted in make-over or self-improvement shows that reinforce the idea that they must better themselves to move into the middle class; therefore, these shows have "contributed to a broader discourse of neoliberal self-governance by encouraging on-screen talent – and viewers alongside – to take responsibility for their own trouble" (Wells 2015, p. 36).

trace how the idea is frequently invoked throughout political rhetoric and persists as a foundational myth that can be traced to the Declaration of Independence, which states that citizens are endowed with certain inalienable rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While America is often held up to be a class-less or class-blind society, the belief in the American Dream suggests that upward social mobility is achievable through hard work or talent. In *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream*, Karen Sternheimer (2014) explores the importance of celebrity culture in promoting and shaping (or skewing) the American Dream. According to Sternheimer, celebrity culture reinforces "the ever-changing notion of what it means to achieve the American Dream and often becomes implicated in creating illusions of mobility (pg. 24). At the same time, recent scholarship has questioned the premise of the American Dream, criticized growing wealth inequality in the United States, and lamented a disappearing middle-class (Smith 2012, Ludwig 2020, Fergus 2018). Within this space, tweencoms offer reassuring counter-narratives as they continue to reflect boundless optimism and faith in the American Dream.

Across three chapters, I track the American Dream in my case studies on tweencoms. These series all affirm the ideology of the American Dream as tweencoms are aspirational in nature. First, tweencoms overwhelmingly place characters into upper or middle-class households in the first place, undercutting any real need for further upward mobility. Second, characters often succeed precisely through chance and luck rather than hard work as tween characters find – or seek – easy access to social mobility in famecoms or in a series such as *Game Shakers (Nickelodeon* 2015-19), where the young protagonists become successful entrepreneurs overnight. In these series, the American Dream becomes understood as achieving fame and fortune.

In the end, tweencoms reflect "fantasies of effortless economic mobility" described by Evan Cooper (2015) in the genre he refers to as 'rich teen soaps.' In the essay "Teens Win: Purveying Fantasies of Effortless Economic Mobility and Social Attainment on Rich Teen Soaps," Cooper refers to *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000) and its reboot *90210* (2008-13), *The O.C.* (2003-07), and *Gossip Girl* (2007-12) as 'rich teen dramas.' Cooper attributes their popularity, in part, to the fact that they "allay anxieties about social mobility and parental dependence by wedding the 'teens win' ethos to a meritocratic spirit that denies any sense of economic or social limitations" (pg. 739). Cooper notes that other trends of these series include "denial of financial realities" and characters who transcend class boundaries (pg 740, 741). As I will detail in Chapter 5, the tweencom universe often obscures financial realities

through class-blindness when protagonists get to enjoy lifestyles beyond their means as 'class floaters.' Throughout tweencoms, class is rarely addressed, and class boundaries are never really transcended as they are never recognized to begin with. While my last case study in Chapter 6, *Andi Mack* (Disney, 2017-19), does present moments of cross-classing and downward social mobility, this occurs only with the acknowledgement that familial ties are present to offer networks of financial support.

2.5 Conclusion

A study of class representations in television through ideological analysis cannot ignore other research traditions such as political economy. Political economy, according to David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), sees the relationship between ownership and political power as the main areas of influence in shaping media structures and output. In other words, the content of the media and the meaning of its messages are determined by the economic base of the organizations in which they are produced. A political economy approach to studying television would focus on its production, such as how a series is owned, produced, and/or distributed by a media conglomerate because television is, after all, an industry. Scholars, including Eileen Meehan (2007), observe that political economy is not necessarily an alternative approach but a parallel one that supports studies from the Cultural Studies tradition. While these research traditions are often separated, Meehan makes the case that they can support each other by writing about how textual analysis combined with political economy can provide a fuller understanding of media products. Comprehensive research that seeks to properly engage in a study of primetime's mediated programming could use the approaches from both ideological criticism and political economy to understand and critique media. Therefore, in the next chapter, I provide an overview of the institutional and industrial contexts of American television to situate the rise of the tweencom genre within the American television industry.

3. The Tweencom Industry: Tweencoms and American Television

In this chapter, I consider the institutional frameworks around the tweencom within the American television industry. As outlined in the introductory chapter, I model my thesis around the approach favored by television scholars Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz outlined in *Television Studies* (2012). They recommend that any study of television should reference at least two of the following: the program, the audience, and the industry. Moreover, they recommend that any study should consider contexts, or the "sociocultural, techno-industrial, and historical conditions" of the phenomena of study (pg. 25). In Chapters 4 through 6, I will look at individual programs and their contexts. In this chapter, I focus on institutions and institutional contexts. By institutions, I refer more broadly to American television's cable industry. The expansion of cable television in the United States fostered the development and growth of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, along with hundreds of other cable channels. The rise of the cable industry and cable programming in the United States, a history that has been examined by Megan Mullen (2009) and Patrick Parsons (2008), shaped American television through media synergy, narrowcasting, niche audiences, and channel branding. I target the branding of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, as I argue that social class and class ideology play an integral role within these channels by looking at their sitcom programming. By looking at multiple tweencoms throughout both networks' programming histories in the subsequent chapters, I identify how these series continually extol ideals around conspicuous consumption, the American Dream, and neoliberalism.

By briefly examining the histories and developments of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, this chapter serves as a contextual background for my subsequent chapters on the individual programs from each network. At the same time, this chapter also serves to expand my literature review as I acknowledge the contributions of key scholarship from media studies, particularly within the subfield of critical media industry studies. This chapter, therefore, also helps to integrate my thesis within this body of scholarship. Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic outline the methods and theories of this field's research agenda in their seminal essay "Critical Media Industry Studies" (Havens 2009). In this essay, they emphasize the study of media *as an industry*. The authors consider how their approach intersects cultural studies and media studies scholarship by proclaiming, "We are primarily interested in the production of entertainment programming, thus limiting the usefulness of many political-economic theories and perspectives" (235-236)." Media scholars Daniel

Herbert, Aswin Punathambekar, and Amanda Lotz broaden their review of the field in their book *Media Industry Studies* (Herbert 2020). The field of media industry studies is, first and foremost, understood as a subfield of critical media studies, which Michele Hilmes (2018) defines as "the critical analysis of texts – not texts in isolation, but as they are produced by industries and institutions, and received by audiences and societies" (xii). In their book, Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar expand this definition. They write, "At its core, the media industry studies we articulate are focused on the critical analysis of how individuals, institutions, and industries produce and circulate cultural forms in historically and geographically contextualized ways" (pg. 7). The authors identify how studies of American television and representational identities fit within media industry studies by considering scholarship around race (Gray 1995), sexuality (Becker 2006), and gender (Lotz 2006) but neglect references to class within television studies.[20]

As I have argued in my previous chapters, there is a need for further investigation of social class in American television, so my thesis offers this intervention. At the same time, I have previously pointed out how, historically, few series in American television portrayed working-class families by noting the prolific scholarship of Richard Butsch on this subject. Acknowledging this lack of positive portrayals of the working class in American television, Brett Mills (2005) cites how the creative workforce within the television industry contributes to this underrepresentation of working-class narratives on American television since they overwhelmingly come from middle-class backgrounds, but this issue within critical industry studies remains outside the scope of my project.

In this chapter, I start with a discussion of the importance of branding from Nickelodeon and Disney. Then I discuss the Nickelodeon network as I chart how the tweencom originated on Nickelodeon and how the network's industrial, programming and production decisions contributed to the development and growth of the genre. After I trace Nickelodeon's history, I next turn my attention to Disney Channel by looking at the development and growth of that network. I finally consider more recent developments from both networks contemporaneously. In the second half of my thesis, I organize the chapters

[20] Some of the key scholarship referenced in "Critical Media Studies: A Research Approach" (2009) as media industry studies include Hartley's *Creative Industries* (2005), Caldwell's *Production Culture* (2008), Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* (1983), Hesmondhalgh's *The Cultural Industries* (2002), and Turow's *Media Systems in Society* (1997). Throughout my thesis, I cite Hartley, Gitlin, and Turow extensively as key scholarship that informs my study. In *Media Industry Studies* (2020), the authors trace the expansion of the field in the 2000s, which can be noted by the launch of the academic journal *Media Industries* in 2014.

that follow (Chapters 4-6) around what could be termed 'eras' or 'periods,' a practice that Amanda Lotz often uses in her analysis of the American television industry. In *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (2018), Lotz divides television transformations into two eras: one around cable (1996-2010) and the second around the Internet (2010-2016). In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2014), Lotz demarcates three distinct eras of television: the network era from the 1950s to mid-1980s, the multi-channel transition from the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s, and the post-network era from the early 2000s.

By looking at tweencoms from these two cable networks from the early 1990s to late 2010s, I demarcate three eras within my study. I call the first era, "The Golden Age of Nickelodeon" (1991-2000), which I will define in Chapter 4. I then refer to the second era as "The Disney Channel Decade" (2001-2012), which I discuss in Chapter 5. I classify the third era as "The Transitional Era of Tweencoms" (2013-2019), marked by a steady decline of traditional television viewing as young audiences migrated to streaming platforms. In each era, I examine how programming patterns often revolved around signature series, which helped contribute to each network's identity.[21] These signature series help reveal how narrative themes circulated, and recirculated, across the two networks. As former Nickelodeon insiders lamented in *Slimed!: An Oral History of Nickelodeon* (Klickstein 2013), the sitcom programming from both networks essentially became indistinguishable by the 2000s. In my thesis, I argue that class fantasy and class ideology played a fundamental role that shaped the programming histories of these two networks. Tweencoms helped to brand Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, and class fantasies became the signature element of these programs.

3.1 Nickelodeon & Disney Channel Branding

Before looking at the individual programs and networks, I first consider how both cable channels utilized similar network strategies around branding. These strategies include program development, scheduling, and promotions. According to Erin Copple Smith (2009) and Amanda Lotz (2018), original program development became increasingly important for

[21] I chose to use the term 'signature series' as a more useful term than Lotz's concept of 'phenomenal television' (2014) since I focus on linking the series to a specific channel and demographic, although I see similarities and differences with the two terms. For Lotz, phenomenal television becomes relevant to a broader society when a series achieves 'watercooler status' (pg. 43). Such 'watercooler status' may have a corollary for programs marketed to younger audiences. For example, Cynthia Maurer discusses how tween girls talk about tween sitcoms in her article "Tween Girls Use of Television to Navigate Friendship" (2018).

cable channels to distinguish themselves. Even though Disney Channel and Nickelodeon already catered to a niche youth audience, they still had to compete between themselves and with new networks (Cartoon Network, which launched 1992) and programming blocks from other networks (Fox Kids, which launched 1990). With the rise in the number of cable channels in what Lotz termed "the multi-channel transition era," scholars have argued that channel branding became increasingly necessary (Gillan 2015, Johnson 2011). In *Television Brandcasting* (2015), Jennifer Gillan examines how networks build their brands through various strategies that include scheduling, programming, promotion, and narrowcasting. She then analyzes how both ABC and Disney Channel used these strategies. For both networks, the development of youth-orientated sitcoms became crucial for targeting their desired audiences. Tracing the history of ABC, a network that aimed to target more youthful audiences than the older demographics of CBS and NBC, Gillan acknowledges the debt that Disney owes ABC: "Today, Disney Channel and Disney-owned ABC Family air the series that most resemble or explicitly copycat elements of ABC sitcoms" (pg.139).[22]

Developing programs and appealing to specific audiences became two essential elements within channel branding. When the fourth major network, FOX, launched in 1986, its marketing strategy sought to target young and urban audiences with a rollout of its original programs. According to Gray and Lotz (2012), Fox's branding identified it as "the hip, young, and edgy alternative" (pg. 129). Other studies also trace how early FOX programming - and later UPN – targeted African-American audiences who felt underserved by the three major networks (Zook 1999). Through the 1990s and 2000s, more channels, including UPN, The WB, CW, and ABC Family, heavily targeted younger audiences with tween dramas. In contrast to these channels that primarily offered teen melodramas on their evening schedules, Nickelodeon and Disney remained consistent in establishing a brand for families and young audiences with a commitment to comedy programming, especially around developing domestic sitcoms.[23]

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[22] Such sitcoms include the TGIF programming block that ABC developed for Friday evenings, which are referenced in the previous chapters.

[23] For Fox, original programs included the domestic satire *Married with Children* (1987-1997), sketch-comedy series *The Tracey Ullman Show* (1987-1990) which introduced *The Simpsons* (1989-) to audiences, teen dramas like *21 Jump Street* (1987-1991) and *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000), and late-night talk shows hosted first by acerbic Joan Rivers (1986-1987) and then Arsenio Hall (1989-1994). Popular WB programs included the family dramas *7th Heaven* (1996-2006) *and Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and teen dramas *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001) and *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003). Popular CW programs included the teen dramas *Gossip Girl* (2007-12*), One Tree Hill* (2006-12), and *90210*'s reboot (2008-2013).

Within the post-network era of the 2000s, channel branding became more pronounced around age demographics as cable channels targeted more narrow audiences. Both Nickelodeon and Disney offered specific programming blocks for their audience and eventually launched sister channels for specific youth demographics. Nickelodeon debuted Nick Jr. in 1999 with programs aimed at pre-schoolers, such as *Blue's Clues* (1996-2007) and *Dora the Explorer* (2000-2015). The network then launched both NickToons, focused exclusively on animated series, and TeenNick in 2002. As part of the cable network's synergy, these sister channels relied extensively on second runs on programs produced by Nickelodeon, so many of the network's more popular series continued to be watched regularly in syndication on either Nickelodeon or a sister channel. Likewise, Disney Channel launched Toon Disney in 1998, then rebranded it as Disney XD in 2009 as it expanded its programming beyond animated series. Another sister channel, Disney Junior, debuted in 2012 for pre-schoolers. In recent years, Disney and Nickelodeon expanded their services by distributing their programs through apps, streaming services, video games, etc. However, I focus exclusively on the production of the original series on the main networks.

Another important aspect of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel branding is the fact that the tweencoms genre has a signature aesthetics or style since most of these series are filmed and produced by the same production company. This creates a signature aesthetic brand that distinctly marks tweencoms: bright colors and large, well-furnished, and well-lit rooms. This style stems, in part, from the fact that most of these sitcoms are shot in a similar manner to the traditional sitcom - three-camera, studio setup – but I also contend that this signature style originates from the fact that they are often created and shot in the very same studios that employ the same people. For Disney Channel, most of its tweencoms are produced by It's a Laugh Productions [See Figure 2 below]. For Nickelodeon, most of its tweencoms are made by either Nickelodeon Studios - or, until 2019, Schneider's Bakery and its head writer/producer Dan Schneider [See Figure 3 below]. The contributions of central industry figures and creatives are one key to studying television as a media industry. Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar devote the second chapter of *Media Industry Studies* (2020) to acknowledging individuals and their roles in media production. As a prolific producer for children's television, Dan Schneider especially developed a particular style of storytelling across multiple series (often using the same stock of actors and filming techniques) that has been dubbed a 'Schneidervese' (Dare-Edwards 2014). As I have pointed out, these sitcoms share aesthetics [See Figure 4 below]. The fact that this universe also comprises a set of shared

values and representational strategies, especially around creative young people, will be illustrated in the next chapter on Nickelodeon.

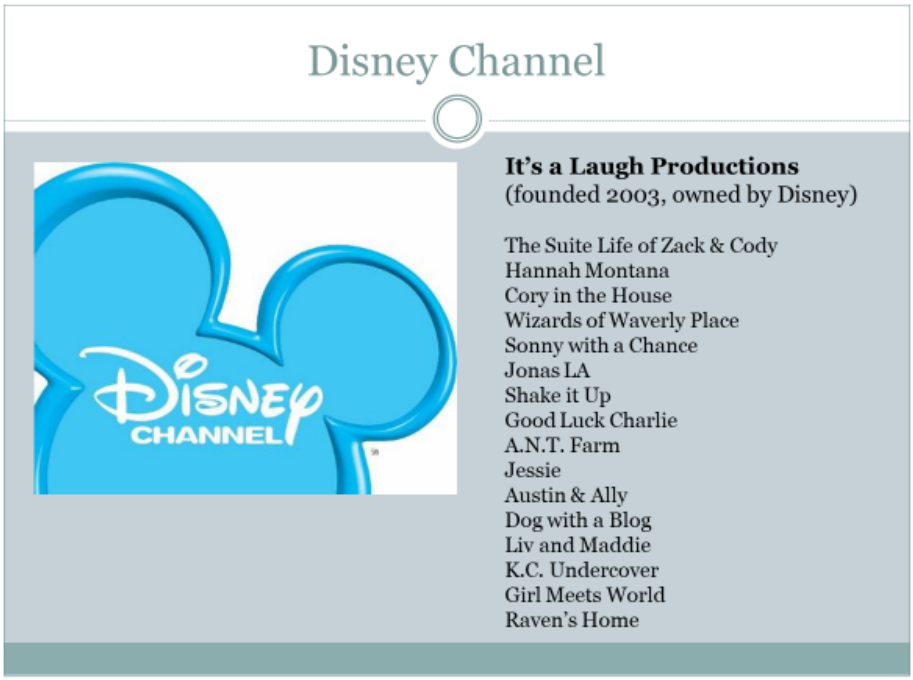

Figure 2 – Series produced by It's a Laugh Productions

Figure 3 – Series produced by Schneider's Bakery and Nickelodeon Productions

Figure 4 – Sets from Nickelodeon's Schneidercoms. From top to bottom, the living spaces in *Victorious* (2010-13), *Sam & Cat* (2013-2014), and *Henry Danger* (2014-2019).

Finally, I make the case that tweencoms are particularly important to Disney Channel and Nickelodeon because they typically air during primetime hours. The importance of primetime programming is often acknowledged within television studies (Gitlin 2005, Lotz 2010). Lasting roughly between the hours of 7pm to 10pm, primetime hours are generally understood the time when programs attract the most viewers, adverting dollars and promotion efforts. Primetime becomes pivotal for a channel's branding strategies. In "Scheduling: The Last Creative Act in Television?," John Ellis (2000) points out how scheduling becomes important for networks because it becomes a pattern for how they imagine themselves and the viewers they hope to attract. Channels then seek to promote their schedule throughout the day with interstitials and short-form content. In their studies of Disney Channel, both Gillan (2015) and Blue (2018) look specifically at how the network uses its tween stars in this promotional content. Ellis refers to the importance of this content as the "architecture of the entire output" of a channel (pg. 36), or what Nick Brown (1987) refers to as the 'supertext.' To this point, I add that a channel's scheduling or programming history becomes an essential part of a network 'architecture' because repeated patterns or themes within this programming can be taken as ideology.[24]

3.2 The Era of Cable TV, Transitions, and Synergies

In this section, the origins and growth of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel become part of the larger story of the American cable television industry.[25] Within a few years, several cable channels debuted to offer specialty content for specific audiences, including ESPN (1979), CNN (1980), and MTV (1981). Nickelodeon initially launched in 1977, and Disney Channel debuted in 1983. Here I briefly contextualize these two tween channels within America's cable landscape and the business practices of American television.

Nickelodeon's origins can be traced to a small local station in Columbus, Ohio, which began broadcasting daytime blocks of educational programming over a pioneering cable system named QUBE in 1977. Initially named The Pinwheel Network, it changed its name to

[24] In the essay, "Political Economy of Televison (Super) Text," Nick Brown (1987) refers to the 'supertext' that "consists of the particular program and all the introductory and interstitial materials – chiefly announcement and ads – considered in its specific position in the schedule…. The most relevant context for the analysis of form and meaning of the 'television text' consists of its relation to the schedule" (pg. 588-589).

[25] While only 20% of American households subscribed to cable in 1980, that number reached nearly 50% by 1988 and 68% by 2000 (Lotz 2014, pg. 57).

Nickelodeon by 1979 and initially broadcast daily from 7:00am to 9:00pm (EST). The network's eponymous show *Pinwheel* (1977-1984) featured a puppet variety show and animated shorts highly influenced by *Sesame Street* (PBS, 1969-) and *The Electric Company* (PBS, 1971-77). It also employed consultants from these educational programs. The early programming model has been described as "the TV equivalent of green vegetables for kids. Parents liked it for its wholesome programming, but the target audience itself, children, by and large were not attracted" (Parsons 2008, pg. 526). In this era, the series *You Can't Do That on Television* (1979-1990) stood out, as the original sketch comedy series featured young amateur players (including Alanis Morissette) and introduced the act of sliming them with the green slime that became a Nick trademark. As Banet-Weiser (2007) suggests, the network's movement away from 'green vegetables' and toward 'green slime' helped characterize Nickelodeon as fun and 'for kids.'

At first, many cable channels served as content distributors rather than producers, with the exception of a few content-specific channels like ESPN or CNN. As Parsons (2008) and Mullen (2003) point out, most programming consisted of old movies and off-network reruns placed in syndication. Disney Channel certainly possessed an extensive library of material from its parent company to offer to its audience, and most of its animated series in the 1980s consisted of updated programs featuring Disney's classic stock characters of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Winnie the Pooh. Before it created original series for its primetime hours, Nickelodeon's evening schedule consisted entirely of syndicated programs. When Nickelodeon expanded programming to 24 hours a day in 1985, it offered an evening program block named Nick at Nite for adult audiences. This block consisted of syndicated sitcoms from the past, including *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS/ABC, 1957-62). *Green Acres* (CBS, 1965-71), and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961-66), allowing adult audiences to reminisce about television shows from their youth. The rerun of these series became seen as "television heritage," according to Derek Kompare (2004).

The growth of Nickelodeon in the 1980s and 1990s has been linked to the figure Geraldine Laybourne, whose contributions are acknowledged within the scholarship of Nickelodeon from Banet-Weiser and Hendershot. As the first president of Nickelodeon, a role she held from 1984 to 1996, Laybourne helped develop programs using focus group testing with children and developed a reputation as an 'architect of children's television' because she believed in targeted programming for specific youth demographics. Laybourne emphasized that Nickelodeon's new shows would no longer view children as an entire demographic, as

one category of 2-11year olds, but instead consider them in separate demographics of 2-5, 6-9, and 9-12year olds (Fifth Estater 1990). Laybourne became both a visible and vocal proponent for children's television and the Nickelodeon network, and for several years she was regularly featured in interviews with *Nickelodeon Magazine* under the heading "Ask the Boss Lady." During her tenure, she redesigned the network's programming by focusing on programs that were more entertaining than educational. *You Can't Do That On Television* became a model for a new game show featuring children as contestants. *Double Dare* (1986-1993) quickly became a hit series. This game show pitted young contestants in a battle that featured trivia questions and messy obstacle challenges, such as a human hamster wheel or a sundae slide. The success of the show led Nickelodeon to sell it in syndication within a year of its debut, and these revenues helped the network double its budget for original programming (Fifth Estater 1990).

However, another more significant development affected the fortunes of Nickelodeon at this time. By 1985, Viacom purchased the network along with MTV, Showtime, and TMC (The Movie Channel). Through the next decade, consolidation, conglomeration, and deregulation all characterized the media environment in the United States during this time. Previous regulations that prohibited television networks from program ownership, and thus a financial stake in syndicated programs that made up much of cable programming, were lifted. Networks, and their parent companies, now had the incentive to produce shows and develop more channels on cable to distribute them. The elimination of these fin syn rules meant that networks could now take advantage of populating their schedules with shows that were produced from studios owned by the network or within the conglomerate that owned the network, which Lotz refers to as "common ownership" (2014, pg. 100). Accordingly, networks could maintain greater control of their programming as both producers and distributors. In the following decades, media mergers and acquisitions became the norm, and a handful of companies became media giants, controlling most of the mass media output of the country.

Examining the history of cable programming, Megan Mullen (2003) describes how cable became horizontally and vertically integrated over time. Corporate parents provided the financial resources for cable channels to create original content. The media parents supplied the cable networks with movies and television libraries that they controlled while, in turn, cable offered distribution for their products. Mullen defines how media corporations began to increasingly use cable channels as part of their synergy, defined as the "cross-promotion of a

media production or event, and distribution of that production through different media outlets or windows" (pg. 133). For example, Disney Channel distributed its parent company's media library and gave space to advertise its other media products, such as trailers and behind-the-scenes looks of a major film release.

By the 1990s, networks like Nickelodeon began producing more original programming. As I argued previously, this development of original programming became crucial in helping a channel develop a brand identity. For Nickelodeon and Disney, the development of tween sitcoms helped distinguish them within the cable environment. Due to the stewardship of Laybourne and its success in developing and marketing its original series for young audiences, Nickelodeon quickly thrived to become one of cable's most prominent channels. By the early 1990s, Nickelodeon could be seen in approximately 52 million households and had built a 90,000-square-foot Nickelodeon Studios in Orlando, employing nearly 500 people in Florida's largest production facility (Leventhal 1993). By this time, Nickelodeon produced several half-hour programs and pioneered the tween sitcom with series like *Hey Dude* (1989-91) and *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991-94). These sitcoms, along with the anthology series *Are You Afraid of the Dark* (1990-2000), sketch comedy series *Welcome Freshmen* (1991-93) and teen soap *Fifteen* (1991-93) demonstrated the network's commitment to developing original programming. Among this variety of programming, though, sitcoms quickly became the more prolific for Nickelodeon, the type of signature programming that Disney eventually sought to replicate. At the same time, these cable sitcoms offered families counter-programming to the primetime series on network television during a period in which networks were phasing out domestic sitcoms, exemplified by ABC's decision to cancel its family-friendly TGIF block in 2000.

3.3 Tweencoms as Sitcoms: Tweencoms and American Sitcom History

Since I classify the first Nickelodeon series of the 1990s as domestic sitcoms, I will briefly describe how tweencoms emerged as a sitcom subgenre. By the time *Clarissa* premiered in 1991, more than half of American households had subscribed to cable (Allen, 2004).[26]

[26] By 1990, the average price of a basic cable package was around $16/month, double the price it had been in 1980. In some communities around the NYC metropolitan area, that price could be as high as $60/month. Audiences would have to pay more for a premium cable package, which gave them more channels, and for specific pay channels like HBO and Showtime, which average $10/month per channel (Lippman, 1990).

Advertisers were increasingly drawn to cable programming, targeting middle-class consumers as the putative audiences of cable programming. One sales executive at Turner Broadcasting stated simply, "The lowest economic and educational categories don't have cable, so the demographics just go up," referring to how cable audiences were attractive to advertisers (Fabrikant 1990). Launching a slate of original sitcoms in the 1990s, Nickelodeon set many of these series in middle-class suburbia. As Joseph Turow explains, "*Clarissa Explains It All* and several other live-action comedies on Nickelodeon telegraphed the upscale nature of its preferred audience" (Turow 1997, pg. 105). These Nickelodeon series set in middle-class suburbia (including *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack*) in many ways reflected the network sitcoms prevalent in the 1980s, which were populated with upscale domestic sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92), *Family Ties (*NBC, 1982-89), *Growing Pains (*ABC, 1985-92), and *Who's the Boss* (ABC, 1984-1992). These family sitcoms helped define American television in the 1980s, attested by the fact that these series often ranked in the Nielsen top ten ratings.[27]

Nickelodeon sitcoms from the 1990s mirrored these primetime network sitcoms of the 1980s, while the networks were beginning to embrace alternate class representations. Just as Nickelodeon began developing sitcoms with middle-class suburban families, several popular domestic sitcoms on network television turned to portraying working-class or blue-collar families, including *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-1997), *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989 -), *Married With Children* (FOX, 1986-1997), and *Grace Under Fire* (ABC, 1993-1998). Such narratives remain absent in the realm of tweencoms, though. At the same time, networks also created many programs with urban upscale singles. NBC specialized in these sitcoms with *Mad About You* (1992-1999), *Friends* (1994-2004), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), and *Frasier* (1993-2004). Therefore, tweencoms from Nickelodeon, and later from Disney Channel, were inherently regressive by reflecting and reaffirming middle-class ideology from the domestic sitcom of the 1980s.

Since Disney and Nickelodeon produced many domestic sitcoms in recent decades, it is necessary to study tweencoms as part of American sitcom history. Tweencoms are, in fact, the generic progeny of the traditional domestic sitcom. At the same time, broadcast networks have either curtailed the development of domestic sitcoms or favored domestic series that are stylistically innovative, like *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020). I can offer a more complete picture of how sitcoms have been fading from the American primetime lineup by looking at

[27] In fact, *The Cosby Show* was the most popular television series for five straight seasons (1985-90), leading Janet Staigner (2000) to label the show 'blockbuster television,' the last series to earn that distinction before cable bifurcated audiences.

American television schedules twenty years apart. In the 1994-1995 fall schedule, declared "one of network tv's last truly great seasons," there were approximately 40 sitcoms on the four major networks, and sitcoms dominated Nielsen ratings of the top twenty most watched television programs (Adalian 2014). By contrast, the 2015-2016 season contained roughly half as many sitcoms across the same four networks. Only one sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory (*CBS, 2007-19), cracked the Nielsen top twenty (de Moraes 2016).[28] While networks divested from sitcom development between these decades, tweencoms proliferated on Disney and Nickelodeon during this same time. Although the two networks continue to invest in developing more series each season, overall ratings across cable networks have dropped precipitously in the last decade. At the same time, both networks are currently concentrating on developing content for distribution on their digital platforms. It remains to be seen, though, whether the tweencom formula, including the representational strategies and ideology around class, will translate or be transformed by these developments.

3.4 The Nickelodeon Story: Nick Studios and Programming in the 1990s

In this section, I trace the growth of Nickelodeon's tweencom programming and scheduling of tweencoms. I then identify *Clarissa Explains it All* (1991-1994) as an important series in this story, as it will become my first case study in the next chapter. *Clarissa* fits directly in the story of the growth of Nickelodeon as a network. By June 1990, Nickelodeon Studios opened in Orlando, FL, on the lot of Universal Studios. Having previously taped in studios in Philadelphia and New York City, Nickelodeon's hit game show *Double Dare* now had its permanent home in Orlando as the first Nickelodeon show to be filmed there. Andy Bamberger, Director of Programming, recalls how the Nickelodeon team felt about its new studio: "We finally had a home. We finally had a place where Nick was made" (Klickstein 2013, pg. 125). Nickelodeon's permanent studio facility allowed it to develop more original programs, particularly game shows, sketch comedies, and sitcoms conducive to studio filming. Within the next few years, Nickelodeon Studios used these facilities to tape a number of series like C*larissa Explains It All.* By 1993, reports claimed that 85% of Nick's original programs were produced in its Florida studio (Leventhal 1993).

Clarissa debuted as Nickelodeon's second original live-action series but served to have a more significant impact than its predecessor *Hey, Dude!* (1989-1991) as both a sitcom and as

[28] In 2021, NBC released its fall primetime schedule with no new sitcoms, something that has not occurred in the past 50 years (Schonter 2021).

a branded product of Nickelodeon. As each episode of *Clarissa* ends with cast credits scrolling up, the last sequences highlight the show as a Nickelodeon product. Following the end credits, images of the studios and Nickelodeon's logo page appear while an announcer affirms, "*Clarissa Explains It All* was taped at Nickelodeon Studios/Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida." This emphatic branding of *Clarissa* as a Nick show, as well as its popularity, helps justify it as one of the network's 'signature shows.' Other Nickelodeon sitcoms from this time, including *Hey Dude* and *Salute Your Shorts* (1991-2), were shot on location in Arizona and California, respectively. While both series featured an ensemble cast of diverse young characters that helped express the kid-focus mentality that the network wanted to present, they did not present an aesthetic model for future Nickelodeon series. Set in a summer dude ranch and a summer kids' camp, respectively, both series largely shot outdoors. Furthermore, as ensemble shows, no single character provided the focus for the narrative. Ultimately, Nickelodeon canceled these two series because executives wanted more programming filmed in Orlando and could not find a way to move these programs there (Klickstein 2013). By producing original series in custom-built facilities, content could be added to Nickelodeon's library and the network could exert greater control over the production. For these reasons, I focus on *Clarissa* and *Kenan & Kel* as my case studies in the next chapter as these sitcoms were both effectively branded as Nickelodeon series - produced by Nickelodeon at Nickelodeon Studios [See Figure 5 below].

Figure 5: Nickelodeon closing credits (showing the studio and Network logo).

The launch and success of *Clarissa* also helped Nickelodeon move its original programs into primetime. Previously, Nickelodeon aired new episodes of its youth-orientated programs in the afternoons as after-school entertainment. By 1992, Nickelodeon scheduled around 35% of its schedule with original productions and developed new programming blocks (Brown 1992, pg. 20). On Sunday mornings, the network programmed animated series like *Doug* (1991-4) and *Rugrats* (1990-2006). That same year, the network debuted a new programming block named

SNICK (Saturday Night Nickelodeon) for young people. This programming block replaced its evening program block, Nick at Nite, for two hours on Saturday evening. Rolling out the programs with a $20 million marketing campaign, Nickelodeon slated its original programming in this new block as a counterprogramming strategy, as executives felt that young audiences were underserved by broadcast networks on that evening. As Geraldine Laybourne stated at the time, "The broadcast networks have virtually ignored our audiences on Saturday nights. The kids and families are there, but they aren't being served" (Brown 1992, pg. 25). For the next two years, *Clarissa* anchored this SNICK lineup [See Figure 6 below].

Duration	Nickelodeon's Saturday Evening (SNICK) Time slots (EST)			
	8:00 PM	**8:30 PM**	**9:00 PM**	**9:30 PM**
1992 - 1994	*Clarissa Explains It All*	*Roundhouse*	*Ren & Stimpy Show*	*Are You Afraid of the Dark?*
1994 - 1996	*The Secret World of Alex Mack*	*All That*	*Ren & Stimpy Show / Space Cases*	*Are You Afraid of the Dark? / The Adventures of Pete and Pete*
1996 - 1997	*Kenan & Kel*	*Space Cases*	*All That*	*Are You Afraid of the Dark?*
1997 - 1998	*Kenan & Kel / Rugrats*	*All That*	*The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo / Kenan & Kel*	*KaBlam! / The Journey of Allen Strange*
1998 - 1999	*Rugrats*	*All That*	*Kenan & Kel*	*Animorphs / Are You Afraid of the Dark*

Figure 6 - Nickelodeon's Primetime Schedule in the 1990s

Within a few years, Nickelodeon expanded its original programming into primetime across the week, finding that series like *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack* generated high ratings. First, Nickelodeon scheduled new series in the 8:00-8:30pm EST time slot across the week and by 1998 expanded this programming from 8:00-9:00pm in an hour-long programming block, briefly named Nickel-0-Zone. Replacing *Clarissa* in the Saturday evening SNICK timeslot, *The Secret World of Alex Mack* premiered on Saturday evenings but moved to Tuesday evenings by its last season. In the middle of its run, the series scored a 4.3 rating and was the

network's highest-rated series (Brown 1996). The success of these series helped the network double down on its commitment to produce original programming. Nickelodeon's new president and long-time programming chief, Herb Scannell reiterated Laybourne's commitment to providing "kids-first, family-friendly" prime-time programming. Scannell affirmed that Nickelodeon's programs filled underserved youth demographics by stating, "The broadcast networks have abandoned kids at 8pm" (Gelman 1996, pg. 35). In another interview, he elaborated: "It seems like the broadcast networks had kind of given up on kids at eight o'clock by putting in everything from *Melrose Place* to *Mad About You*. We figured if they weren't going to do it, we were going to do it" (Brown 1996, pg.117). In this space, Nickelodeon invaded primetime with its tweencoms.

3.5 Commercial Break: Television Flow and Recombinant Tweencoms

Before I move from Nickelodeon to Disney Channel, I offer a brief commercial interruption in order to elaborate on television scheduling and television flow on these channels. Previously, I addressed the importance of television scheduling from John Ellis. I refer to this concept again by highlighting contributions from Raymond Williams and Sarah Kozloff. In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1975), Williams introduced the theory of television flow to describe the distinctive nature of television. Williams explains how television 'flows' from program to program and creates patterns of organization around the day. More commonly, we think of this as a schedule, where viewers expect to see certain programs at certain times of the day (daytime news shows, late-night talk shows, etc.). Flow also becomes seen as a sequence, as networks create programming blocks for viewers to stay tuned in, as I have explored with ABC's family-friendly TGIF block. Today, though, the narrative around television flow often discusses how technology like DVR's and streaming services have thoroughly disrupted this traditional, planned flow (Arditi 2021).

I suggest that television flow or scheduling can also be thought of as a super narrator. Sarah Kozloff (1992) applies narrative theory to television by describing how a network can be thought of as a 'super narrator.' This super narrator becomes the 'voice' behind a station's schedule. Network logos splashed across the screen, signature music themes, and voice-over narrators who speak to viewers – elements that I have just looked at from Nickelodeon – become marks of a super narrator. To this, I add that a network's scheduling or programming history can also become a type of supertext or super narrator for a network like Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. In understanding how the networks develop or program certain series, I

consider that these programming decisions, especially when programming patterns become continuously repeated and recycled, function as ideology. For Nickelodeon and Disney, I find that class aspiration and class fantasy are precisely the elements that are rebroadcast.

As cable networks, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel possess televisual flow that revolves around repetition. While both networks develop programming blocks for specific age demographics during different times of the day, I have argued that the airing of tweencoms during primetime gives these series a distinctive status. At the same time, though, I acknowledge that these two networks have inherently unique scheduling patterns as cable channels. In *Rerun Nation* (2005), Derek Kompare writes about how reruns dominate cable schedules, referring to them as 'regimes of repetition.' Today, that is still true. Cable channels, including Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, frequently run marathons and reruns of their most popular series throughout their weekly schedule. These reruns may occur during the first run of a series and for years after the show ceases production. For example, one could watch syndicated episodes of a popular series like *Drake & Josh* (Nick, 2004-2007) on the network well into the 2010s across the weekly schedule, including primetime hours and as marathon blocks. The series would often be paired with *iCarly* (Nick, 2007-2012) during an hour block, as both series starred Miranda Cosgrove. I claim that this very repetition of these series on these networks makes them prime sites for studying ideology.

Repetition can also be found in the more obvious observation that tweencoms often have similar premises and plots, serving as copycats to each other.[29] Gillan (2015), Greene (2012), and Oppliger (2019) all point out one common occurrence, the fact that many tweencoms of the 2000s were set in the world of show business. In *Framing Class* (2005), Diana Kendall points out that while the concept of framing is most often applied in the study of news media, framing can also be found in other television programs. Framing exists in television sitcoms, for example, when "narratives are standardized and frequently repetitive" and commonplace when agendas are set by writers and producers (pg. 5). The fact that most American television, especially sitcoms, is deemed unoriginal lies at the heart of Todd Gitlin's

[29] Doyle Greene's *Teens, Tunes, and TV* (2012) compares how the two networks often copy one another. After the success of Nickelodeon's *Drake & Josh* (2004-2007), Disney produced *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* 2008) and its sequel *The Suite Life on Deck* (2008-2011) where the two main characters were brothers with opposite personalities, with one boy being carefree and impetuous, the other being reserved and uptight. Another example would be Disney's *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011) and the Jonas Brothers series *Jonas* (2009-2010) influence on Nickelodeon's *The Naked Brothers Band* (2007-2009), *Big Time Rush* (2009-2013), and *Victorious* (2010-2013*)* since all series follow are teen rock bands/musicians.

social critique in *Inside Prime-Time* (1983). Throughout the book, Gitlin incorporates more than 200 interviews with executives, producers, writers, actors, and other figures in the television business to understand the economic imperatives of creating and maintaining a hit show. Television is inherently "recombinant" as past successes are re-tried and re-made. Since the investment in developing new shows is so high and the success rate so low, Gitlin considers how networks replicate elements from past successes to create new shows. Spinoffs and copycats are inevitable, reflecting "the triumph of the synthetic" (pg. 68). When a show does become a hit, its formula is quickly copied. Even when a show is lauded for its originality, the exigencies of maintaining its success across twenty-plus episodes per season across many seasons strains the creative impulse, resulting in a "television assembly line" (pg 83). Gitlin's critical scholarship, therefore, recalls the culture industry thesis from Adorno and Horkheimer that critiques how the culture industry imposes its same 'stamp' on everything.[30]

Several industry insiders interviewed in Matthew Klickstein's *Slimed!: An Oral History of Nickelodeon* (2013) reflect on how the network lost its creative license as it grew and faced competition from Disney Channel as it developed its own tweencoms. Former Nick writer Larry Sulkis states, "The stuff I see on Nickelodeon today, I don't know whether they're watching Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon or Disney" (pg. 226). Former Nick executive Will McRobb concurs: "We had tried to be the anti-Disney, now they're just trying to be Disney" (pg. 226). Another former executive, Alan Goodman, accounts for how Nickelodeon became Disneyesque. Instead of portraying kids just being kids, Nickelodeon now replicates Disney's ideology of wish fulfillment: "They got seduced by the success of Disney's shows with older tweens and teens living fantasy lives. Wizards, a rock star in disguise, twins who live in a palace." (pg. 227). Thus, Nickelodeon originally sought to be the hipper alternative to Disney, but gradually its programs became indistinguishable from Disney.

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[30] According to this essay, the culture industry was a phenomenon of late capitalism that designed mass products for profit and imposed these products onto the masses. In "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944/2006), Adorno and Horkheimer write about their concerns about how "culture now impresses the same stamp on everything" and that "under monopoly, all mass culture is identical" (Adorno & Horkheimer, pg.41). This essay on the culture industry pointed to the simplicity, repetitiveness, and formulaic nature of mass products produced by the cultural industries and expressed concern of the manipulative power of the media. Adorno denounced mass media's creation of popular culture for its banality and dumbing-down effect in which people became passive and powerless through their ceaseless consumption of the products of mass culture.

3.6 The Disney Channel Story

After discussing the industrial contexts of Nickelodeon, I now expand my investigation into Disney Channel's history and programming. After summarizing the production history and network strategies of Nickelodeon, I will do the same for Disney Channel. Disney possessed a long presence on television even before it debuted Disney Channel, as it produced anthology series for ABC and NBC. Disney became a true television powerhouse when it eventually purchased Capital Cities/ABC for $19 billion in 1995, creating one of the world's largest media conglomerates across film, television, music, and publishing (Rosenfeld 1995). However, the Disney Channel took considerable time to develop its identity and profitability. In a brief history of the Disney Channel, I look at the developments of the network from the multi-channel era into the post-network era. Initially launched as a pay channel in 1983 to target family-friendly audiences at a time when other pay channels like HBO often exhibited R-rated films and adult content, Disney Channel benefited from instant name recognition and branding from its parent company, as the Disney label had been long associated with wholesome family entertainment. When Disney launched the channel with a price tag of $100 million, reportedly the most expensive cable network start-up at the time, it helped sustain the channel through its early years of unprofitability. In its first decade, the channel remained a niche network, with three million home subscriptions by 1986 and five million by 1989 (Parsons 2008, pg. 467).

The introduction of Disney Channel was initially conceived as a vehicle for both television and film content that originated from the studio, providing content that could appeal to families and promote Disney, thus exemplifying media synergy. For example, Disney Channel's nearly 40% of its schedule consisted of movies from Disney's film library, and the fact that it remained commercial-free meant that its only interstitial advertisements were for other Disney-related businesses. This synergistic marketing strategy has remained in place in the years since (Disney Deal 1983). Much of Disney's early programming re-updated its classic characters like Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh, Donald Duck, and Dumbo in animated or puppet series. Other early series included *You and Me Kid* (1983-1986), an interactive program designed to teach kids physical exercise or dramatic skills, and *Videopolis* (1986-1989), a dance show for kids. Probably the most influential and recognizable series that debuted in its first decade was a new version of *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1989-1996), which marked the debuts of several young stars who would go on to enjoy greater fame as adults. Into the 1990s, though, its audiences largely remained preschool and elementary-aged

children. As the decade progressed, Disney Channel focused more on animation development with original cartoon series. It could rely on its much more extensive library of live-action and animated films and series from its vault and still saw its primary audiences as young people and families. Disney Channel was slower at producing original sitcoms compared to Nickelodeon. One notable series, *Good Morning, Miss Bliss* (1988-1989), aired on Disney Channel but lasted for only a single season. The series was later retooled and picked up in syndication by NBC to become *Saved by the Bell* (1989-92). Disney Channel did not launch an original sitcom again until *Flash Forward* (1995-1997). Throughout the decade, Disney Channel primarily served as a distribution home by airing acquired programming from its distribution partner, Buena Vista Television

Several factors contributed to the rebranding of Disney Channel beginning in the late 1990s and would help foster its success in the 2000s. In addition, Disney's purchase of ABC meant that Disney could expand its synergy strategies, as it aired a programming block of Disney animated series on ABC Saturday mornings and could cross-market its various products. By 1997, Disney Channel became a basic cable channel, available in cable bundle subscriptions, rather than a premium pay channel**.** Like Nickelodeon, Disney Channel also began to build programming blocks. Playhouse Disney (1997-2011, afterward known as Disney Junior), aired in the mornings for preschool audiences, while Zoog Disney (1998-2002) aired in the afternoons for older adolescents. For example, *Lizzie McGuire* debuted in 2001 as part of Zoog Disney on Fridays 6pm EST. Zoog Disney and Zoog Weekendz served as Disney's efforts to develop a tween programming block in the early 2000s that resembled Nickelodeon's SNICK schedule in the 1990s - [See Figure 7 below].

In the 2000s, Disney Channel ramped up the production of original programs to target the tween demographic. Angharad Valdivia (2008) attributes the reorganization of the channel to the efforts of Disney executives who sought to expand outreach to the tween market and create hipper programming that would appeal to them. In 2001, Disney Channel reached 77 million homes and projected a revenue of $753 million (Disney Earnings Report 2002). By 2003, Disney Channel was declared the company's 'cash cow' after its success with *Lizzie McGuire* (Boorstin 2003). By 2006, when *Hannah Montana* debuted, Disney Channel became "the highest-rated cable channel among children 6 to 11 and 9 to 14" (Wee 2010, pg. 173). In the following sections, I will look at how certain franchises, series, and stars helped further build the Disney brand.

Figure 7 – Disney's Zoog Weekendz promo

3.7 Disney Channel: Brand Franchising and Synergy in the 2000s

While others have referred to the 1990s as the Disney Decade or Disney Renaissance (Pallant 2001) due to the company's resurgent success with its animated film division, I acknowledge that Disney Channel only achieved similar results during the following decade. After all, it was only in the 2000s that Disney Channel revved up its original production of live-action series, following its success with *The Famous Jett Jackson* (1998-01), *Even Stevens* (2000-3), and *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-3). I refer to the 2000s then as the 'Disney Channel Decade,' as I argue that Disney produced television content that became much more significant across tween media and popular culture than Nickelodeon by this time. Nickelodeon created teen stars out of Melissa Joan Hart (*Clarissa*) and Amanda Bynes (*All That, The Amanda Show*) in the 1990s and Miranda Cosgrove (*Drake & Josh, iCarly*) in the 2000s. However, Disney Studios put its star-making machinery into hyper-drive in the 2000s with the launch of each new series, beginning with Hilary Duff in *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-3) and continuing with Miley Cyrus in *Hannah Montana* (2006-11), Selena Gomez in *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-12), and Demi Lovato in *Sonny with a Chance* (2009-11). During this time, various publications often referred to these Disney Channel actresses as not just 'tween stars' but as 'tween queens' as they dominated tween culture and media industries (Learmonth 2006, Sanders 2008, Sullivan 2011, Lumenick 2008).

The fact that most actors during the Disney Channel Decade were multifaceted performers who could act, sing, dance, etc., meant that each series could be turned into a synergistic franchise across multiple media platforms, extending the television series into made-for-tv movies, feature films, albums, and concert tours, in addition to other commercial products. Disney possessed a long history of managing young actors on television for future stardom, from the first iteration of the variety show *The Mickey Mouse Club* (ABC, 1955-59),

which turned 'Mouseketeers' like Annette Funicello into household names. A revived format, *The All-New Mickey Mouse Club* (Disney, 1989-1994), debuted cast members that included Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake, Keri Russell, and Ryan Gosling, who would all go on to enjoy fame across entertainment industries. Jennifer Gillan (2015) considers how such youth stars become seen as Disney 'brand ambassadors.' In their studies of Disney Channel, Lindsay Hogan (2013) and Morgan Blue (2017) view the network as an institutional author that construct tween female stars, a contemporary version to the Hollywood Studio Era when a contracted actor's career and image were carefully managed by the studio. A child star like Shirley Temple, who performed and commodified girlhood (and was in turn commodified by Twentieth Century Fox), provides one of the origins of 'girl power' according to Rebecca Hains (2008).

In the twenty-first century, Disney Channel's tween series provide a self-reflexive commentary around the themes of stardom, performance, and fame during a decade when American television was dominated by reality television and talent formats, exemplified by the top-rated series *American Idol* (Fox, 2002-16), the country's most-watched primetime program for its first eight consecutive seasons (Rowe 2011). This predominant focus on fame became one of the central themes for many series on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel during this decade, so I will explicate this theme in greater detail later in Chapter 5 on Disney programming as I identify these series around fame-building and celebrity as famecoms, a distinctive subgenre within the tweencom genre.

Throughout the 2000s, Disney Channel built several successful tween entertainment franchises across the broader Disney company encompassing television series, movies, and music. Notable franchises in popular culture include *Hannah Montana* (TV series 2006-2011, films 2008, 2009) and *High School Musical* (2006, 2007, 2008, series 2019-). Valerie Wee (2010) traces the importance and development of these franchises for Disney. Wee traces how these franchises, as case studies in this post-network era, exemplify "heightened commitment to multi-media synergy, the exploitation of new media delivery platforms and technologies, and the blurring boundaries between disparate media formats" (pg. 20). For example, the Disney Channel original movie *Camp Rock,* which featured Demi Lovato along with the Jonas Brothers in their acting debut, was broadcast on both ABC Family and the Disney Channel and was also available for streaming online at Disney.com and audio cast on Radio Disney. One could then purchase a DVD or the CD soundtrack, among other merchandise, and constantly see Demi and the Jonas Brothers in print publications. Aggressively promoted with

a "multi-media and advertising blitz," Disney promoted the movie through music videos and an upcoming concert tour from the Jonas Brothers, itself the subject of a 3-D feature film *Jonas Brothers: The 3D Concert* Experience in 2009 (pg. 6). Likewise, Valdivia (2008) analyses the success of *The Cheetah Girls* trilogy of television movies as another Disney Channel franchise which became marketed through books, made-for-television films, soundtracks, and other merchandise.

The connecting thread between these notable Disney Channel franchises is the fact that they all featured performances and plots revolving around singing. In *Hannah Montana*, Miley Cyrus plays a pop star. *High School Musical* revolves around the friendship and romance of the two stars of a school musical. *Camp Rock*, set at a music camp for gifted teens, culminates in a singing contest where the winner receives a recording opportunity with an established star. In *The Cheetah Girls*, four girlfriends attend an elite performing arts school in Manhattan. During a talent competition at their school, they meet a famous alum who signs them to a recording contract and tries to make the group into superstars. The recurring theme of young protagonists aspiring to or achieving fame also runs throughout many of the tweencoms of the Disney Channel Decade, so I refer to these series as famecoms and analyze this concept in Chapter 5.

Along with the focus on musical performance, franchises, and TV series during this Disney Channel Decade also foreground class. Both Wee and Valdivia find reoccurring messaging patterns in Disney Channel franchises. Even though she highlights representations of race and ethnicity in her case studies of C*heetah Girls* and *Lizzie McGuire*, Valdivia acknowledges how they showcase "upper-middle-class protagonists in mostly upper-middle-class suburban settings" and highlight consumerism (pg. 277). As I have suggested in my thesis, such representations persisted throughout Nickelodeon and Disney programming as the hallmark of tween media. Identifying Disney's strategies in building appealing narratives to the tween demographic, Wee states how Disney creates "aspirational viewing" by using teen actors to serve as role models for pre-teen audiences:

> The notion is based on the assumption that younger audiences aspire to the lifestyles, behaviors, values, and habits of those a few years older than they are. The popular belief is that tweens are drawn to media that offers them access to these realities. In targeting tweens, Disney needed to toe the line between offering its young audiences a window into the older lifestyles and experiences they aspired to, while ensuring that such content did not feature elements that might be deemed inappropriate for these young viewers (pg. 171).

Wee emphasizes age when she refers to 'aspirational viewing,' suggesting independence and responsibility are what motivates this, and she also links this phenomenon to 'age compression,' referring to the notion that children's tastes mature at an accelerated pace. However, as Valdivia and Kennedy acknowledge in their studies of Disney Channel, such 'aspirational viewings' also needs to be framed in relation to class. The Disney dream becomes the neoliberal American Dream, as Marc Randall of *Newsday* describes in his review for *Cheetah Girls*: "Dreams can come true if you work hard" (Randall 2006). In Chapter 5, I discuss how such aspirational viewing links to class ideology, within the themes of fame building, class fantasy, and vicarious living. I argue that these themes become prevalent narrative-building motifs found in the network's signature shows and across tweencom programs during the Disney Channel Decade.

Finally, it is important to note how some of these tween franchises became more than cross-over multi-media hits but also global phenomena, using a model similar to Sesame Workshop by working with international production companies as co-producers or distributors to offer localized content. Albert Moran traces this television globalization as shows are adapted for local markets throughout his scholarship on TV formats and cultural adaptation (Moran 2005, 2009). For example, Disney China produced *High School Musical: China* (2010) with a plot similar to the original story: a boy and girl in a Shanghai college share a secret passion for singing. While the original *Camp Rock* movie follows a group of teens at a music camp, culminating in a music contest called the Final Jam, Disney Australia's *Camp Rock Down Under* (2009) parlays the plot into a reality show competition where musical groups from Australia and New Zealand compete. Disney Channel India adapted *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* as a Hindi series, *The Suite Life of Karan & Kabir* (2012-2013), about twins who live in a hotel named The Raj Mahal. In addition, other series and TV movies adopted a global outlook. In the third installment of the *Cheetah Girls: One World* (2008), the girls travel to India to star in a Bollywood movie. Both Nickelodeon's *iCarly* ("iGo to Japan," 2008) and Disney's *Shake It Up* ("Made in Japan," 2012) presented a multi-episode arc as a TV movie where the characters travel to Japan. By this time, tween media became thoroughly embedded within popular culture as tweencoms proliferated across Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, with the most popular series attracting high ratings.

3.8 Tweencoms in a Transitional Era (2013-2019)

The saturation of tweencoms and their significance within tween culture from the Disney Channel Decade spills over into the third era, which I refer to as "The Transitional Era," which I will outline in this section. The ever-evolving television and media industry is necessary to understand during this era of the tweencoms, as television is often marked by transitions. Throughout the decade of the 2010s, the rise of streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, HBO Now, YouTube, and Amazon led some writers and journalists to herald a 'post-TV era' (Van Esler 2016, Poniewozik 2014). The growth of Internet TV or streaming services is central to this era, as the digital age has dramatically altered distribution processes and created on-demand viewing.[31]

As streaming services transformed television, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon have turned to creating more content for its platforms Disney+ and Paramount+. It is important to consider then how this online content could be examined alongside the networks' broadcast history. Can these new series created for streaming platforms still be branded as a Nickelodeon or Disney series? Does the tweencom genre predominate original program development for the online platform? Does class fantasy still abound in these tweencoms? While Disney has developed a few tweencoms for Disney+, which include *Diary of a Future President* (2020-21) and *Doogie Kamealoha, M.D.* (2021-), the company seems to be focusing more attention on developing content around its fantasy and superhero franchises, such as *The Mandalorian* (2019-).

Marking this transitional era as the era of the "Tweencom in Decline" questions whether television programming maintains the same cultural currency for young people, compared to the Golden Age of Nickelodeon or the Disney Channel Decade. Netflix and YouTube have been leaders of digital television, altering traditional television.[32] At the same time, audiences engaged in 'cord-cutting' by switching from cable to digital television, and young audiences especially became the early adopters of this trend. Surveys have repeatedly shown that tween and teen audiences prefer online videos over other media (Sumagaysay

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[31] This phenomenon has been covered by Catherine Johnson's *Online TV* (2019), Amanda Lotz's *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (2018) and *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-distributed Television* (2017), Aymar Jean Christian's *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* (2018), and Derek Johnson's *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels* (2018).

[32] By 2014, Netflix had surpassed 50 million subscribers worldwide. By 2019, that number reached 160 million subscribers, with nearly 70 million from the United States and Canada (Luckerson 2014, Pallotta 2019).

2019, Palmer 2019), with the video-sharing site YouTube as their preferred destination over television in the 2010s.[33] The most recent video-sharing platform, TikTok has more recently proven immensely popular with young people, with over 45 million downloads within a year of its international release in 2017 (Settembre 2019).

With audiences tuning into digital content, television channels have seen their ratings plummet. Cable channels that narrowcast to specific audiences, especially young children, have been especially hurt by this turn to digital. While Disney's television operations reported surging profits in 2010, by 2015 it reported deep subscription losses (Bond 2010, Bond 2015). It has become a familiar refrain in industry news that ratings at the three major kids' cable broadcasters – Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, and Cartoon Network – have been in free fall throughout the 2010s (Steinberg 2015, Amidi 2018, Bouma 2019). By the end of 2019, *Broadcasting and Cable* reported that audiences were down 27% at Disney Channel and 29% at Nickelodeon than the previous year (Bouma 2019).

Both Disney and Nickelodeon have tried multiple strategies to stem audience migration and increase audience engagement, particularly around the strategies of tele-participation that Nickelodeon first utilized successfully with *iCarly*. Many programs during this 'Transitional Era' were based around web culture, including *Game Shakers* (Nick, 2015-19) and *Bizaardvark* (Disney, 2016-19). It was thought that infusing web-based elements into tweencom narratives could help the shows live beyond television. In other ways, these series still blend a famecom narrative within a fictionalized (and manufactured) behind-the-scenes look at how online content is created and who is behind it. For example, *Game Shakers* depicts a gaming company designing apps. At the same time, Nickelodeon built actual versions of each new app appearing on the series across digital platforms, including the network's website and iTunes. *Bizaardvark* follows two protagonists who make offbeat music videos for a site known as Vuuugle, a thinly disguised version of YouTube. Disney Channel even hired some writers with a successful YouTube channel to work on the show alongside Jake Paul, the younger brother of famed YouTube provocateur Logan Paul, as part of the main cast. Another series, *Coop and Cami Ask the World* (Disney 2018-) revolves around siblings who run an

[33] According to Common Sense Media, tweens reported spending 56 minutes a day watching videos online, choosing YouTube as the preferred portal, and they reported enjoying that activity over watching TV, listening to music, or using social media (Sumagaysay 2019). Another research report found teens prefer YouTube over Netflix, with 37% of teens favoring YouTube to the 35% who preferred Netflix attributed these findings to the diversified and user-generated content of YouTube's library, from music videos to how-to videos from influencers as appealing especially to teens.

online channel named ‘Would You Wrather?,’ where they ask their fans to make decisions for them, such as who they should ask to a dance. Among these series, I analyze *Game Shakers* further as a case study in Chapter 6.

Another strategy that Disney Channel and Nickelodeon utilized in the digital era included distributing more of their content on online platforms. Over the years, they variously inked or ended contract deals for exclusive distribution rights to Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon. By the end of the decade, though, Disney decided to compete directly with Netflix by acquiring Hulu and then launching its streaming platform, Disney+, designed as the exclusive domain for the Disney library. The CEO of Disney, Bob Iger, referred to the project as ‘the most important product that the company has launched’ during his fourteen-year tenure (Bond 2019). In turn, Nickelodeon and Netflix announced a multiyear partnership to compete directly with Disney+ by producing original live-action and animated series for the online platform, as Netflix saw a need to offer more content for kids and families (Low 2019, Brookbank 2019). However, with the new focus on streaming, questions remain about what programs on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel will look like. Due to the steadily declining ratings and prominence of these cable channels on youth and tween culture, I refer to the digital era as an era that marks a decline of the tweencom genre.

3.9 Tweencoms in Decline

By referring to the ‘tweencoms in decline’ during this transitional era, I have already written about the falling ratings across Disney Channel and Nickelodeon throughout the 2010s. Here, I also emphasize the growing criticism of these networks at the same time, as critics and audiences alike have frequently disparaged the genre. This critique also contrasts with the earlier celebration of tween television that lauded its potential in creating a youth culture, representation and citizenship from scholars who charted Nickelodeon’s rise in the 1990s (Banet-Weiser 2007, Hendershot 2004). In her examination of the two networks in *Tweencom Girls* (2018), Patrice Oppliger emphasizes the troubling social cues presented in these series where characters disrespect or talk back to adults, put down friends to get laughs, and in other ways engage in aggressive or bad behavior.

Echoing a critique of the culture industry from Adorno and Horkheimer, much criticism has also been levelled against the lack of originality found across the networks. Looking at the glut of famecoms in a review for *The Atlantic*, James Parker charges: “Across the two biggest children's networks, Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel, the gags and

obsessions are all the same, the characters and their glossy environments more or less interchangeable. Mechanized laughter reigns" (Parker 2015). Parker acknowledges the fact that the tween protagonists are special, exceptional, and unique has become a central trope of tweencoms, where the shows have all become about "hidden power, superpower, star power, money power." As Nickelodeon rebranded itself with the help of Schneider sitcoms in the 2000s, the network portrayed kids as extraordinary rather than ordinary. In Matthew Klickstein's *Slimed!* (2013), the insider account of Nickelodeon, former network executives emphasize how much the network strayed from its roots of kid-centric attitudes, turning from being a Disney competitor to a Disney clone. Will McRobb, the co-creator of *Pete and Pete*, notes that "everything's about wish fulfilment now" (Klickstein, pg 77).

In the 2010s, many television journalists and reviewers found few tweencoms to praise. In a *New York Times* blog post, one reviewer nominated *Bella and the Bulldogs* (Nickelodeon, 2015-16) as the 'worst tween sitcom on television" for perpetuating gender stereotypes even in a series where a girl becomes the middle school quarterback of the football team (KJ Dell'Antonia 2015). In another article, Pete Vonder Haar (2016) labels Disney's programming as 'horrible' and 'banal' and derides the network for ditching challenging or contemporary issues. By choosing to look at the two series, *Game Shakers* and *Andi Mack* in the last chapter, I acknowledge that these two series can be placed in two different camps. With its fantastical premise, broad acting and slapstick elements, *Game Shakers* falls in the camp of the poorly reviewed series.[34] On the other hand, *Andi Mack* represents something quite different. By addressing complex and challenging issues and grounding characters in real-world situation with serial storytelling, it offers Disney an attempt to stand out from the standard tween sitcom fare and present a television series within the tradition of 'quality television' (McCabe & Akass, 2007).

In addition to the lower ratings and the increased derision levelled at tween sitcoms over the years, there remains one further justification for why I also label the Transitional Era as the era of the 'Tweencom in Decline.' The fact is Disney and Nickelodeon have been losing their oligopoly on tween popular culture, as they are no longer the sole producers and distributors of this genre. Many series in this genre can be found on digital platforms. Some notable series across the second half of the 2010s include *Just Add Magic* (Amazon, 2015-),

[34] Certainly, this critique of sitcoms as a low form of popular culture is not new in American discourse. In the 1960s, the Chair of the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) condemned television as a "vast wasteland," while in the 1980s cultural critic Neil Postman echoed this critique in his bestseller *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985).

Gortimer Gibbon's Life on Normal Street (Amazon, 2014-16), *Team Kaylie* (Netflix, 2019-), *Alexa and Katie* (Netflix, 2018-), and *The Baby-Sitters Club* (Netflix, 2020-). The Disney+ series *Diary of a Future President* (2020-) was notably produced by an outside production company. As Nickelodeon and Disney continue to make decisions regarding what content will air on which channel or platform, it remains to be seen what future developments can be found in the tweencoms or what new series will emerge as signature series, if any, on these platforms.

I have just laid out three eras of tweencom programming that will encompass the following three chapters. Offering a historical timeline of the tweencom programming, I start at the beginning, so chapter 4 focuses on Nickelodeon's tweencom programming in the 1990s. By using *Clarissa Explains it All* (1991-94) and *Kenan & Kel* (1996-2000) as my case studies in this chapter, I illustrate how class fantasy, commodity consumption, and class ideology have been instrumental elements within the earliest tweencoms.

4. The Golden Age of Nickelodeon (1990-2000)

In my analysis of case studies, I start with the Nickelodeon network because it far surpassed Disney Channel in both ratings and original content development throughout the 1990s. For most of their history as cable competitors, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel targeted similar audience demographics. The entertainment trade publications *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* charted this rivalry, noting how Disney finally overtook Nickelodeon in the ratings only within the 2010s, after decades of competition (O'Connell 2015, Kissell 2015). In the 1990s, though, Nickelodeon was not just a successful network for tween programs but an important cable channel with hugely popular shows like the animated *Rugrats* (1991-2006), sketch comedy *All That* (1994-2005), and sitcom *Clarissa Explains it All* (1991-94). In fact, the popularity of several Nick shows from the 1990s led some to refer to the decade as its "golden age" (Klickstein 2013). Nickelodeon's success story in this era has inspired critical scholarship, as I referenced in Chapter 2, providing a thorough understanding of the channel's history, growth, and business practice during this era. However, I now situate this scholarship and these series alongside the later developments and practices in tweencom production. I look at how the themes and representations found in popular Nickelodeon series, especially those around class, became long-term trends traced to the earliest tweencoms.

Within the larger institutional context of the American television industry that I presented in Chapter 3, I will now focus on selected representative series from both Disney Channel and Nickelodeon in the following three chapters. In this chapter, I first briefly examine tweencoms from Nickelodeon during the 1990s that served as signature programs of the network in this decade. I identify these signature series to include *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991-1994), *The Adventures of Pete and Pete* (1992-1996), *The Secret World of Alex Mack* (1994-1998), and *Kenan & Kel* (1996-2000). While this chapter looks at how these sitcoms contributed certain representations and themes to the emerging tweencom genre, I focus more closely on the two popular tweencoms that bookend the decade, *Clarissa Explains It All* and *Kenan & Kel*. Both sitcoms helped contribute to the brand identity and story of Nickelodeon not only because they were both popular among the network's targeted young audience but also because they were both produced by and filmed at Nickelodeon Studios. Both series also called attention to their own production and network brand by addressing the audience directly and showcasing the production studios and Nickelodeon logo in the closing credits. By the

time *Kenan & Kel* debuted, the network's goal to be identified with hip young audiences was exemplified by Rap artist Coolio performing the sitcom's theme song.

By taking a closer look at these two tweencoms, I argue that *Clarissa* and *Kenan & Kel* do more than mark the network as a cool channel for young audiences, as Hendershot and Banet-Weiser chronicle in their histories of the network. These series also foreground the two class themes, relating to consumption and production, that I identified in the introductory chapter, thematic trends which grew even more prevalent in the tweencom genre in the subsequent decades. First, while the element of DIY in *Clarissa* has been noted in scholarship (Hartley 1999), I emphasize that this DIY aspect of the show was, above all, class-based. Clarissa thus became a DIY model for other tweencom girls through self-fashioning and self-commodification, where a character could possess and/or access a commodity display. Tween protagonists from Lizzie McGuire to Andi Mack, who reside in comfortable suburban homes, trace their origins back to Clarissa. In the subsequent chapters, I consider how self-branding identity formation in tween sitcom protagonists needs to be understood through their gender, race, and class positions. In my analysis of *Kenan & Kel*, I highlight how the series serves as a pre-famecom series, as the two protagonists relentlessly chase fame and fortune. I also identify the series as a workplace comedy since Kenan's place of employment serves as a primary setting. While this suggests that the character is learning to become a productive employee/er in adulthood, this ideology is complicated by the fact that he eschews these values whenever the two boys engage in farcical get-rich-quick schemes. This series, therefore, illustrates the concept of 'playbour,' first introduced by video-game theorist Julian Kucklich (2005) to suggest how worktime and playtime have become collapsed in contemporary capitalism. In the small market where Kenan works, the two friends often meet celebrities and pursue a series of adventures that suggests the workplace could be a fun place where anything can happen. This fantasy around work, easy wealth, and instant access to celebrity becomes prolific in subsequent tweencoms centered directly around famous characters, like *Hannah Montana*, and around the workplace where the tweens are in charge, such as *Game Shakers*. While I will present a more extensive analysis of *Clarissa* and *Kenan & Kel* in this chapter, I first situate how these series are just two signature programs among Nickelodeon's output during its Golden Age.

4.1 Defining Signature Series

As I referenced in Chapter 3, Nickelodeon's original program development played a significant role in helping the network create a brand identity. Scholars who have written on the cable and television industry in the United States, like Megan Mullen (2003) and Amanda Lotz (2018), argue that producing original series became an important way for a cable network to establish a brand identity. Applying an understanding of the advertising industry's target marketing to television, Joseph Turow (1997) outlines three strategies that successful cable networks employed to find their audiences and brand themselves. These include the use of promos and logos, the selection of certain syndicated programs, and the development of signature shows. While Nickelodeon's sitcoms have dominated its primetime programming schedule since the 1990s, I highlight the four that I consider to be its signature sitcoms in that decade: *Clarissa Explains It All, The Secret World of Alex Mack, Kenan & Kel,* and *The Adventures of Pete and Pete* [See Figure 8 below].

Figure 8 – Nickelodeon's signature series

Turow defines a signature program as "a series created expressly for a particular programming network as an explicit on-air statement to audiences and advertisers about the personality of the network" (pg. 105). These signature programs helped generate publicity and buzz in other media and, more than anything, carried a particular 'attitude.' Turow continues, "People in the cable business believed that successful signature shows had to carry an attitude that telegraphed for what and for whom their network stood" (pg. 105). For Nickelodeon, these attitudes included the generational 'us vs. them' and the 'kid-first' messaging. Once it began developing original series, Nickelodeon crafted signature shows that closely resembled the sitcom aesthetics of domestic comedies that populated much of network television in the 1980s but with a twist: these sitcoms privileged the narrative position and point of view of the child rather than the adult or parent.

Going beyond Turow's definition of the signature show, I make a case for why I consider these four series to be the signature sitcoms of Nickelodeon's golden age. First, I consider a signature show is one that was successful enough to run for several seasons in its original run. While a series run of three to five seasons is not particularly long in American television, it should be noted that tweencoms have a limited run because the stars are meant to stay young, with popular series like *Clarissa* (1991-1994), *iCarly* (2007-2012) and *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011) all coming to an end when the protagonist graduates high school. The fact that Nickelodeon's four series would often rerun for several years after their original run also meant that they continued to have a presence on the network and its sister channels, such as TeenNick.

The fact that these series have a continued fan base and recognition point to another reason why I label them as Nickelodeon's signature series. Each series has either held a reunion show or inspired consideration for a reboot series, reflecting a wider broader around generational nostalgia.[35] In March 2018, *The Hollywood Reporter* announced that Nickelodeon was working to develop a reboot series of *Clarissa Explains It All.* The cast reunited, but plans to produce a future series were put on hold (Goldberg 2018). The cast of *The Secret World of Alex Mack* reunited in 2018, twenty years after the series ended, in a one-hour special filmed with a live audience. The stars of *Kenan & Kel*, Kenan Thompson and

[35] In *Esquire*, Olivia Pym (2019) considers how nostalgia went into hyperdrive in the 2010s, with everything from the proliferation of TV reboots and film remakes, the mediation of memory through social media, reunion events on the Internet, and the popularity of *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) where set recreations in exhibits allowed 'audiences' to become 'visitors' of the show.

Kel Mitchell reunited on a sketch for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in September 2015 and appeared together in a reboot of *All That*, a Nickelodeon sketch comedy show that originally ran from 1994 to 2004 and first paired the comedy duo. Kenan Thompson, as a long-time cast member of *Saturday Night Live*, has also occasionally given a wink and nod to the audiences about a *Kenan & Kel* reunion on the show (Schonter 2019). Often labelled as a cult show, the quirky comedy *The Adventures of Pete and Pete* especially enjoys an active fan base online. Over the years, its cast and crew have attended reunions and interviews with live audiences (Worthington 2018). Stars of the series, Danny Tamberelli and Mike Maronna, have recorded a monthly podcast called "The Adventures of Danny and Mike" since 2013 and have launched new sketches on YouTube in 2017, playing their characters as adults. Many entertainment writers have continued to write about the series, which they remember fondly from their youth. When Nickelodeon reran episodes from 2011 to 2012, *AV Club* posted weekly reviews of each episode as if it were a new series. Of the four sitcoms, *The Adventures of Pete and Pete* enjoyed the shortest run with only thirty-nine episodes and has received very little scholarly attention, but the series continues to delight fans and online reviewers who treat it as a 'beloved cult artifact' and celebrate its weirdness, often proclaiming the show to be among Nickelodeon's best (Goldman 2017).

Family	Friends	Fantasy	Fame & Fortune
The Adventures of Pete & Pete (Nick, 1991-6)	*Hey Dude* (Nick, 1989-91)	*The Secret World of Alex Mack (*Nick, 1994-8)	*The Famous Jett Jackson* (Disney, 1998-01)
Clarissa Explains It All (Nick, 1991-4)	*Salute Your Shorts* (Nick, 1991-3)	*So Weird* (Disney, 1999-01)	*Taina* (Nick, 2001-2)
My Brother and Me (Nick, 1994-5)	*Kenan & Kel* (Nick, 1996-01)	*The Journey of Allen Strange* (Nick, 1997-2000)	
Cousin Skeeter (Nick, 1998-01)	*Flash Forward* (Disney, 1995-7*)*	*Space Cases* (Nick, 1996-7)	
The Brothers Garcia (Nick, 2000-04)	*The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* (Nick, 1996-99)	*100 Deeds for Eddie McDowd* (Nick, 1999-02)	

Figure 9 - Categories of Tweencoms, 1989-2001

Perhaps the strongest argument I will make for labeling these four sitcoms as signature shows, though, is due to the fact that these four series helped serve as an influencer for the direction of the tween sitcoms [See Figure 9 above]. In sum, tweencoms broadly fall under four main categories: family, friendship, fantasy, and fame/fortune. While *Kenan & Kel* emphasizes the friendship of the titular characters, it does sometimes also address the fourth major theme. This category of fame/fortune, with sitcoms revolving around aspirational characters, becomes much more prominent in the tweencoms of the 2000s and on the Disney Channel. I will, therefore, illustrate this category further in the next chapter. The family category comprises series that are domestic sitcoms, which includes *Clarissa Explains It All* since it is set almost entirely in Clarissa's home and comprises all the members of Clarissa's family in the main cast. Friendship sitcoms focus on the character's relationships with peers rather than with family, which include sitcoms that are set in a school or where the main character primarily interacts with friends rather than with his/her family. Of course, some sitcoms may straddle these categories and blur the lines by having a main character interact with both family and friends. For example, while *Kenan & Kel* focuses on the friendship of the two characters, Kenan's family are also main characters, and the show's main settings include both Kenan's home and the grocery store where he works and where his best friend often hangs out. *The Adventures of Pete and Pete* also moves between the settings of the neighborhood and school to include parents and friends as main cast members.

The two other categories – fantasy and fame/fortune – are premise-based. *The Secret World of Alex Mack* falls in the category of fantasy, as its main character develops supernatural powers after she gets caught in a chemical spill. While her best friend and her sister learn about her abilities, she keeps the secret from her parents and others because she is afraid that representatives of the chemical company will experiment on her. The show's use of special effects and focus on sci-fi elements was unusual in the tween sitcom, but these elements became much more common in the genre over the next decade. Within a few years, several other series on both Nickelodeon and Disney would focus on fantastical or supernatural elements and characters who possessed unusual abilities.

There is one final argument I suggest identifying *Clarissa, Alex Mack, Kenan & Kel,* and *Pete and Pete* as signature sitcoms of Nickelodeon in the 1990s. Each series was produced, or co-produced by Nickelodeon. Not only were these series popular, but at the same time Nickelodeon engaged in cross-promotional strategies that identified the young actors as part of the Nickelodeon brand. Two tween sitcoms from Nickelodeon, *Hey Dude* (1989-1991)

and *Salute Your Shorts* (1991-1993), both produced by other media companies that were picked up for distribution by Viacom, were ensemble shows that witnessed a main character depart and be replaced by another character in the middle of their respective runs.[36] For Nickelodeon's signature series, though, the main actors became linked to and marketed by the network. In their scholarship of Nickelodeon's efforts at branding their actors, Hendershot and Banet-Weiser point out how Nickelodeon's efforts at brand synergy incorporated the use of the recognizable young stars from its programs. These young actors from popular sitcoms could pop up in a number of the network's game shows like *Nickelodeon Arcade* (1992-1997) or *Figure It Out* (1997-1999) or attend the network's awards ceremony such as Nickelodeon's Kids Choice Awards, an annual awards show held since 1988.

Further identification between the tween Nickelodeon star and audience could also be found in the fact that three of these series employed the use of a character breaking the fourth wall to talk directly to the camera, providing voiceover, or talking directly to the live studio audience. This direct address helped to establish two themes. It established intimacy with the audience, and it allowed the young characters to speak for themselves, which fit nicely into Nickelodeon's branding of being kid-centered. These young protagonists are the authors and authority of their stories. Of the signature series, *The Secret World of Alex Mack* is the only show that does not employ these techniques, although the character is given the opportunity to tell her backstory in the intro of each episode. To learn more about these signature series, I will provide a brief synopsis for each series. Then, I will examine *Clarissa* and *Kenan & Kel* as case studies by looking at how they address issues relating to class.

4.2 Nickelodeon's Signature Series

Nickelodeon's four signature shows represent different categories of the tweencom and different tones or points of view. These points of view include sitcoms about freedom and independence (*Clarissa Explains It All*), fitting in (*The Secret World of Alex Mack*), figuring out the world and one's place in it (*The Adventures of Pete and Pete*), and simply just having fun (*Kenan & Kel*). Before entertainment reviewers criticized tweencoms as formulaic with

[36] *Hey, Dude* was produced by Jupiter Entertaiment/RIVR Media, and *Salute Your Shorts* was produced by Propaganda Films. While they were distributed on Nickelodeon, they were not produced by the network, unlike *Clarissa* and *Kenan & Kel*.

repetitive narrative patterns and characters, as I have written about at the end of chapter three, these different points of view helped provide Nickelodeon with diversity in its programming.

Set almost entirely within the domestic space of the Darling home, *Clarissa Explains it All* privileges the point of view of Clarissa as the star and narrator. The series became identified through its unique visual styles, which included graphics, flashbacks, and imagined sequences that were unique for contemporary sitcoms. More than anything, the show is all about Clarissa. The character represents a state of adolescence trying to assert her independence and freedom, from her wardrobe choices to her room décor. In my case study of *Clarissa*, I highlight how the bedroom space is central to the character's identity formation as I refer to the scholarship of Angela McRobbie (1976, 1991), who examines how the bedroom serves as an important and gendered site for consumption and cultural production for young women. Outspoken and opinionated, Clarissa becomes defined through her embrace of independence as she struggles to carve out her individuality. Her desire to have her own car, something she repeatedly refers to throughout the first season, represents this aim for more independence. Clarissa also embraces nonconformity in her style, evident from the fact that she likes to wear layers of mismatched clothes. In the second episode (S1E2, "School Picture), Clarissa wants to make a statement through her clothes by standing out from her peers on school picture day by finding an unconventional look rather than dress nicely like everyone else with a navy sweater, pleated skirt, and knee socks. While her mother initially pushes back on Clarissa's plans, Clarissa pleads her case and gets her mother to relent, allowing Clarissa to wear what she wants.

In contrast to the more self-assured and confident Clarissa, the character of Alex Mack feels more pressure to fit in rather than stand out. In the first episode, Alex gets ready for her first day of junior high school, and her anxiety is highlighted when she proceeds to try on an array of caps. Looking at herself in a mirror, she tells herself, "I should just face this. I'm boring, plain and simple, boring." Living with a father who is a scientist, Alex feels like she is not special compared to her older sister Annie, a genius who understands and can discuss their father's work with him at the breakfast table. One of the creators of *The Secret World of Alex Mack*, Tommy Lynch, describes how he originally conceived of Alex as a boy who would be based on his own father, a nuclear physicist. However, the character of Alex became Alexandra (Klickstein, pg. 164). As a tomboy starting a new school, Alex deals with common adolescent concerns: lunchroom bullies, mean girls, and a crush. The problems of fitting in become even more exacerbated by the fact that she develops secret magical powers, and the opening sequence helps explain this premise to the audience. Alex narrates:

> Do you want to grow up here? I have to. I'm Alex Mack. I was just another average kid until my first day of junior high. One minute I'm walking home. Next there's a crash that drenches me in some weird chemical. Since then, nothing's been the same. My best friend Ray thinks it's cool. My sister Annie thinks I'm a science experiment. I can't let anyone else find out, not even my parents. I know the chemical plant wants to find me and turn me into some sort of experiment. You know something, I guess I'm not so average anymore.

The fact that both *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack* are narrated from a girl's point of view has resulted in g previous scholarship of these two series, especially *Clarissa* (Hartley 1999, Hendershot 2004, Banet-Weiser 2004/2007), focusing on gender. Clarissa's interests in cars and computers, Alex Mack's interest in sports, and Annie Mack's interest in science portray these girls as multifaceted and having the same interests as boys.[37] As tweencoms, these series fit into the broader patterns of 1990s culture that witnessed the girl power movement. From the formation of the Spice Girls band in 1994 to the creation of powerful female characters on television, the girl power movement celebrated the independence and confidence of young women. Animated series, *The Powerpuff Girls* (Cartoon Network, 1998-2007), and dramas such as *Xena, Warrior Princess* (USA, 1995-2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997-2003), all manifested girl power, as scholars used the term 'girl power' to describe the representation of strong female characters that emerged in this decade (Early & Kennedy 2003). This is a trend that I will discuss further in my study of Nickelodeon's Clarissa and the subsequent case studies from Disney Channel in the next chapter.

Boys are also central characters in the Nickelodeon's signature series from the 1990s. As the most idiosyncratic signature series, *The Adventures of Pete and Pete* portray two brothers, both named Pete, who live in a suburban town called Wellville, and the series often provides a quirky take on suburbia. Katherine Dieckmann, a co-creator of the series along with Chris Viscardi and Will McRobb, previously directed music videos, including those of R.E.M., and frequented the New York downtown scene. Her contacts within this scene, along with the fact that the series filmed on location nearby in New Jersey, helped the series bring in

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[37] In season 2, Alex plays golf, joins the track team, and enjoys roller hockey while her sister Annie engages in science experiments throughout the series. Prior to *Clarissa*, boys were most likely to be the ones who possess or show off their skills with video games or computers in films like *The Last Starfighter* (1984), *Tron* (1982), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *War Games* (1983), and *Weird Science* (1985). Speaking about how Clarissa served as a role model for girl power, series creator Mitchell Kriegman states, "The world at a time was a G.I. Joe versus Barbie world… Shows were either for boys or for girls. I thought Nickelodeon needed a spokesperson who was representative of what a kid really was, and I wanted to create a show that girls would be empowered by, but boys would like too." (Rankin 2016).

several figures from the world of indie cinema, alternate music, and pop culture as guest actors. Citizens of Wellville are played by character actors and prominent figures from the music scene, including Steve Buscemi, Iggy Pop, Blondie's Debbie Harry, R.E.M's Michael Stipe, LL Cool J, and 70s tabloid heiress Patty Hearst, names and faces that would be more familiar to adult audiences. The characters and plots of the episodes embrace surreal situations and quirky characters, common elements that American audiences in the early 1990s would often see in primetime dramatic series like *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-91), *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990-5), and *Picket Fences* (CBS, 1992-96). In one episode (S2E3, "The Call"), Little Pete finally answers a pay phone at the edge of town that has been ringing for 27 years. Perhaps, more than any other signature series, *Pete and Pete* represented the coming-of-age narrative as the two brothers seek to figure out the world around them, such as in one episode where Little Pete (S2E13, "Sick Day") feigns illness to stay home from school but then journeys around the community to see what goes on during a school day. Most episodes open with a narration by Big Pete who explains the premise for each storyline. As the costume designer of the series points out, the series' embrace of quirky characters with vintage looks, such as Little Pete perpetually wearing a flannel shirt and a lumberjack hat, suggested a certain hipster aesthetic quality that predated Wes Anderson (Klickstein 2013). In its continued popularity, the sitcom comes closest of the signature tweencoms to being labelled as cult television.

In many ways, *Kenan & Kel* is both similar and different to *Pete and Pete* since both series center around two young male protagonists who often find themselves in unusual situations. Far from the white suburbia of Wellville, though, *Kenan & Kel* portrays two urban African Americans from Chicago who embrace hip-hop style. As Timothy Havens argues in *Black Television Travels: African American Media Around the Globe* (2013), African-American style in fashion and music, including hip hop, became universal signifiers for popular youth culture in the 1990s, exemplified by the popularity of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990-96), which starred rapper-actor Will Smith. The biggest differences between *Pete and Pete* and *Kenan & Kel*, though, are not around race but around tone. While the characters and plots of *Pete and Pete* can be described as quirky or absurd, the characters and narratives in *Kenan & Kel* abound in slapstick. Various episode plots include the two friends meeting the President, a basketball star and a film star all in a local neighbourhood market where Kenan works part-time. In various episodes, the boys attempt to sue a tuna company for $10 million, foil a robbery at a jewelry store, get stuck on a scaffold above Sears Tower (Chicago's tallest building), and lose a

$64 million lottery ticket. Influenced by the aesthetics of sketch comedy, the two stars introduce themselves to the live studio audience before the curtain opens onto the first scene of each episode. I argue that *Kenan & Kel* can be considered a pre-famecom by repeatedly highlighting the nature of performativity and idolizing fame, aspects of the series which I will detail later in this chapter. Its embrace of silliness, along with the broad humor and performances, certainly represented a new trajectory for the tweencoms where the characters employ more slapstick physical humor and catchphrases like Kel's expression, "Awww, here it goes." At the same time, the series blends a domestic and workplace comedy, so I consider *Kenan & Kel* to be an important tweencom that helps me explore the genre's trajectory from the influences of the domestic sitcom to the aspirational themes that dominate tweencoms in the 2000s. As I have written in my introductory chapter in my decision to select case studies for each chapter, I have found that despite its popularity there are few references to the series within the scholarship examining Nickelodeon's history and programming (Greene 2012, Banet-Weiser 2007, Hendershot 2004). At the same time, since the series does not directly address race, it is also unmentioned throughout much of the scholarship examining African-American television (Means Coleman 1998, Zook 1999, Adamo 2010, Havens 2013). By examining one series addressed by previous scholarship (*Clarissa*) and another that has been overlooked in scholarship (*Kenan & Kel*), I look at how both tweencoms reflect and comment on class as two exemplars of the tweencom genre. To understand the ideological implications of these signature tweencoms, I will begin with *Clarissa*.

4.2.1 Middle-Class Nickelodeon

Within academic studies, *Clarissa Explains It All* becomes a pivotal series in youth television development by focusing on an outspoken and nonconformist adolescent girl as the main protagonist (Holz 2017, Banet-Weiser 2007, Hendershot 2004). Holz writes that the show was significant for its time by "defying industry assumptions that boys would not watch shows starring girls," because it instead "attracted a large audience of both genders, and its success motivated Nickelodeon to continue producing shows starring strong, independent girls. Over the next decade, Nickelodeon continued to produce additional live and animated series with strong, independent girls, including *The Secret World of Alex Mack (*1994-98*), The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo (*1996-99), *That Amanda Show (*1999-2002*), As Told by Ginger* (2000-06)*,* and *The Wild Thornberrys* (1998-2004). As two of the sitcoms from this decade that I have identified as Nickelodeon's signature shows, I will look at both *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack*, paying more

attention to the former as the network's first signature sitcom. For both *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack*, though, it is necessary to consider how gender representations intersects with class, as both series present families who are professional, middle-class residents of suburbia.

As I have previously sketched, *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack* were influenced by the primetime network sitcoms from the 1980s that predominantly featured middle-class families. The domestic spaces and parental occupations indicate these families to be middle-class. In both series, the parents are introduced and continually identified by their occupations. At first, this may not seem all that remarkable. After all, *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92) revolved around the domestic home life of the Huxtable family and often referenced the mother's career as a lawyer and the father's career as a doctor through dialogue. Audiences would even sometimes see Dr. Huxtable at work at his hospital.[38] In the world of the tweencoms, though, parents are not the main characters and their lives outside the home are often invisible. In fact, audiences of tweencoms would often not even know what the parents did for a living, as I will describe in my later case studies For the Nickelodeon sitcoms of the 1990s, such as *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack*, though, these sitcoms share many of the representational strategies of the 1980s network sitcom by repeatedly showcasing the parents as middle-class professionals.

After introducing herself to the audience in the very first scene of the first episode (S1E1, "Clarissa's Revenge"), Clarissa Darling next introduces her parents by referencing what they do for a living. These occupations reaffirm the importance of domesticity, symbolic for a domestic sitcom set almost entirely in the home. Her mother Janet works as an educator in a children's museum, an occupation that signposts her as a nurturing educator, as she insists that her family eat healthy food like tofu. She next introduces her father Marshall by describing how he works as a modern architect whose design styles are inspired by pop art, which reflects both his past as a nonconformist and reinforces the importance of the domestic realm as someone who literally designs houses. While Clarissa states that she is glad her family cannot afford to live in one of the unusual houses he designs, the family maintains a comfortable middle-class existence. For Clarissa, her bedroom serves as an important space for marking her identity and class.

The series routinely identifies the parents with their careers through their conversations and storylines. In one episode (S1E12, "Cool Dad"), Clarissa fears that she will be embarrassed when she learns that her father will speak at her school's career night as Marshall spends the

[38] Similarly, the Seaver family in *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-92) featured a mother who worked as a journalist and a father who worked as a psychiatrist from his home office. Audiences would more often see Dr. Seaver at work since he didn't need to leave the domestic space.

episode preparing materials for his speech. His professional life is marked throughout his home, as he works on models and drawings of his building projects in various episodes, and he keeps a work desk in a corner of his bedroom. Tensions between the two parents erupt in one episode (S2E2, “The Great Debate,”) when Marshall plans to build a mini-mall on a strip of undeveloped land that the eco-conscious Janet wants to save. Clarissa then steps in to broker a peace between them by letting them see each other’s point of view and make compromises.

Likewise, Alex Mack belongs to a middle-class suburban family who live in a company town named Paradise Valley. Both parents work for the town’s chemical plant, and their occupations are pivotal to the plot and premise of the series. At the breakfast table in the first episode, Mr. Mack works on a laptop and discusses his latest project as a chemist with his daughter Annie, who shares his passion for science. Meanwhile, Mrs. Mack busily converses on the telephone to discuss market research. Employed as a public relations professional, she works frequently with Danielle Atron, the chemical plant’s CEO. As the main antagonist of the series, Atron exerts a tremendous influence over the Mack family and over Paradise Valley. Even the local junior high school is named after her. The Mack family live in a quite comfortable home seen frequently in establishing shots. In subsequent tweencoms from both Disney and Nickelodeon, the neighborhoods and homes of the characters are frequently denoted as being ‘middle-class’ or ‘upscale,’ reflecting a class hegemony that is always visible on the networks (Valdivia, 2008) - [See Figures 10 and 11].

Figure 10 - The Mack home in *Alex Mack* (as seen in frequent establishing shots).

Lizzie McGuire (Disney, 2001-4)

Even Stevens (Disney, 2000-03)

K.C. Undercover (Disney, 2015-18)

Drake & Josh (Nickelodeon, 2004-07)

Figure 11 – Other tweencom homes (Since I do not identify any of these series as famecoms, they do not revolve around fame/fortune, but they do around middle 'classness').

In *Alex Mack*, the dominance of the town's chemical plant where both the parents work occupies a central place in the sitcom's plotlines and conception. Along with the Mack home and Alex's school, the plant becomes one of the major settings of the series. When Alex winds up getting drenched with an experimental chemical from a truck spill in the first episode (S1E1, "The Accident"), she discovers that she has unusual powers like being able to control mechanical devices, levitate objects, and turn herself into a pool of liquid, powers which she only shares with her sister and with her best friend. Throughout the first season, Alex and her sister visit their father in his office at the plant and attend other events held there, including a career day event (S1E4, "The Videotape") and a science fair (S1E16, "Science Fair,"). The mother's employment as Ms. Atron's public relations account manager preoccupies the main plot of another episode (S1E19, "Alex and Mom") when she finds herself unprepared for an event pitch. She fears that she will lose her job when she can't find caterers for the event, so Alex and her friends offer to fill in, and Alex uses her powers to help her mom.

Since both Clarissa and Alex are primarily domestic tweencoms, it's necessary to survey how class is manifest in the home, décor, and parental occupations, which position the characters with a certain class background. In the case studies in the subsequent chapters, though, class often functions more as an ideology or fantasy. For my case studies, I begin with *Clarissa*, and I believe it is necessary to understand how the series fits in with wider discourses around girlhood, childhood, and consumer culture in order to examine class in the series.

4.4 Nickelodeon Case Study 1: *Clarissa*, Consumer Culture, and Productive Practices

In the early 1990s, *Clarissa* became Nickelodeon's first signature live-action sitcom. In this section, I explore how this foundational sitcom served as a template for middle-class representations and ideology on the network and the tweencom genre. In many ways, *Clarissa* became a forerunner for the tweencom, especially for series such as *iCarly* (Nickelodeon, 2007-12), *Lizzie McGuire* (Disney, 2001-03), and *Hannah Montana* (Disney, 2006-11) not only by centering around a young female protagonist but also by emphasizing a display of commodity objects as central signifiers to the identity of the protagonist that may alternately read to reflect agency or conformity [See Figures 12 and 13 below]. As Natalie Coulter (2005) reminds us, "One of the key doctrines of capitalist consumer culture [is that] the self and self-identity are formed through a wealth of consumer goods" (pg. 337). During America's prosperous decade of the 1990s, education scholar Shirley Steinberg (1997/2011) introduced the notion of 'kinderculture' to describe how contemporary youth were being targeted and constructed as consumers by media corporations. The development of this kinderculture coincides with the growth of the tween market and the two tween networks. Within the tweencom televisual worlds, the characters, their commodities, and their spaces are continually on display, often signaling a middle or upper-class status and an association with commercial culture. Therefore, I would like to engage in a closer reading of the series through the an analysis of class.

In her study of Disney tweencoms in the 2000s, Morgan Genevieve Blue (2017) considers a pivotal moment in the pilot episode for *Hannah Montana* (2006-11). In this scene, Hannah reveals her 'secret identity' as a pop star to her best friend by opening up a vast, brightly lit room as her closet, a repository of commercial consumption. Indeed, that series offered a hyperbolic display of consumption and, in turn, became more than a television show but a franchise by marketing itself through numerous commercial products and media entities. This commodity display, though, has always been central to the tweencom genre, beginning with Nickelodeon's *Clarissa*. This commodity display also points to the scholarship around youth consumption and

the bedroom space as central to girlhood, particularly for the construction of Western, middle-class white girlhood. In entertainment trade publications in the early 1990s, articles on *Clarissa* construct such an image: Clarissa is alone in her 'cool' bedroom and is surrounded by her 'cool' possessions. This emphasizes Clarissa as the series lead, but it also highlights markers of her identity. While Hannah's wardrobe room looks like a shop display, Clarissa's stylized bedroom highlights her multi-faceted individuality and DIY aesthetics.

Figure 12 – Clarissa in her room (promo photograph from *Broadcasting & Cable*, Aug. 1992)

Figure 13 - Hannah's closet in *Hannah Montana*

Within the fields of girl culture and girl studies (McRobbie 1975/1991, Driscoll 2002, Coulter 2005, Kearney 2009), there is an acknowledgment that girlhood and commercial culture are linked. In *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Catherine Driscoll discusses how participation in girlhood is thoroughly marketed to, so what is "coded as feminine is perceived as being channeled into and constituted in consumption" (pg. 218). The importance of Clarissa's commodified space and consumer practices is intertextually highlighted in one episode, "Involunteering" (S3, E7). In this episode, Clarissa's mother asks her family to

help her volunteer for Family Day at the children's museum where she works. She asks her family to prepare interactive exhibits for young children. When the museum has to be closed for repairs, the family instead invites the children to their home. Clarissa's brother reads to them, Mr. Darling shows them how he builds things as an architect, and Mrs. Darling prepares art projects for them. At the last minute, Clarissa decides that she and her room will become an interactive exhibit, performing 'the life of an average teenager' for the young kids [See Figure 14 below]. She then proceeds to show them her clothing and the typical activities she engages in, including reading a magazine. As Angela McRobbie notes in her scholarship of girl magazines (1997, 2000), magazines for girls often mediate consumption and "perform the role of guides to girls as to what is in store for them at the next stage of growing up" (1997, pg. 197). Here, Clarissa herself serves as the guide, signaling to her young guests how to engage in consumer practices when they get older. In turn, the young kids watch Clarissa playing out her life in her room, just as the television audience does.

Figure 14 – Clarissa and her room become a museum exhibit

While I previously linked Nickelodeon's *Clarissa* and Disney's *Hannah Montana* to consumer culture, I can trace a direct line through Nickelodeon tweencoms from *Clarissa* to *iCarly* (2007-12). In both series, a young female protagonist constructs herself on-screen and engages with the audience through direct address in a vlog format, a genre structured around a monologue delivered directly to a camera [See Figure 15 below]. For both series, the female lead assumes the role of a cultural producer. In *iCarly*, Carly and her best friends produce a show-

within-a-show by creating YouTube-like videos of stunts for her Web show, iCarly.com, a real website that allowed viewers to watch and then upload their own content. According to LaTouche (2011), the combination of scripted television and viewer participation via the Web within this series created both a sense of intimacy and hyperreality for the audience. Before YouTube launched in 2005, though, vlogs predated the platform, as Bjorkman Berry (2015) details in a cultural history of videoblogging. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, authors of *YouTube: Online and Participatory Culture* (2018), and Theresa Senft (2008), author of *Camgirls* (2008), also look at this history where young women and girls engaged in social network practices before YouTube content creators ever appeared. From *iCarly* to the web series *lonelygirl15* (2006-08), the role of the Web 2.0 has often been associated with girlhood (Kearney 2011). As a television show in the early 1990s*, Clarissa Explains it All* engages with similar, albeit more basic, mediated strategies. As she narrates the events of her life, Clarissa looks straight into the camera to address her audience. In a sense, she becomes a vlogger. In *The Uses of Television* (1999), John Hartley sums up Clarissa's character as "a smart teenager teaching by example how to survive family life, which is no easy matter. We're her diary" (pg. 183). As an author of her own life, Clarissa constructs herself within her own space, so I would like to examine how her construction and space operate from an intersection of gender and class.

Figure 15 - Direct address in *Clarissa* (left) and *iCarly* (right)

Anticipating the capability of the media sphere before Web 2.0, Hartley sees Clarissa as a prime example of D-I-Y citizenship. He describes this as "the practice of putting together an identity from the available choices, patterns, and opportunities on offer in the semiosphere and the mediasphere" (pg. 178). He then describes how Clarissa communicates herself to audiences as an intelligent, self-actualized teenager who exercises control of her own life. She's at once a juvenile but also a "mainstream, fully-formed, 'adult,' character, articulate, interesting, full of

initiative, clever, and congenial" (pg. 184). Hartley notes how breaking the fourth wall plays a pivotal role in the series. Clarissa speaks for herself and at the same time speaks to the audience, 'explaining it all,' especially to younger audiences. Hartley values the character as a teacher who teaches by entertaining. However, I would like to add that there is another element to Clarissa's 'semiotic self-determination' that Hartley does not address. Clarissa cannot be separated from class signifiers. Clarissa's identity and style become codified and commodified through her space, dress, accessories, and other commodities that she possesses or wishes to possess, including her ownership of a computer and her desire to own a car. Just as Carly and her friends possess the equipment (camera and computer) and economical means to produce their web show, Clarissa similarly enjoys the privileges of middle-classness. Clarissa owns a computer, a wardrobe, and a room full of items that mark her identity as a consumer and producer.

In this thesis, I argue then that class has always played an important role within the tweencoms, from the genre's beginning. While Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) and John Hartley (1999) identified the significance of the series *Clarissa* in their examinations of the series, they did not emphasize the importance of the character's class status or class markers. Banet-Weiser discusses how Clarissa represents empowerment as an embodiment of the contemporary girl power movement of the 1990s. Hartley identifies the series as an example of identity construction through 'DIY' citizenship, referring to how one creates an identity and individuality through selecting items and ideas offered by media. As I will detail in later sections, Clarissa chooses a wide range of material objects (from an equestrian hat to hubcaps, from posters of rock bands to posters of cars), allowing her to choose multiple identity formations. Yet, Clarissa's middle-class status provides the very means for making her empowerment and identity construction possible.

In one example of Clarissa's DIY citizenship in practice, she seeks a job because, as she explains at the beginning of the episode (S3E5, "Punch the Clock"), she suffers from 'empty pockets syndrome' since her allowance is not large enough to purchase all the things she would like [See Figure 16 below]. She quickly receives four job offers, all in service-related jobs. She then reasons that she can accept all four on a trial basis, choosing the one she likes best. However, she decides to continue working all four because that would allow her to eventually earn enough to make a down payment on a sports car. During a much-harried workweek, though, she accepts double shifts and causes accidents at all her workplaces, which force her to pay for the damages out of her earnings. By the end of the week, she nets only $5 in profit. By the end of the episode, though, a librarian who helped her with the job searches also offers to hire her as a research assistant, and she finds that she prefers the quiet work in the library to the stressful jobs

she held previously. This episode portrays a social reproduction of class.[39] Clarissa finds herself incapable of working in the service-sector employment, coded as low-class or blue-collar employment, while she finds herself more suitable to work as a research assistant, employment that could be coded as middle-class or white-collar. At the same time, this episode refers to the realities of 'not getting by' on low-wage salaries, as Clarissa ends up with very little money from her service-related jobs at the end of the week, a phenomenon that Barbara Ehrenreich details in her book *Nick and Dimed* (2001).[40] In the end, though, Clarissa manages to find part-time employment that matches her background.

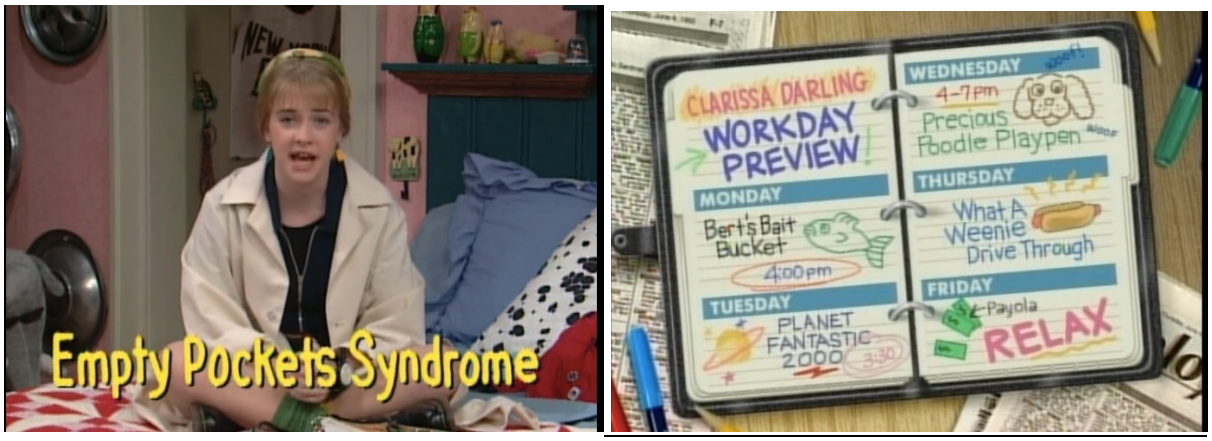

Figure 16: Clarissa seeks employment

4.3.1 Clarissa Culture: Style Branding

As I have outlined, *Clarissa Explains It All* embeds its protagonist in material culture, from the space she inhabits to her wardrobe and the commodities she possesses. Clarissa's style, seen through her clothing and bedroom, has become a hallmark image of the series. Fans and

[39] Social reproduction refers to how social inequality, or privileges through inheritance, can be passed on across generations. The concept was originally proposed by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*. In the 20th Century, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu applied the concept to contemporary society by writing that education or cultural capital played a prominent role in the social reproduction of class. In the United States, Harry Braverman applied Marxist analysis to America's political economy in *Labor and Monopoly: A Degradation of Work in the 20th Century* (1974), finding that low-wage workers were now treated as commodities. Braverman especially looked at the rise of low-skilled and how poorly compensated service occupations, like retail workers, became a larger segment of the working population.

[40] While the 1990s were known as an era of economic prosperity for America, economic analysts noted that the decade witnessed rising GDP along with growing economic inequality, as part of a trajectory since the 1970s. A retrospective study of the decade, conducted by *The New York Times*, states that the middle class was left 'no better off than it was a decade before' as the greatest gains in wealth went disproportionately to the upper classes (Scott 2001). Other studies at this time show that working-class, low-wage workers became an increasing share of the country's workforce, an observable trend since the 1970s (Bernstein 1999).

entertainment writers who look back at the series, including interviews with the series creator and other personnel of the show, often highlight these aspects of the show (Klickstein 2013). A sample of online articles that focus solely on the show's fashion includes *Cosmopolitan*'s "15 Essential Style Lessons from Clarissa Darling" (Manning 2014), PopSugar's "20 Fashion Lessons Every '90s Girl Learned From *Clarissa Explains It All*" (Garcia 2015), and *E! Online*'s "*Clarissa Explains It All* Turns 25: See how the show's fashion inspires today's celebs" (Rankin 2016). Fans have created numerous blogs and Pinterest posts about Clarissa's clothes as emblematic of 1990s nostalgia and hipness, using her style for everything from paper dolls to Halloween costumes. As the initial costume designer for the series, Lisa Lederer describes how the downtown scene of New York City influenced her creative decisions. As someone immersed in the city's rock-and-roll punk scene, she found part of her inspiration for Clarissa's style by watching different types of kids on the subway (Klickstein 2013). The character embraces mixing patterns and prints in her clothing and wearing layers and accessories such as glasses or headbands.[41] At times quirky and bohemian, and always thoroughly unique, Clarissa's clothing becomes an important signifier of her identity and plays a significant role in her identity construction. She possesses an extensive wardrobe and changes her wardrobe frequently. In *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, feminist critic Susan Douglas (1995) writes about how the decade witnessed how "political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires" (pg. 246). For Clarissa, this includes possessing a unique wardrobe and being allowed to wear what she wants.

Within this discourse between individual agency and consumer behavior, Clarissa's wardrobe fits directly within Hartley's concept of D-I-Y citizenship as she plays with her identity through clothing [See Figure 17 below]. Banet-Weiser (2007) discusses how Nickelodeon popularized an ideology around girl power in the 1990s by referring to how girls could be active, visible, empowered agents who could make choices around their consumer practices but also participate in the production of their own culture as well (pg. 214). However, the tension between the show's embrace of both girl empowerment and commodification becomes readily apparent in the more recent entertainment coverage of the show. Within two days, entertainment writer Sija Rankin (2016) published two online articles for *E! News* to celebrate the show's 25th anniversary. The first article from March 2, 2016, looks at "How the Show's Fashion Inspires Today's Celebs." The second article from March 3, 2016, then attempts to discuss "How *Clarissa*

[41] Clarissa's clothes can be seen on a Tumble page devoted to "Every Outfit on *Clarissa Explains it All*": https://everyoutfitonclarissa.tumblr.com

Explains It All Started TV's Girl-Power Movement." Placed side by side, though, these sentiments serve a reductive purpose of relegating girl power to fashion choices.

Figure 17 - Clarissa's clothing

As a character in the 1990s, Clarissa represented an icon for youth, someone who defined coolness or hipness, in part facilitated by her embrace of an individualized DIY aesthetic. For Clarissa, though, her coolness is also classed since she can consume a range of products. In their book about how undergrads experience television, Bernard McGrane and John Gunderson (2010) conducted a number of interviews with their students to relate their experiences with media. In an exercise where they discuss their relationships with television characters, one student discusses her feelings about the character of Clarissa:

> In the first few weeks of seeing her, Clarissa was an icon for me. She had the coolest clothes, and I soon began wanting to follow a similar style. She listened to Pearl Jam and attended their concerts, and even though I didn't know who Pearl Jam was and certainly never heard of them, I instantly liked them…. That's when I realized that Clarissa was more than just an icon; she was a friend. It is as if Clarissa had become my older sister and a knowledgeable influence (pg. 116).

The eclectic and DIY style of the series, one of its identifiable hallmarks, extends from Clarissa's clothing to her bedroom, which I will also examine. The set design of *Clarissa Explains It All* reflects the family's middle-class status. The three primary sets – the living room, kitchen, and Clarissa's bedroom – create different environments. The living room and kitchen are clean and

spacious to allow character blocking, but Clarissa's room contrasts to these rooms with a colourful, eclectic and explosive panoply of bric-a-brac objects scattered around her room. In this way, Clarissa's room helps to define and support the character as she spends much of her time there talking to her friends and narrating the events of her life to the camera. Unlike the communal space of the family room or kitchen, Clarissa's bedroom serves as a primary focal point in the series, supporting Clarissa as the main protagonist and providing semiotic clues to her personality and interests.

4.3.2 Clarissa Culture: Stylized Space

Since Clarissa's bedroom is a primary setting, it is necessary to situate the series within the body of scholarship around 'bedroom culture' as a gendered space (McRobbie & Garber 1976/1991, Steele & Brown 1995, Kearney 2007, Lincoln 2014). Angela McRobbie established the importance of the bedroom as a space for identity construction and consumer culture for young women in the influential essay "Girls and Subcultures." In more recent scholarship, Sian Lincoln (2013, 2014) looks at how teen girls personalize their private spaces and how material culture becomes embedded in their bedrooms. Mary Celeste Kearney (2007) builds upon the scholarship on consumer culture to also engage with how girls' bedrooms are also sites of cultural production, including online vlogging, film production, and zine making. For Clarissa, her bedroom is the site that contains her personal stamp and serves as the space where she continually engages in DIY identity formation.

Clarissa's bedroom expresses both her unique personality and her class position. While series creator Mitchell Kriegman sometimes describes the character as a cross between Annie Hall and Ferris Bueller, he also emphasized that she needed to have her own point of view and style that would be unique (Miller 2014, McCarthy 2014). He recounts the first time he came to the set and saw what decorators and set designers created, realizing it didn't fit the character: "It was done in all pink and was very frilly — like most girls' bedrooms at the time on these kinds of shows — but I had the set designers literally take black car paint and make checkered walls on top of the pink wallpaper" (McCarthy 2014). Nickelodeon's art director, David Ellis, recalls that this decision to redesign the bedroom "was necessary to show that edge of Clarissa's personality and also the liberalness of her parents by having her expressing herself that way" (Klickstein, pg. 99).

The eclecticism of Clarissa's room reflects her broad interests and a personality that defies any particular age or gender to highlight the complexities of girlhood. She possesses

stuffed animals and Russian nesting dolls but also displays a poster for the alternative band They Might Be Giants. In the first season, she owns a baby pet alligator named Elvis that she keeps in a sandbox. Her desire to finally drive and own her own car is visibly evident throughout her room. A poster of a pink Cadillac hangs above her bed, surrounded by a collection of state license plates, further clashing the traditional feminine pink with the more masculine car imagery. Similarly, she places hubcaps on one wall while she also hangs a collection of hats on another. Altogether, various elements of Clarissa's room, from her hand-painted desk furniture and the checkerboard wall pattern to the objects hanging on her wall, create a DIY atmosphere that is personal but not necessarily expensive. [See Figure 18 below]. At the same time, though, Clarissa possesses a more expensive commodity in her bedroom to symbolize her middle-class status.

Unusual for young characters in domestic series of the era, Clarissa owns and frequently uses a desktop computer.[42] Clarissa also enjoys the sophisticated knowledge of how to use it creatively. She proves to be a skillful programmer because she often designs games (S1E2, "School Picture"; S3E6, "The Silent Treatment") and even uses it to help her with a writing assignment by designing a program where the computer churns out poetry (S3E3, "Poetic Justice"). As a computer programmer, Clarissa proves herself to be a cultural producer. The Commodore Amiga computer featured in the series released models in the late 1980s that ranged from prices as low as $699 and as high as $2395, no small sums in the 1980s (Centre for Computing History). According to a government study of the demographics of household ownership of computers at the time, only 15% of American households owned computers in 1990, and education and income levels most likely characterized who these owners were (Bureau of Labor Statistics 1999). Clarissa's possession of a computer, combined with a desire a car, again suggests the influence of the movie character Ferris Bueller as a referent point, as the creator suggested. At the same time, her love of computers and game programming reflects the burgeoning girl power sentiments and offers an attempt to portray a young female character embracing the computing world.

[42] Perhaps *Doogie Howser, M.D*. (ABC, 1989-93) offers one of the few other contemporary series that show a teen owning and operating their own personal computer. As a show about a teen genius (played by Neil Patrick Harris) who works as a physician, Doogie often uses his computer as a journaling device.

Figure 18 - Clarissa's style as a model of DIY design

Clarissa's room and all her possessions on display, notably her Commodore computer, all serve to mark and symbolize class status. A dual system of commodity display thus exists in this way: the series serves as a commodity for audiences, and the material objects within the series also present another level of commodification. Discussing the first system, Douglas Kellner (1995) argues that "media culture in the US and most capitalist countries is a largely commercial form of culture, produced and disseminated in the form of commodities" (pg. 16). In this system, popular culture produced for public consumption reinforce a dominant value system. Speaking of the second system of commodity display within the series, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (2003) claims that "the entire society is organized around consumption and display of commodities through which individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing. In this system, the more prestigious one's commodities (houses, cars, clothes, and so on), the higher one's social status or prestige through 'sign value' (Baudrillard, pg. 313).

In this way, the DIY elements of Clarissa's bedroom do not necessarily seek to display wealth but do suggest material comfort and middle-class status. Clarissa's bedroom also becomes a precursor for tweencom set design, as Clarissa's bedroom and commodity display became a template for later series. The living spaces of tweencoms, particularly the bedrooms of ttweencom protagonists, could thus be one way to examine 'conspicuous consumption.'[43] In

[43] Conspicuous consumption is a term first introduced in 1899 by sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his landmark book *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*.

the next chapter, I chart how this conspicuous consumption or commodity display expanded in the tweencom realm in the 2000s as these series became more aspirational.

4.3.3 Consumerism and Gender in post-Clarissa Tweencoms

I have discussed how *Clarissa* operated as a central case study for my discussion of Nickelodeon in the 1990s, but it is also important to situate the series as a pioneer of the tweencom genre. *Clarissa* became a template for both middle-class domestic tweencoms by highlighting its protagonist's facility to purchase, consume, and possess commodities. This provided a model for the subsequent Nickelodeon series from the 1990s with contemporary female protagonists (Alex Mack), as well as for later Disney series in the 2000s, which will be the focus of my next chapter. The pivotal placement of Clarissa's bedroom and clothing in the series as a signifier of 'cool' also served as a model for the subsequent Nickelodeon and Disney series where female protagonists often express interest in shopping, clothing, modelling, and/or performing and who inhabit bedrooms that are abundant displays of conspicuous consumptions. For example, episodes in both *iCarly* (S4E1, "iGot a Hot Room") and *That's So Raven* (S4E6, "Hook up my Space") revolve around the protagonist getting a dream bedroom makeover [See Figures 19 and 20 below]. Both episodes, therefore, reference popular makeover reality shows at the time, such as *Trading Spaces* (TLC, 2000-08) and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (ABC, 2003-2012). The latter series showcases a family, always facing financial and/or health struggles, who receives a home improvement from a team of laborers who 'volunteer' their services. In their book *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (2008), Ouellette and Hay assert that such makeover reality series end up reinforcing neoliberal citizenship by focusing on how to educate, improve and shape their subjects and by reinforcing a belief in the effectivity of individual rather than state assistance. Of course, in the two tween bedroom makeovers, Carly Shay is the only one who actually 'needs' a new bedroom after her old room gets destroyed by a fire. However, she doesn't just get a new bedroom but a dream room. When her older brother and legal guardian, Spencer, sells a family heirloom for $82,000, he uses all the money to rebuild her room with tons of plush furniture, a gummy bear chandelier, and a rotating closet. Following this episode, Nickelodeon gave away replicas of some of the items shown in Carly's bedroom as sweepstakes prizes. On the other hand, *That's So Raven* [Disney 2003-2007) flips the script entirely on the makeover concept. Raven Baxter receives a new room simply because she doesn't have enough space. As an aspiring fashion designer, Raven

inhabits an attic bedroom full of racks of clothes, and eventually her friends find it hard to even enter her room. Quite simply, Raven has too many possessions, and the episode presents this dilemma as her 'need' for a larger bedroom. By coincidence, and adhering to the pattern of sitcom plot conventions, Raven's brother Cory wins a contest where he receives a free room makeover. He presents the gift to his sister, who now can enjoy a full-size basement bedroom. Like *Clarissa*, these episodes highlight the importance of object consumption, which Lita Furby (1978, 1991) has extensively studied in her analysis of the psychology of ownership and possession, including how essential objects are for children's identity and status. Like Clarissa, subsequent tweencom protagonists, especially from *iCarly* (Nickelodeon 2007-12) and *Austin & Ally* (Disney 2011-16), are fortunate to be able to fashion their identity as D-I-Y content creators by first enjoying the privilege of class that allows them access to audio-visual equipment and musical instruments.

***F*igure 19 -** *That's So Raven*

Figure 20 – *iCarly*

4.4 Nickelodeon Case Study 2: Race, Class, and *Kenan & Kel*

Having looked at one of the pivotal signature series that helped put Nickelodeon on the map with cable audiences in the early 1990s, I now examine the growth of the network in the second half of the 1990s through another series, *Kenan & Kel* (1996-2000*).* This tweencom developed as a spin-off of *All That* (1994-2005), a sketch comedy inspired by *Saturday Night Live* with young performers playing various characters. Frequently paired together in Nickelodeon projects, Kenan and Kel also starred in *Good Burger* (1997), Nickelodeon's second feature film. At the same time, the merging of sketch-comedy into the sitcom format within the performances and plots of *Kenan & Kel* should not be lost. The slapstick nature of the show helps recall how vaudeville comedy inspired early sitcoms, and the opening sequence of each episode features both actors on stage addressing the studio audience in a manner reminiscent of George Burns in *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS, 1950-58). At the same time, the show reflected a modern hip-hop style with its introductory theme song performed by Coolio, "putting the viewer on notice that the show had an urban sensibility" (Holz 2017, pg. 149).

Similar to *Clarissa, Kenan & Kel* offers an early text to understand the development of the tweencom. While *Clarissa* focused on the daily domestic lives of the characters, subsequent tweencoms in the 2000s focused on exceptional and gifted protagonists. As the creator of *Clarissa,* Mitchell Kriegman, explains, "The shows that came after are supposed to be aspirational, but the characters are really just aspiring to be show business stars… Clarissa was *smart*. She wasn't trying to be a star" (Klickstein 2013, pg. 236-7). In Chapter 5, I label many tweencoms from the 2000s as famecoms since protagonists from these series often desire a career in the entertainment and creative industries. For this reason, I identify *Kenan & Kel* as a pre-famecom. While the two protagonists are not actively trying to be 'stars' or 'famous,' they continually engage in aspects of wish fulfilment and class fantasy. The characters Kenan and Kel also idolize fame and fortune. In various plots, they win a lottery, file a million-dollar lawsuit, hatch various schemes to make money, and continuously meet rich and famous people, which, in short, helps promote a fantasy around the accessibility of fame and fortune. Throughout the series, the two characters have extraordinary adventures (like meeting the President) and often plot money-making schemes. In the final season, such plots include Kenan trying to take advantage of being mistaken as a corporative executive and Kenan getting Kel to dress up as his wife to go on a game show to win a house. These plots become a leitmotif of the series, helping to recall similar American sitcoms such as *The*

Honeymooners (CBS, 1955-56), *The Amos n'Andy Show* (CBS, 1951-53), and even the animated series *The Flintstones* (ABC, 1960-66), where the working-class protagonists often embark on get-rich-quick schemes. Therefore, I analyze this tweencom by examining how class and class ideology operates within its representational strategies and ideological imperatives, and I also consider how class intersections with race in the series.

Featuring two African-American characters from middle-class backgrounds, *Kenan & Kel* reflects the intersectionality of race and class within Nickelodeon tweencoms. Living in a two-story home that looks as though it could just as well belong to the Darling family from *Clarissa Explains It All* (after all, both series were filmed on the same sound stages in Orlando, FL), Kenan's family includes professional middle-class parents, a similar representational pattern found throughout other Nick series, like *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack*. Kenan also possesses a room full of commodities, including a computer, to exemplify his own conspicuous consumption. At the same time, one notices that the background of his bedroom contains images celebrating Black cultural representations. Just as Clarissa's posters of cars or bands like Pearl Jam or They Might Be Giants exhibited her interests, Kenan's posters of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Coolio, Whitney Huston, and Janet Jackson display Black pride. However, the characters and storylines within the series do not engage in any commentaries on race. Instead, they inhabit a world that is harmoniously integrated and multicultural, an example of a post-racial society. For many Americans, the election of Barak Obama as President in 2008 signaled that they had finally achieved a 'post-racial society,' something that political scientist Michael Dawson and sociologist Lawrence Bobo challenge as a myth (2009). They write, 'This view [affirming a post-racial society] is consistent with beliefs the majority of White Americans have held for well over a decade: that African Americans have achieved, or will soon achieve, racial equality in the United States despite substantial evidence to the contrary" (pg. 247). While the sitcom *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92) helped circulate a representation of Black affluence in popular culture in the 1980s, the tweencom *Kenan & Kel* helped circulate a representation of racial integration for youth in the 1990s, for young audiences who would grow up to become eligible to vote for Obama in the following decade.

Harmonious race relations are on full display in *Kenan & Kel* as it imagines integration in the workplace and neighborhood. Kenan works at a small, local grocery store that is frequented by customers of all ages and races. His white employer Chris serves as more of a friend than a strict boss, and he who often puts Kenan in charge of the store and accepts Kel

hanging around the store all the time (and drinking all the orange soda he wants without paying for it). By the third season, Chris hires a new employee, another African-American teen named Sharla. In this season, a recurring character named Marc is also introduced when he moves next door to the Rockmores with his parents. Stereotyped as a white 'geek' with his clothing (glasses, blazer, vest, and tie), intelligence (having won spelling bees in his youth), and interests (having an extensive knowledge of watches), Marc becomes friends – and also classmates – with Kenan, Kel, and Sharla. The strategies of Nickelodeon to embrace integration and multiculturalism in the 1990s could also be evident in its ensemble series *Hey Dude* (1989-91) and *Salute Your Shorts* (1991-92) where young people from different backgrounds (including socioeconomic backgrounds) live and work together. This idealization of integration still proves to be exceptional in American society, where research has shown that people's social network remains fairly homogeneous even as the country grows more diverse (Ingraham 2014).[44] As a narrative text, *Kenan & Kel* does not embrace race as much as it ignores it. The series instead focuses more on class fantasy.

I also note how the series marked a pivotal trajectory for the tweencom. The series presents a shift in narrative focus for the tweencom. Kenan comes from a nuclear family with four members: his father, mother, self, and sibling. In fact, this is a family dynamic shared by the protagonists of all four signature series of Nickelodeon's Golden Age. However, the series does not focus on the family as much as on the friendship of Kenan and Kel, reflecting a movement away from the domestic realm. In the last two seasons, Kenan's younger sister appears in only a handful of episodes. This trajectory became more apparent in the tweencoms of the 2000s, which I will explore in more detail in the next chapter, when peer relationships provide a much more central role to tweencoms than familial relationships. Kenan's home offers one of the main set locations; the store where he works part-time provides the other. This second location becomes a stage for many of the main plots. *Kenan & Kel* thus presents a tweencom that could also be classified as a workplace comedy.[45] As a result, I will consider all

[44] Ingraham cites studies pointing out that 75% of white Americans don't have any non-white friends (Ingraham 2014).

[45] The genre of workplace comedy was represented by such sitcoms from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-77), *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-93), and *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-98), among others. The 1990s witnessed a growth of workplace sitcoms or workplace/domestic hybrids on primetime: *Frasier* (NBC, 1993-2004), *NewsRadio* (NBC, 1995-99), *Suddenly Susan* (NBC, 1996-2000), *Just Shoot Me* (NBC, 1997-2003), *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-98), *The Drew Carey Show* (ABC, 1995-2004), *Spin City* (ABC, 1996-2002).

these threads from *Kenan & Kel* - the sets, characters, performances, plots, and racial representations - alongside an analysis of class.

4.4.1 Race, Class, and the American Sitcom

The history of African American characters in American television has shown that the most durable images are found in sitcom portrayals, and several studies have attempted to understand these representations (MacDonald 1992, Means Coleman 2000, Gray 1995, Torres 1998). Derived mainly from stereotypes in Hollywood films, typical portrayals in early sitcoms like *Beulah* (ABC, 1950-52) cast African Americans as a servant. Another series, *The Amos n' Andy* Show (CBS, 1951-53), proved even more controversial. A sitcom about the misadventures of a trio of male friends, the show immediately courted backlash against its demeaning stereotypes. As Watkins (1994) notes, the characters from the series were familiar stock characters in minstrel shows: the idle Andy, the dim-witted Amos, and the bombastic scheming Kingfish. As over-the-top characters, their costumes, manner, and speech evoked caricatures that painted a patronizing picture of black society. Thomas Cripps (2003) examines the controversy surrounding the show, exploring its historical context on television at the same when the country debated racial integration. Cripps notes that the characters were mere caricatures whose get-rich-quick schemes lampooned the aspirations of America's growing Black middle class, leading the NAACP to call for the cancellation of the series.

In American television history, the sitcom became a particularly rich site to explore representations of race. By the 1960s, the dramatic series *I Spy* (NBC, 1965-68) and sitcom *Julia* (NBC,1968-71) once again included Black characters as protagonists in television after a decade-long absence. Even at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, though, narratives addressing racism remained largely absent in television series. *Julia,* a series about an African-American widow employed as a nurse while raising a young son, invited a range of scholarship that has examined its depictions of race and class, production practices, and audience reception (MacDonald 1992, Bodroghkozy 1992, Shabazz 2016). Some of the more frequent criticism of the show included the fact the character lived in a very nice apartment with white neighbors, so the show effectively whitewashed the character's race. In this criticism, Julia's 'comfortable image of black success' lay in 'stark juxtaposition to the images seen on local and national news' (Macdonald, pg. 130). By the 1970s, an era of socially relevant sitcoms from producers like Norman Lear, sitcoms now dealt with contemporary issues of race and class and offered multifaceted portraits of the African American experience.

Good Times (CBS, 1974-79) featured a poor family living in the Chicago housing projects, *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972-77) followed the adventures of a cantankerous junk dealer and his more aspirational son, while *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985) portrayed a nouveau riche couple climbing the social ladder after moving into a new luxury apartment building.

In the 1980s, a trio of domestic series - *Diff'rent Strokes* (NBC, 1978-86), *Webster* (ABC, 1983-89), and *Gimme a Break!* (NBC, 1981-1987) – integrated race within the family. In the first two series, an affluent white family adopts Black children. In the third series, a Black housekeeper serves as a maternal figure for a widowed police chief and his children and later becomes the head of the family in the middle of the series when the father also passes away. As I suggested earlier, these programs that depicted racial integration became texts that could circulate in popular culture as affirmations for many Americans that their society became, or was becoming, a post-racial society.

As the most popular sitcom of the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92) revolved around the affluent Huxtable family and provided a rich text for scholarship about how race and class intersect. Michael Real (2003) looks at how the strong nuclear family, the emphasis on education, affluent professional parents, and the depiction of a perfect father figure helped to recode some racial stereotypes in mass media. Timothy Havens (2013) and Michael Real (2016) also examine how racial pride and heritage could be evident in the frequent references to Black history and culture, the posters of Black celebrities and artwork from Black artists, and the guest appearances of prominent Black celebrities. However, Real points out how the family's affluence isolated it from the larger issues pertaining to race and class still persistent in American society: "*The Cosby Show* recodes Blackness but it fails to address directly class and group conflict within American society" (Real 2003, pg. 241). In a study of audience reception, Jhally and Lewis (1992) mark how the show evokes 'enlightened racism' by promoting the middle-class American Dream while ignoring actual social and racial inequalities.

Following the success of *The Cosby Show*, the growth of Black sitcoms proliferated on American television from the mid-1980s.[46] These series, along with the launch of new networks like FOX in 1986 and then UPN in 1995, which both made targeting minority

[46] Other sitcoms from the mid-1980s to late-1990s as African American domestic comedies included *227* (NBC, 1985-90), *Amen* (NBC, 1986-91), TGIF series *Family Matters* (ABC, 1989-97), *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (NBC, 1990-96), *In the House* (NBC/UPN, 1995-99), *Hanging with Mr. Cooper* (ABC, 1992-97), *Smart Guy* (WB, 1997-99), *The Jamie Foxx Show* (WB, 1996-2001), *The Steve Harvey Show* (WB, 1996-2002), *Moesha* (UPN, 1996-2001), *Sister, Sister* (ABC/WB, 1994-99) and *Living Single* (Fox, 1993-98).

audiences a priority, sparked several studies to understand how these programs engaged in race representations. Kristal Brent Zook (1999) examines race on the FOX network, noting how it was able to carve out a target niche through this programming strategy and the influence of black producers and writers, while Herman Gray (1995) acknowledges the importance of the political economy of television through the increasing diversity found in the production and writing staff. Gray looks at how various television series from the 1980s and 1990s offer a pastiche of Blackness as these series circulated different meanings and representations around race. Gray singles out praise for *A Different World* (NBC, 1988-1993), a successor of *The Cosby Show* that revolved around a group of students at a historical Black College, and the short-lived *Frank's Place* (CBS, 1987-88) as shows that directly confronted issues surrounding race. However, he considers how another series, FOX's sketch comedy *In Living Color* (1990-94), could be received ambivalently by Black audiences. As a comedy, the series offered irrelevancy, satire, and spectacle around race, where it could be read alternatively as either contesting previous racial stereotypes, or perpetuating them. Robin Means Coleman (2000) also critiques how some programs from the 1990s, notably FOX's *Martin* (1992-1997) and *In Living Color*, represented the Black community. Coleman defines this era as the period of 'neo-minstrelsy,' where Black culture is lampooned through the use of racialized language and exaggerated physical comedy (pg. 104). Donald Bogle's *Primetime Blues* (2002) examines racial stereotypes in the history of African Americans on network television, such as how television perpetuated the buffoon trope from *Amos 'n' Andy*. As Coleman (2000) notes, American television was far more comfortable relegating African Americans to comic rather than dramatic roles. Within this space of increasing representations of Black characters on television, Nickelodeon aired two sitcoms by the mid-1990s featuring Black families, *My Brother and Me* (1994-95) and *Kenan & Kel* (1996-2000), in which the second series became far more noteworthy as one of Nickelodeon's signature series.

4.4.2 Diversity within Tweencoms and Sitcoms

Through the 1990s and into the 2000s, Nickelodeon demonstrated a commitment to diversity by expanding representations of Latino, Asian-American, and African-American characters in children's television.[47] Among these programs, *Kenan & Kel* is noteworthy the

[47] During a decade when only one primetime network series presented an Asian American as the lead, with Margaret Cho in *All-American Girl* (ABC, 1994-95), Nickelodeon offered its own lead character in *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* (1996-99). In the ensemble sitcoms *Salute Your Shorts* and *Hey Dude,* racial

series was created by African Americans working in the television industry. Writer/producer Kim Bass, who wrote for *In Living Color* and created the sitcom *Sister, Sister* (WB, 1994-99), developed the series. In addition, African-American actress Kim Fields, known for her roles in *The Facts of Life* (NBC, 1979-1988) and *Living Single* (Fox, 1993-98), directed many episodes. The series, therefore, offers an example of the increasing roles Black producers and creatives played in producing television following the success of *The Cosby Show*, something Gregory Adamo examines in *African Americans in Television: Behind the Scenes* (2010). However, *Kenan & Kel* also proved to be the training ground for two influential White producers, Brian Robbins and Dan Schneider, who went on to make many creative contributions to the Nick universe over the lengths of their careers, which I referred to in the last chapter.

In their comparative study of how Nickelodeon's model of diversity fared with other children's programming divisions from other channels, Ellen Seiter and Vicki Mayer (2004) note this inclusive commitment on Nickelodeon's part. They suggest some of the reasons that may have accounted for its racial and gender inclusivity included the fact that the cable channel relied less exclusively on gender-specific toy advertising and the fact that its first two presidents, the female Geraldine Laybourne and the Puerto Rican Herb Scannell, were members of under-represented groups for television executives.[48] However, Banet-Weiser suggests that Nick practiced inclusive representation but at the same time disavowed racial politics in its programs. Throughout the tweencoms of Nickelodeon and Disney, issues around race remain largely unacknowledged. In one episode of Disney's *That's So Raven*, (S3E10, "True Colors"), the protagonist's ability to have psychic visions and read person's thoughts allows her to realize that she didn't get a part-time retail job in a clothing store because the racist manager doesn't hire people of color. Such single episodes, though, do not establish any persisting political sentiments or can be found in any other series. This single episode from 2005 does not have any complement in the Nickelodeon series of the 1990s, in which race remains unmentioned. The fact that Kenan and Kel are two teen males living in Chicago who

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and ethnic minority groups were represented. As one producer stated about casting decisions, "Nickelodeon wanted us to look like the UN. They wanted a little bit of everything" (Klickstein, pg. 159).

[48] In a single year during Scannell's tenure, Nickelodeon debuted two series with Latino/a characters, the animated *Dora the Explorer* (2000-2015) for preschoolers and the sitcom *The Brothers Garcia* (2000-2003) for tweens, where both programs used Spanish words and phrases throughout. As Banet-Weiser (2007) notes, the sitcom made television history as the first English-language program with an all-Latino cast and creative team (pg. 173).

also happen to be African American means that race can be both visible but also in the background, like Kenan's posters.

To Banet-Weiser's analysis, though, I would add that the intersections of race and class within the Disney and Nick tweencom are also invisible. As I have noted, tweencoms overwhelmingly present a monolithic representation of the middle and upper classes. For the tweencom families, certain repeated patterns include the fact that the parents are educated and successful professionals, the families live in either a suburban or urban setting in a two-story house, their homes are clean and well-furnished with spacious rooms, and any narratives around economic want are absent.[49]

4.4.3 *Kenan & Kel* – Family, Work, and Class

Regarding class representation, *Kenan & Kel* continues Nickelodeon's pattern of portraying middle-class youth, but moves the setting from a predominantly white suburbia to urban Chicago. In his book on teen culture, Doyle Greene (2012) affords the series only a passing reference but claims that the characters play "relatively poor African-American males living in inner-city Chicago" - which is also relatively inaccurate (pg. 184). This statement may be due to Greene's unfamiliarity with the series, but it still presents troubling racial implications. Instead, the Rockmore's home provides one principal setting for the series, and the images of Kenan's house clearly demarcate the family as comfortably middle-class, not relatively poor. Like Clarissa, Kenan owns a desktop computer in his bedroom, a conspicuous consumer object that indicates a certain class and income status.[50] Kenan's parents, Roger and Cheryl, can afford to purchase other middle-class luxuries. In one episode, (S1E6, "Diamonds are for Roger"), Roger purchases a diamond ring as an anniversary present. In another episode, (S3E3, "The Raffle"), the family buys a high-end television set for $800. Obviously, this family does not struggle to get by, and there are no narratives around the inability to pay

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[49] Many tweencoms following *Kenan & Kel* fit into the category of workplace sitcoms. Two series, *Wizards of Waverly Place* (Disney, 2007-12) and *The Haunted Hathaways* (Nickelodeon, 2013-15), offer a realistic premise where teens work part-time at their parent's restaurants. This is undercut, though, by the fact that both series are magicoms where economic realities are rarely addressed. Other subsequent workplace tweencoms, including *True Jackson, VP* (Nickelodeon, 2008-11) and *Game Shakers* (Nickelodeon, 2015-2019), present a fantasy of allowing teen characters to enjoy a professional corporate career – as tweens/teens.

[50] While computer ownership rose sharply in the 1990s, from 15% to 35% of all households, ownership of a computer for Black households remained under 18% by 1997, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999).

bills or make mortgage payments unlike other contemporary series about working-class families, such as *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97).

Kenan's parents possess backgrounds and professions to implicate the family as solidly middle-class. Although Cheryl makes no mention of having a profession, she does reveal that she attended college. Roger works as an air traffic controller at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, an occupation that pays a salary well above the median income in the United States.[51] Although Kel's parents do not appear in the series, he reveals that they are wealthy scientists when he graduates high school in the final season, the first time their occupations are mentioned**.** Like George Mack and Marshall Darling, Roger Rockmore enjoys a professional career. However, *Kenan & Kel* does not link parental figures to their occupations as Clarissa and Alex Mack did. While the two earlier series identified the parents' occupations in the very first episodes and continued to reference the parents' employment throughout the series, *Kenan & Kel* makes few mentions of parental occupations. The first mention of Roger's career occurs when he reveals that he works on Saturdays (S1E8, "The Cold War"). In this episode, Kel concocts a drink for treating a cold that also makes people fall asleep. When Roger takes it to work, the boys rush to the airport so that he won't fall asleep at his job. In another episode, (S1E9, "Dial O for Oops"), the boys attempt to retrieve an answering machine tape from the possession of Roger's unpleasant boss after Roger leaves an unpleasant message telling off his boss. Since *Kenan & Kel* represents a trajectory away from the domestic, the actual presence of the parents and their own lives and careers outside of the family become rather insignificant, and Roger's job is rather alluded to, apart from these two episodes. Instead, the series gives Kenan his own job as an employee at a local grocery store named Rigby's [See Figure 21].

[51] According to 2001 statistics, an air traffic controller averaged a yearly salary around $93,640, more than double the median household income of $42,000 for the United States (US Census Bureau 2001, Friel 2002).

Figure 21 - Rigby's store in *Kenan & Kel*

4.4.4 *Kenan & Kel* as a Workplace Tweencom

Kenan's workplace is an important element of the series. His employment allows the character to have an identity – and adventures - outside of the home. He does not seek employment due to financial need as much as financial want.[52] In the pilot episode, Kenan reveals that he would like to own a car, another symbol of freedom for youth that he shares with Clarissa. The series presents Kenan's employer Chris as a likeable enough pushover who is more friend than tyrant. Chris often orders Kenan to do grunt work, like sweep the floor, and expresses frustration whenever he sees Kenan not working. Still, Chris also gives Kenan a great deal of responsibility, such as putting him in charge of the store whenever he runs errands. With no real threat that Chris will ever fire Kenan, Kenan and Kel occasionally wreak havoc on the store without any consequences. In the pilot episode, they open all the cereal boxes and rifle through them to find a $10,000 sweepstake. In another episode, (S1E4, "Duh Bomb"), they turn the store into a night club after closing hours in order to make extra money until a fire marshal shuts it down. The boys often make the store space their own, using it for a press conference or an art auction. Although he is not an employee, Kel hangs around the store almost as much as Keenan to be with his friend and to feed his addiction to orange soda, a recurring gag in the series.

[52] Economists who study teen employment and spending habits reveal that many teens do not work to contribute toward family necessities but instead spend their money on their own personal use (Johnson and Lino, 2000). In their study, Johnston and Lino selected teens aged 14 to 17 as these years correspond to the years when teens are still in high school and continue to live with their families.

Kenan & Kel blends domestic comedy and workplace comedy, while I categorize it primarily as a friendcom. Nickelodeon's first tweencom, *Hey Dude!* (1989-91), enjoyed a similar premise as a workplace friendcom, as the teen protagonists work on a dude ranch during the summer and likewise get to enjoy time away from parental supervision. Analyzing the workplace comedies that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, Ella Taylor (1989) writes about how such sitcoms were simply another version of the domestic sitcom by offering workplace families: "The television world of work, in sum, is primarily a world of relationship, and emotionality and – of community. In this sense, it extends and comments on, rather than departs from, the domestic series" (Taylor, pg. 148). MTM Enterprises in the 1970s and 1980s specialized in producing workplace comedies such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77). Extensive scholarship from Jane Feuer and Paul Kerr (1984) of these MTM productions explores how such series mythologized workplaces as settings of intimacy with co-workers as friends, offering alternate families for single people and settings that allow for a range of gender, race, and age diversity. Taylor asserts that these comedies also offer a humanist version of the workplace, where characters are given more autonomy than they otherwise find in real-life corporate institutions.

It is key to re-emphasize that in adult workplace comedies, protagonists treat their work colleagues as an alternate family because I suggest that tweencom workplace comedies flip this script. Instead of finding an alternate family at work, the tween protagonists bring their friends and family with them into the workplace. Kel joins Kenan at his workplace. In *Drake & Josh* (Nick, 2004-07), two teen stepbrothers work together in a movie theatre, and in Disney's *The Suite Life on Deck* (2008-2011), twin brothers likewise work together on a cruise ship. These series reflect the importance of connections for employment, at a time when teen employment participation in the United States has dropped steadily.[53] More importantly, though, these models of workplace employment, even for temporary/part-time employment in service industry jobs, suggest that work can still be made fun, especially when you are with your best friend.

In *Kenan & Kel*, the workplace offers them a site for play and adventure. For this reason, I identify workplace tweencoms as a site of an important ideological site of 'playbour,' a term introduced by Julian Kucklich (2005) to refer to the collapse of the distinction between

[53] Teresa Morisi (2010, 2017) records how teen labor force participation, including summer employment, has dropped significantly from a high of around 58% in 1979. While that rate fell to 52% in 2000, it dropped precipitously to 34% by 2011, a steady range it has remained since in the subsequent years.

work time and playtime. While Kucklich explores this term in the video-game industry to refer to how techniques of play are used to extract unpaid labor from a person, I could easily apply this theory to the tweencom series that indeed portrays this very same industry, *Game Shakers* (Nick, 2015-2019). However, I contend that this concept of playbour begins earlier in the realm of tweencoms and extends throughout the genre as characters get to 'play with' employment and also 'play at' work. Playbour runs throughout the tweencom genre, as I will explore further in Chapter 6 in my analysis of *Game Shakers* (Nick, 2015-2019). Here, I argue that *Kenan & Kel* offers a site to explore a trajectory toward playbour, as the two characters 'play' together during working hours while they also try to commodify the workspace after work hours, something demonstrated most clearly in the episode "Duh Bomb" (S1E5). In this episode, Kenan and Kel hear about Outrage, the "coolest club in Chicago," but since they are only fifteen they are too young to get in. Kenan then gets an idea to open a new club where young people like them can go. He reasons that since his store closes at eight o'clock and 'sits here all alone and bored,' it would make the perfect place to become a nightclub. Kenan suggests that they can fix the place up with music, a DJ, decoration, and lights and can charge an admission fee without the manager, Chris, ever finding out. During the evening, Kenan alternates between dancing and minding the store, as he chides people for taking things from the store shelves without paying for them, telling them that 'this is a night club, not an all-you-can-eat buffet." Chris returns to find to his dismay that his grocery store has become a club. Soon the fire marshal also arrives to demand everyone disperse and fines the store $300 for exceeding its capacity. In the closing credits where Kenan and Kel address the audience, Kenan reasons that they can pay the fine by opening a bigger, better club at another place. This episode demonstrates how Kenan sees his workplace as a place where he can both work and play at the same time and as a space that he can commodify after his workday ends. While he works at the store, he continually engages in class fantasy by dreaming about making money from his schemes so that he wouldn't have to work again.

With *Kenan & Kel*, the ideology around work is complicated by the endless get-rich-quick schemes the characters hatch, undermining any attempts at learning the value of hard work. Many of the episodes revolve around Kenan and Kel trying to get rich or win a prize or contest. In an early episode, (S1E2, "The Tainting of the Screw"), Kenan almost chokes on a screw he found in his tuna sandwich, unaware that Kel accidentally dropped it there. Kenan then seeks to sue the tuna company for ten million, even refusing to accept the company's willingness to give him one million to settle the lawsuit. In season 2, they try to make claims

on a winning lottery ticket, and Kel tries to become rich as an artist. While working-class characters hatching get-rich-quick schemes became a sitcom trope, from *The Honeymooners* to *The Flintstones*, Richard Butsch labels these characters as buffoons because they always inevitably fail in their schemes (Butsch 2003). The problem with *Kenan & Kel*, as noted by Banet-Weiser (2007), is the fact that the portrayal of the characters as buffoons and schemers isn't far from the racial stereotypes that were presented and criticized in *Amos n' Andy*. This comparison is noteworthy as both sitcoms place emphasis on slapstick physical comedy and exaggerated performances. As middle-class teens, though, Kenan and Kel are allowed to fail in their schemes because they have the opportunity to always try again.

4.4.5 *Kenan & Kel* - Fame and Performance

Kenan & Kel is interesting stylistically, as it breaks the fourth wall in the opening and closing sequences by having the actors address a rousing studio audience in front of the red curtain. The theatricality and performative nature of the series are thus immediately highlighted. Therefore, I classify *Kenan & Kel* as a pre-famecom for a number of reasons. While Kenan and Kel are not famous in the fictional universe, Kenan Thompson and Kel Mitchell were famous in the real world as Nickelodeon celebrities by this time. The actors were well-known from the sketch-comedy *All That* (Nick, 1994-2005) and would receive further recognition by starring in Nickelodeon's theatrical release *Good Burger* (1997). The fact that the characters from the series are given the same first names as the actors help to blur the distinction between their real-life celebrity and their character counterparts.

As I have already identified, the series also utilizes the prevalence of celebrity as something that can be both idolized and accessible. In the first two seasons, the boys meet the President and fictitious actors and athletes at Rigby's store. In the final season, they also take a trip to Hollywood in a two-part episode (S4E8/E9, "Aww, Here it Goes to Hollywood"), which Nickelodeon utilized to engage in cross-promotions and marketing. During their stay in Hollywood, the pair visit Universal Studios (which also owns Nickelodeon) in an extended montage sequence. They then get tickets to a talk show. As they walk through the studio, they meet the comic who is the voice of the puppet protagonist of the show *Cousin Skeeter* (a show airing on Nickelodeon at the time), actor-comedian David Alan Grier, and the popstar Britney Spears, who mistakes them for her hairdressers [See Figure 22 below]. The characters Kenan and Kel, therefore, inhabit a world that can be blind to color but not celebrity.

Figure 22 - Kenan and Kel meet Britney Spears

I also classify the series as a pre-famecom due to the fact that it heavily relies upon and emphasizes its own performativity. From the broad comedy of slapstick in the series to the direct address to the audiences and each other, the exaggerated performances call attention to themselves. As Kenan and Kel often get into ridiculous schemes and overemote, audiences could read their performances and characterizations within the comedic tradition of the buffoon from vaudeville and minstrel shows. In this tradition, the character tropes include the schemer and the fool. Following this model, Kenan frequently hatches schemes while Kel plays the comic fool.

As the schemer, Kenan initiates a lie or a plan that inevitably goes awry. In one episode (S3E15, "The Limo"), he meets a rich girl named Melissa at a music store while she's buying a $2000 stereo with her credit card. He wants to impress her by pretending that he is also rich. She later runs into him at his job at Rigby's where she sees him wearing an apron and holding a broom. Continuing the charade, he lies by telling her that he owns the store and then asks her out, promising to pick her up in his limo. Kenan proceeds to rent a tuxedo and rent a limo to impress her. Meeting her parents, he tells them that he is in real estate and made his money through investments. Meanwhile, Kel knocks out the limo driver, takes over as the driver, and then crashes the limo. As the boys panic, Melissa storms away from the date. In this episode, Kenan performs and exaggerates class. He knows that Melissa is only interested in him because she thinks he's wealthy and that she is spoiled, but he doesn't care. This episode offers a critique of the upper class, as the spoiled Melissa is an unsympathetic character, and Kenan gets a comeuppance for his deceit in passing himself off as rich. Class can be performed, just as race and gender can, according to Gwendolyn Foster (2005), who uses the term 'class passing' to refer to how people often claim different socioeconomic

classes as their own. I will review Foster's scholarship and the term class-passing further in the next chapter, as I find that tweencoms in the 2000s are replete with examples of class-passing. Kenan's attempts fail here, but he continuously hatches plans to make money by remaining true to his nature as the schemer.

As the comic fool, Kel Mitchell frequently engages in exaggerated theatricality in his performance, such as when the character guzzles orange soda and when he shows a complete lack of common sense. The character of Kel as a foolish character is on full display in an episode where the boys decide to climb to the top of the Sears Towers in Chicago (S1E3, "Doing thing the Hemingway"). As they climb the stairs, Kel drops breadcrumbs as they climb on the stairs 'so they don't get lost' and carries heavy and unnecessary items in his backpack. The show can, therefore, be placed within the literature of the contested images of race in American television around the comic traditions of exaggerated performance (Bogle 2001, Hunt 2005, Means Coleman 2000, Gray 1995, Torres 1998). These scholars consider how such comic representations can be coded and encoded by audiences who may find black slapstick alternately problematic or amusing. Likewise, Timothy Havens (2013) writes that:

> Black slapstick is controversial due to the long history in the West of stereotyping blacks through such comedy to achieve racist political ends. Since their inception in nineteenth-century minstrel shows, mainstream depictions of African Americans in white popular culture have exhibited an 'overruling investment in the black body' (pg. 115).

As Sarah Banet-Weiser notes (2007), the characters of Kenan and Kel may be compared to Laurel and Hardy or, racially, to *Amos 'n' Andy*. Although she finds the racial performances of the characters to be problematic, Banet-Weiser claims that Nickelodeon ultimately engages in 'racial ambivalence' (pg. 159) by programming diversity to help its business. Kenan and Kel's performances are treated as a 'racial style' that is seen as a commodity, and their identities are linked to a 'brand-identified urban style' (pg. 160). Therefore, the performances are not racialized as much as they are commodified. Timothy Havens (2013) makes a similar point by writing that slapstick travels well across different markets and demographics even as it negotiates a delicate balance in not offending its main target audience. I suggest that the continued fandom of the series and calls for its reboot have immured *Kenan & Kel* from more serious conversations about race and representation simply due to the fact that it is mostly seen and remembered as an innocuous tween series. More than anything, the series is characterized by silliness and absurdity that blunts any discussion of social realities around race, class, and American culture.

4.5 Nickelodeon and the Direction of Tweencoms

I have identified *Clarissa* and *Kenan & Kel* as two series that helped establish the tweencom genre. Clarissa's model of commodity consumption and DIY identity formation became hallmarks of the genre. The settings, slapstick elements, and class fantasy present within *Kenan & Kel* can be found throughout subsequent tweencoms. As Michael Tueth (2005) notes, many network sitcoms from the 1990s showed adults navigating city life as a "safe and fun playground" that could offer endless comic adventures for single sitcom characters to hang out with each other outside domestic or workspaces (pg. 185). Doyle Greene (2012) expresses similar sentiments by suggesting that city life symbolizes what is hip or cool for young people. *Kenan & Kel* reflects an early tweencom that demarcated urban hipness as the primary location for future tweencoms. Of the four Nickelodeon signature series I have written about in this chapter, it is the only one set in a city. In the next chapter on Disney Channel, all its signature series take place in cities.[54] Along with the move to the big cities, the characters dream bigger. While I identified *Kenan & Kel* as a pre-famecom in the 1990s, I will next detail how the famecom became the dominant tweencom genre of the 2000s in Chapter 5. Furthermore, I noted in this chapter how *Kenan & Kel* blends both domestic and workplace comedy, offering a shift in narrative focus away from the family. This element likewise became much more prevalent in the tweencoms in the 2000s.

In discussing the importance of the workplace in *Kenan & Kel*, I reflected on how it offered a site for the characters to daydream and playbour. In a small store, the characters meet the President, an NBA player, and a famous actor. *Kenan & Kel* seeks to perpetuate a world where the characters can continuously meet and interact with world leaders, famous celebrities, and wealthy individuals. Thus, even though the two characters are young, middle-class city kids, they often encounter the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

In the next chapter, I build upon this centrality of material comfort within the tweencom in my discussion of the Disney Channel series of the 2000s, in sitcoms like *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* (2005-08), *The Suite Life on Deck* (2008-2011*),* and *Jessie* (2011-15). These sitcoms no longer present a comfortable middle-class lifestyle that Clarissa or Alex Mack possess but instead present upper-class lifestyles where protagonists often have access to wealth and privilege. I look at two prevalent and key themes from Disney tweencoms - the

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[54] *That's So Raven* is set in San Francisco. *The Wizards of Waverly Place* is set in New York City. *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* is set in Boston. *Hannah Montana* and *Lizzie McGuire* are both set in southern California.

theme of vicarious living and the theme of achieving fame - to suggest how they both reinforce the class ideology and materiality of the American Dream. While Disney's *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* presents a class fantasy of vicarious living, and Disney's *Shake It Up* presents a daydream around achieving fame, I illustrate how class should be treated as the defining element within both series.

5. Disney Channel Decade (2001-2012)

In this chapter, I expand my investigation into Disney Channel and its programs by focusing on the decade of the 2000s - a decade that I refer to as the Disney Channel Decade. While others have referred to the 1990s as the Disney Decade or Disney Renaissance (Pallant 2011) due to the company's resurgent success with its animated film division, I acknowledge that Disney Channel only achieved similar recognition in the following decade due to its success with live-action series. After all, it was only in the 2000s that Disney Channel revved up its original production of live-action series, following its success with *The Famous Jett Jackson* (1998-01), *Even Stevens* (2000-3), and *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-3). As Christopher Bell attests in *Disney Channel Tween Programming* (2020), these tweencom series contributed significantly to the channel's success and quickly dominated its network schedule.

Like Nickelodeon, my analysis of Disney Channel will also position the network within the period of television defined by Amanda Lotz (2010) as the post-network era, which I have previously explained was marked by an explosion of new content across many new cable channels. At first, Disney Channel trailed Nickelodeon in developing original series throughout the 1990s but quickly caught up by the mid-2000s. It then produced some of the most popular tweencoms, including *Hannah Montana* (2006-11) and *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-12), turning Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez into household names. Nickelodeon continued to beat Disney Channel in the ratings throughout the 2000s and produced popular several of hit series, namely the Schneider-produced series like *Drake & Josh* (2004-7), *iCarly (*2007-12), and *Zoey 101* (2005-8). However, I focus on Disney Channel in this chapter because I believe that the channel's output during this decade gave the network a more distinct brand identity. As the Nickelodeon insiders interviewed in Klicksten's *Slimed*! (2013) lament, by the 2000s Nickelodeon's series often began to copycat Disney Channel's narratives. Therefore, Disney Channel offers a more useful site to explore this decade's tweencoms, particularly around the subjects of class representation, consumption, and aspirational ideology. In this chapter, I also extend my analysis of the tweencom as a study of genre.

I argue that Disney produced television content that became much more significant across tween media and popular culture during the Disney Channel Decade. Nickelodeon created teen stars out of Melissa Joan Hart (*Clarissa*) and Amanda Bynes (*All That, The Amanda Show*) in the 1990s and Miranda Cosgrove (*Drake & Josh, iCarly*) in the 2000s. However, Disney Studios put its star-making machinery into hyper-drive in the 2000s with the

launch of each new series, beginning with Hilary Duff in *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-3) and continuing with Miley Cyrus in *Hannah Montana* (2006-11), Selena Gomez in *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-12), and Demi Lovato in *Sonny with a Chance* (2009-11). During this time, various publications often referred to Disney Channel actresses as not just 'tween stars' but as 'tween queens' as they dominated tween culture and media industries (Learmonth 2006; Sanders 2008; Sullivan 2011; Lumenick 2008). The fact that most actors during the Disney Channel Decade were multifaceted performers who could act, sing, and dance meant that each series could be turned into a synergistic franchise across multiple media platforms, extending the television series into made-for-tv movies, feature films, albums, and concert tours, in addition to other commercial products. These series then provide a self-reflexive commentary around the theme of stardom, performance, and fame during a decade when American television was dominated by reality television and talent formats, exemplified by the top-rated series *American Idol* (FOX, 2002-16), the country's most-watched primetime program for its first eight consecutive seasons (Rowe 2011). This focus on fame becomes one of the central themes for many tweencoms during this era, so I consider this theme in greater detail in this chapter. These narratives of celebrity are inextricably linked to class, even while achieving fame/celebrity, as a result of one's natural talent, is assumed to be classless. As sociologist Karen Sternheimer (2011) writes, "Celebrity culture reflects and reinforces the ever-changing notion of what it means to achieve the American Dream" (pg. 24).

I also build upon this centrality of material comfort and independence explored in the last chapter to the Disney Channel series of the 2000s. Across multiple Disney series, characters don't just live a comfortable middle-class lifestyle but instead enjoy a fantasy lifestyle - surrounded by wealth and luxury. This becomes a consistent theme that runs across the tweencoms of the Disney Channel Decade that I refer to as 'vicarious living.' I use the terms 'class floaters' and 'vicarious living' because these characters are not wealthy themselves but instead get to enjoy access to a wealthy lifestyle, and I define the concept of 'class floating' in greater detail during my analysis of *Disney's The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*. In similar series, including *Jessie*, I point out that that characters who enjoy vicarious wealth are often precariously perched in a liminal class position, to which I refer to them as 'class floaters.' At the same time, social class is not a subject often addressed or even portrayed realistically throughout tweencoms, a concept that I refer to as 'class concealment,' or what

Karen Sternheimer (2011) also names 'class unconsciousness.'[55] In this chapter, I explore this notion of 'class concealment' in more detail in my examination of Disney's *Shake It Up*. Therefore, I offer a thematic approach to this chapter in my examination of the Disney Channel Decade to look at the two key themes I find throughout these series - the theme of vicarious living and the theme of achieving fame - to suggest how both themes reinforce the class ideology and materiality of the American Dream and obscure any real considerations of class or socioeconomic concerns through concepts of 'class floating' and 'class blindness.'

Just as I identified four signature sitcoms from Nickelodeon in the last chapter, I similarly suggest that certain series from Disney also serve as the network's signature series during the Disney Channel Decade due to the their popularity and influence by helping in shape the Disney tweencom. While I provide a short synopsis of each series and an exegesis on their importance within the Disney canon, I also suggest that the explosion of original content creation by this time across both Disney Channel and Nickelodeon complicates turning one tweencom into a singular case study for the decade. This is especially the case for the genre of tweencoms which I label famecoms, so I first look at the ideology of the genre and then discuss how *Shake It Up* serves as a representative series. Likewise, I look at the ideology around the vicarious living series and examine a representative series of this theme in *The Suite Life*.

5.1 Disney Channel Signature Series

As I explored in the last chapter, Nickelodeon's programming during the 1990s could be traced through its signature programs. For Disney Channel, I likewise identify the crucial sitcoms that I believe serve as signature series for the network in the first decade of the 2000s*: Lizzie McGuire, The Suite Life of Zack and Cody, Hannah*, and the two magi-coms *That's So Raven* and *The Wizards of Waverly Place* [See Figure 23 below]. These Disney signature series exemplified specific themes, representational patterns, and narrative premises that became prevalent across multiple series. For example, *Hannah Montana* follows a young pop star, and its success led to the creation of more series built around a similar premise of following teen characters pursuing opportunities in the entertainment business, a genre of

[55] In *American Culture and the Celebrity Dream* (2011), Sternheimer writes this about class unconsciousness: "Celebrities seem to provide a visible example that we have an open class system, not based on family lineage but rather on one's own talent, skill, and specialness. Despite the belief that success is primarily the result of our own actions, being born into the right family can make it easier to become a celebrity, a part of the American caste system that we seldom recognize" (pg. 12).

famecoms. In his critique of the television industry, Todd Gitlin (1983) decried this 'recombinant culture' where copycat shows and spinoffs often copied the successful elements of hit series. Following *Hannah Montana's* popularity, Disney developed the series *Shake It Up* about teens who danced rather than sang. Among the most visible patterns, though, is that only one series from the Disney Channel Decade, *The Suite Life*, consists of male protagonists, while the other four all possess female leads. By this time, tweencoms and tween culture became thoroughly understood as female-gendered (Coulter 2014, Kennedy 2018).

Figure 23 – Disney Channel signature series

Many of the female-led series from Disney Channel in this era continue the genre's discourse around 'girl power' post-*Clarissa,* within a larger context where girls emerged as a powerful economic force (Gonick 2006). According to Natalie Coulter (2013), the tween girl demographic became 'crystallized' as a market by this time, constructed "in the marketplace, in media, and in everyday family life and ideology within which girls came to know themselves as consumers" – in part through media representations (pg. 5). The evocations of

Girl Power proliferated by the late 1990s throughout popular media, with examples ranging from the Spice Girls to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997-2003). The rhetoric around 'girl power,' though, became contested. Those who affirmed Girl Power held that it "celebrates the fierce and aggressive potential of girls as well as reconstitution of girl culture as a positive force embracing self-expression through fashion, attitude and a DIY approach to cultural production" (Gonick 20006, pg. 7). At the same time, feminist critiques blasted it as a commercial, commodified, non-political, non-threatening alternative to feminism, where Girl Power became just a marketable concept that could be commercially exploited (Taft 2001, Gonick 2006). The crystallization of 'tween girl power' became embedded within such post-feminist and neoliberal discourse that idealized individualism and self-determination around choice and agency (Henry 2004, Gonick 2006). Astrid Henry (2004) writes that a prominent characteristic of post-feminism is a "stress on individuality and individual definitions of feminism" (pg. 31). In a post-feminism context where feminism was simply "taken for granted," according to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000), gender equality is simply assumed and taken for granted. Jessica Taft (2004) criticizes the Girl Power discourse as a post-feminist, or anti-feminist, movement which presents "a world with no need for social change" that "fails to provide girls with the tools to understand and challenge situations where they experience sexism and other forms of oppression" (pg. 73). In *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2008), Angela McRobbie discusses how consumer culture encroaches on feminism's progressive gains, deploying discourse around 'choice' and 'empowerment' to affect individual subject formation. In this context, one needs to further interrogate gender representations on Disney Channel from this era.

The first signature series of Disney Channel*, Lizzie McGuire* (2001-4), helped irrevocably link the tweencom with girlhood, as the network subsequently developed many of their original series around a female protagonist (Hogan 2012, pg. 298). The series follows the adventures of thirteen-year-old Lizzie and her two best friends growing up and navigating junior high. Lizzie's animated alter ego punctuates the series at moments to express her true thoughts and emotion. For Patrice Oppliger (2019), the series becomes a prime representative of the character tropes and themes found throughout tweencoms. These include the tropes of the main girl who is thin, attractive, nice, and perky and yet always relatable (Lizzie) and the mean girl who is aggressive yet also popular, someone who is usually attractive, rich, and a member of the school's popular clique (like Lizzie's ex-friend Kate). Examining how Hillary Duff was constructed as a celebrity in the media at this time, both Hogan (2015) and Elza

(2020) point to how the series, and the popular press, framed Duff with a wholesome and normal girl image that perfectly suited Disney's brand. This constructed image included the suggestion that 'anyone could be a star,' which Disney often cultivated as it launched the subsequent careers of other tween stars. In one episode (S1E9, "Election), Lizzie's friend suggests that she should run for class president because she's one of the 'normals.' As I emphasized in the last chapter, belonging to the middle class is understood to be integral to normalcy in the tweencom universe. With plots revolving around popularity and cliques, school parties, shopping for a bra, modelling, and getting one's picture in the yearbook, Valdivia (2008) describes the overall feel of the series as set in 'white affluence' (pg. 282). Lizzie lives in an upscale home, like many tweencom protagonists, but the occupations of both parents are never really determined. Her father wears ties and occasionally references having to work at an office but can usually be found at home, while her mother apparently works as a stay-at-home mom. In this world of suburban affluence, Lizzie even gets to travel to Rome with her class following their junior high school graduation, which serves as the premise for a movie. The popularity of *Lizzie McGuire* and Duff extended beyond the TV screen, as it became the first Disney series to have a theatrical movie spin-off.[56] Both the series and movie generated soundtracks with music performed by Duff, who began national concert tours following the release of her albums *Metamorphosis* (2003) and *Hilary Duff* (2004). By this time, Duff received the title "Queen of Tweens" (Nussbaum 2003). In turn, Lindsay Hogan (2015) traces how Duff wished to pursue an acting and music career beyond Disney and the *Lizzie McGuire* franchise, which promptly limited the series to only two seasons. The popular sitcom continued to air reruns for years after it ended. More recently, Duff expressed serious interest in returning as the character in a reboot. In 2019, Duff announced that she would star in a *Lizzie McGuire* reboot for Disney's new streaming platform, Disney+, describing her character as having "her dream job, the perfect life right now working as an apprentice to a fancy NYC decorator" and "the perfect man, who owns a fancy restaurant," which extends her character's 'white affluence' into adulthood (Lewis 2019). However, due to both Covid-19 and disagreements over the direction of the shows, these plans for the reboot were subsequently canceled, but the initial plans for the reboot signal the long-lasting popularity and nostalgic appeal of the series (Spencer 2020).

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[56] In his review of *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (2003), Roger Ebert criticizes the movie as presenting a vacuous world that 'celebrates popularity, beauty, great hair, lip gloss, and overnight stardom, those universal obsessions of pop teenage culture" (Ebert 2003).


Figure 24 - *The Suite Life*: the Tipton yacht and Tipton hotel

As the only signature series with boys rather than girls as lead protagonists, *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* (2005-8) proved to be a popular staple throughout the Disney Channel Decade. Produced by Disney's partner, It's a Laugh Productions, *The Suite Life* revolves around twelve-year-old twins Zack and Cody Martin (Cole and Dylan Sprouse) who move with their mother into an upper-floor suite in Boston's ritziest hotel after she gets a contract to sing in its nightclub. The twins manage to make friends with various hotel staff and guests, especially the gift shop clerk Maddie (played by Ashley Tisdale, from Disney's *High School Musical* franchise) and spoiled hotel heiress London Tipton, who also resides in the hotel and whose spoiled persona and name parodies real-life hotel heiress Paris Hilton. Running around The Tipton Hotel like a playground, the boys can enjoy all the amenities of their new home, including room service, a swimming pool, a game room, and a candy counter. One tagline for the series read: "For them, it's a life of luxury. For everyone else, it's a living nightmare!" The popularity of the series led to a sequel series, *The Suite Life on Deck* (2008-11), in which the twins, along with Miss Tipton, enroll in a semester-at-sea program aboard the luxury cruise ship SS Tipton [See Figure 24 above]. In an interview, Disney Channel president Gary Marsh stated that the popularity of the series led to Disney's decision to create the revamped sequel (Nordyke 2008). In addition to the sequel, the series also led to an eventual *The Suite Life Movie* (2011) on Disney Channel. Finally, the global reach and popularity of both Disney and *The Suite Life* can be evidenced by the fact that Disney Channel India developed an adaptation of the series. While I categorize the *The Suite Life* as one of the signature series of Disney

Channel, it has so far received little academic attention. Therefore, I find it necessary to look at this series as a case study to provide an original analysis that examines how the series exemplifies the recurring themes around class fantasy, which I argue runs throughout the tweencom genre.

Hannah Montana (2006-11) serves as the next identifiable signature series. In contrast to *The Suite Life*, there has been a plethora of attention in academic literature and the popular press given to *Hannah Montana* as *the signature* Disney tweencom (Blue 2017, Oppliger 2019, Kennedy 2019, Bickford 2013, Mayes-Elma 2011). Another series produced by *It's a Laugh Productions*, it spanned four seasons and spawned four soundtracks, two theatrical movies, a concert tour, and the career of Miley Cyrus. Much of the critical attention given to the series looked at how it interrogated and commodified girlhood by aggressively promoting and marketing the series and its star through various merchandise (Mayes-Elma 2011, Blue 2017). In *Girlhood on Disney Channel* (2017), Morgan Blue examines how the series exemplified Disney constructed contemporary images of the tween as feminine and the tween as consumer, producing discourses of girlhood. A month before the series debuted, *Variety* proclaimed Miley Cyrus 'the next Hilary Duff' (Learmonth 2006).[57] With a Disney promotional campaign following the success of the first *High School Musical* movie in January 2006, the series debuted in March as the biggest series premiere in the channel's history (McDowell 2006). In the series, Miley Cyrus plays Miley Stewart, a seemingly ordinary teenager with a secret identity. She lives a double life as the pop star named Hannah Montana and can carry on this charade by donning a blonde wig and sunglasses to disguise herself as her alter ego. According to Wee (2010), this secret identity narrative allows audiences "escapist pleasures associated with the fantasy lifestyle associated with her rock star Hannah Montana alter ego" (pg. 175-6). While Miley wants to live what she considers a 'normal life' as a 'typical teenager' by remaining incognito, she attends a public high school where she deals with mean girls and popularity issues, despite being conventionally attractive and living in a large Malibu beach house, complete with an outdoor pool, stable, and a separate room for her closet [See Figure 25 below]. In the subsequent years, many other series across Nickelodeon and Disney Channel dealt with the narrative trope of tween characters either aspiring to be performing stars or having already achieved a level of fame or status as

[57] Valerie Wee (2011) points out how Hannah Montana's debut in March 2006 benefited from Disney's media-saturated promotional campaigns following the success of Disney's TV-movie High School Musical in January that year, which aired repeat viewings across Disney's channels.

performers.[58] I refer to these sitcoms as famecoms and find that they produce a recurring narrative theme around fame-building that, along with the theme of vicarious living, dominates Disney Channel tweencoms. Therefore, I will examine the ideology surrounding fame as a broad theme in a representative series of the subgenre, *Shake It Up.*

Figure 25 - The Stewart Home as a Malibu beach house, and a Barbie toy model

Finally, I consider *That's So Raven* (2003-2007) and *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-12) as two Disney signature series that I categorize as magi-coms, a sitcom subgenre explored by Gary Kenton (2016) to describe several American sitcoms of the 1960s that embraced escapism through fantasy. It is interesting to note that both series present multiple parallels beyond the premise of being magi-coms because the protagonists possess extraordinary abilities. For Disney Channel, both series also exemplify attempts by the network to represent racial and ethnic diversity, even if it exists in a Disneyfied, colorblind society where race and ethnicity are only addressed in an individual episode (Blue 2017). *That's So Raven* portrays an African American family, while *Wizards of Waverly Place* portrays a mixed-race family with a father who comes from a wizard background and a mother who is mortal and Mexican American.

In *Wizards of Waverly Place,* the Russo family possesses secret powers: the three kids have inherited magical powers from their father. While their father gave up his own powers to marry a mortal, he now trains his kids on how to control their own powers. A popular series, *Wizards* boasted 9.8 million viewers for its final episode, and it became the most-watched series finale in Disney history (Reynolds 2012). The series also led to two television movies, *Wizards of Waverly Place: The Movie* (2009) and *The Wizards Return: Alex vs. Alex* (2013).

[58] These series include *Victorious*, *Shake It Up, Austin & Ally, iCarly, Big Time Rush, Sonny with a Chance, Jonas LA, A.N.T. Farm,* and *Liv and Maddie.*

Playing middle child Alex Russo, Selena Gomez was pronounced Disney's latest tween queen as she also launched a singing career (Sullivan 2011). In *That's So Raven*, the Baxter family lives in San Francisco, where Mr. Baxter works as a chef and eventually opens his own restaurant. Raven Symone plays Raven Baxter, a clairvoyant teen who often has brief psychic visions of the future that eventually lead her and her friends into comic mishaps as she often misreads her visions. Proving immensely popular, it became Disney's highest-rated series during its run and became the first Disney series to extend to 100 episodes (Alston 2016). It also led to a Disney Channel spin-off sitcom, *Cory in the House* (2007-2008), and a Disney Channel reboot, *Raven's Home* (Disney, 2017-), in which Raven and her best friend Chelsea are now parents.[59] *That's So Raven* was especially noted for the star's physical comedy, with some comparing her to a young Lucille Ball (Alston 2016).

I could offer a reading of class in the magicom genre. In *Wizards*, the Russo family operates a family business, a deli in New York City, offering a portrait of an ethnically ambiguous hard-working immigrant family. Colin Ackerman (2020) looks at how the series portrays the family as blue-collar and working-class by running a family business in the service industry. Ackerman also points out the skewed economic realities of the series, due to the fact that the deli business could not possibly allow them to afford to live in a brownstone home in Greenwich Village, one of the most expensive neighborhoods in the country, once more offering the trope of 'class concealment.' In the series, the Russo's neighborhood presents a portrait of a thriving place for local businesses where families live and work. Ackerman suggests how the show conflates family values with neoliberal values, as the former-wizard father teaches magic to his children and use their powers responsibly. The kids, however, then repeatedly use their magic powers to get what they want or make their lives more comfortable. As Ackerman points out, these inherited magical abilities become a stand-in for inherited privilege (pg. 81).

Of course, fantasy has always been a pivotal element in children's literature and media. In the 2000s and 2010s, Disney and Nickelodeon explored supernatural elements and superhuman characters by including series with magic, witches, wizards, psychic abilities,

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[59] *Cory in the House* revolves around Raven's brother Cory and father moving into the White House after her father gets a job as the head chef. In addition to living in the White House with his father, Cory attends an elite private school in Washington, DC, where his classmates are the well-connected sons and daughters of politicians, Supreme Court justices, and international dignitaries. As the first tweencom reboot for the two networks, *Raven's Home* once more seems to indicate that nostalgia among millennial fans is important to the longevity of these franchises.

talking ghosts, time-travel, and superpowers. Although these magicoms became a heavily represented subgroup of the tweencoms, I still find that they are not as useful to explore issues surrounding class representation and class ideology as other live-action series since they often do not even attempt to portray reality, including economic realities. For example, the Russo family can live beyond their means simply with the use of magical powers. In other magicom series, such 'class concealment' often becomes comically absurd. In Nickelodeon's *The Haunted Hathaways* (2013-2015), the series begins with a single mother moving to the French Quarter of New Orleans with her two daughters. Ms. Hathaway buys a mansion and runs a bakery on the first floor but finds that she cannot afford to hire any employees, so she asks applicants if they would accept being paid in the form of cookie dough. Instead, my case studies favor the domestic sitcom, the famecom, and the workplace sitcom, as I feel that these sitcom categories inculcate more distinctive messages surrounding class representations and class ideology. In turn, I will now consider this messaging within the tweencom famecoms.

5.2 Disney Channel Decade's Signature Theme 1: Fame and Fortune

In addition to the key 'signature series' that help to brand a network, media scholar Philip Napoli suggests that a channel's brand identity can be conveyed through its choice of programs and its overall narrative patterns (Napoli 2003, pg. 36). As I point out in this section, one such narrative pattern from both Nickelodeon and Disney Channel during the mid-2000s to early 2010s reflected an interest in fame and celebrity, and Disney's brand during this time especially became interconnected with a celebration and promotion of youth celebrity. Therefore, I explore the rise of famecoms to trace the narrative patterns and ideological messaging of these sitcoms. While I acknowledge that Nickelodeon and Disney both produced many of these famecoms, I focus on Disney's *Shake It Up* (2010-2013), which has received far less academic attention than the tween phenomenon *Hannah Montana*.

Looking at the proliferation and ideology of celebrity in modern American culture, scholars attribute how the emulation of celebrity becomes an essential part of consumer culture (Foster 2005, Sternheimer 2011). Reviewing the rise of personal debt, Gwendolyn Foster charges that consumers are inundated with 'fetishistic displays of celebrity' to 'spend, spend, spend': "We are flooded with images of products that we can ill afford, but in the new American Dream we are repeatedly told that we can afford the same fetishized products that the celebrities embody" (pg. 66). According to Karen Sternheimer (2011), intensive media

coverage of celebrities intertwines with a consumer-driven economy, where celebrities sell commodities and are themselves commodified. Celebrities help promote, model, and sell an idealized lifestyle as part of the American Dream, linking the dream to ever-increasing standards of living that encourages the purchase of new material things (Sternheimer 2011, Kamp 2009). As young people became the "epicenter of consumer culture in the United States," the images of young celebrities, both real and fictional, in the media helped to encourage consumptive practices (Mayes-Elma 2011, pg. 174). In looking at Disney's aggressive merchandising of *Hannah Montana* into concert tickets, t-shirts, backpacks, DVDs, CDs, and other products, Ruthann Mayes-Elma critiques how possessing such merchandise circulates as status symbols of youth culture (pg. 183).

The famecom subgenre became especially prolific in the 2000s. In 2012, an article written for *The Atlantic* asked, "Why are so many kids' shows about fame?" (Lufkin 2012). Author Bryan Lufkin argued that while former children's cable programs such as Nickelodeon's *Clarissa Explains It All* and *The Adventures of Pete and Pete* once sought to portray 'everyday kids,' the current programs often featured tween music prodigies or 'wannabe celebrities.' Summing up this tweencom output at the time, Lufkin writes that many of these series invoke narratives where "the children play characters who are famous, are seeking some level of fame, strive to be associated with famous people, or are dealing with the hassles of being famous" (2012). For example, Tori Vega from Nickelodeon's *Victorious* (2010-13) attends a performing arts school to become a singer, and in one episode she competes with her fellow classmates to win a contest to perform with Ke$ha (S2E3, "Ice Cream for Ke$ha). In other series from Disney Channel, such as *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011) or *Jonas* (2009-2010), the characters portray not just wannabe celebrities but are bonafide celebrities, who often interact with other real-life or fictional celebs. In a crossover episode of *Hannah Montana*, for example, Hannah/Miley meets the Jonas Brothers during a recording session (S2E16, "Me and Mr. Jonas and Mr. Jonas and Mr. Jonas").

Proceeding to address his question posed in *The Atlantic* article, Lufkin suggests that *Hannah Montana* in part originated the famecom and that the success of the series created a '*Hannah Montana* Effect' whereby other tweencoms simply followed its narrative formula. This explanation adheres to the arguments made by Todd Gitlin (1983) about spinoffs, copies, and recombinant culture found in the television industry, which often recycles formulaic products. However, the story of why the tween networks developed and invested heavily in the famecoms in the 2000s is far more complicated. Moreover, tweencoms that dealt with

celebrities had already appeared in Disney's *The Famous Jett Jackson* (1999-2001), and wannabe celebrities appeared in Nickelodeon's *Taina* (2001-3) and *Romeo!* (2003-2006). While two Nickelodeon famecoms, *The Naked Brothers Band* (2007-09) and *iCarly* (2007-12), premiered one year after *Hannah Montana*, they were likely already in some stages of development.[60] I suggest then that the construction of fame narratives was already a fundamental current in youth culture throughout popular media by the time *Hannah Montana* debuted, so it reflected rather than created this phenomenon. Therefore, I trace these fame narratives through a cultural context and an industry context to better understand why so many fame narratives were constructed in the first place and why Nickelodeon and Disney Channel gravitated toward them. For Disney, one reason to explain the development of fame narratives is understanding how it helped the company's media and marketing synergy, especially with the music industry. However, I also suggest that since Disney Channel and Nickelodeon were located in the Los Angeles area, as Nickelodeon Studios had moved its headquarters from Orlando by this time, the networks could also easily tap into celebrity promotional culture by booking celebrities as guest stars. While Kenan and Kel often met fictional celebrities in highly improbable plots, Hannah Montana could meet celebrities starring as themselves, as she also inhabited their world. Guest stars on the show included the Jonas Brothers, Larry David, Ray Romano, and The Rock, all playing themselves. As I have suggested, these Disney tweencoms in the 2000s contrast with the Nickelodeon tweencoms of the 1990s by repeatedly representing celebrity and embracing exceptionalism.

5.2.1 Celebrity, Fantasy, and Fame in Tweencoms

By the mid-2000s, many tweencoms from Disney and Nickelodeon embraced celebrity narratives. At the same time, there was growing attention from scholarship and cultural commentary that attempted to explain American contemporary youth culture's obsession with fame. A widely circulated study from UCLA examined how the top television shows for pre-teens from 2007, *American Idol* and *Hannah Montana*, reflected the values of fame, achievement, popularity, image, and financial success (Wolpert 2011). The lead author of the study, Dr. Patricia Greenfield, expressed concern that these fame narratives contributed to a documented rise in narcissism and that children were internalizing the goal of wanting to

[60] For example, Nickelodeon's *The Naked Brothers Band* originated as a low-budget movie in 2005. Disney's first famecom, *The Famous Jett Jackson* (1999-2001), debuted several years before *Hannah Montana*.

achieve fame. Other contemporary authors and scholars likewise noted a youth obsession with fame and celebrity at this time. Jean Twenge, the author of *Generation Me* (2014) and *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2010), suggests that young people have become more narcissistic as a result of increased media consumption. Likewise, Jake Halpern's *Fame Junkies* (2008) considers how America became obsessed with fame/celebrity at a time when more Americans were watching *American Idol* than the nightly news. In their books, both Twenge and Halpern cite a study known as "The Rochester Survey" given to middle school students in Rochester, NY. The study found a correlation between media viewing and an obsession with fame: "There is also a strong correlation between how many hours of television teenagers watch and how badly they want to become famous" (Halpern, pg. 12). While Twenge and Halpern document youth media consumption of reality shows, they do not include an examination of the tweencoms which is noteworthy considering how many tweencoms replicated fame narratives.

Along with the rise of reality television in the 2000s, the growth of online content creators who could be 'discovered' helped foster growing discourse around youth celebrity. As digital natives, the Millennial Generation, the youth of the 2000s, are often identified through their participation in online media practices. YouTube, launched in 2005, developed a brand identity in its early years around the slogan, 'Broadcast Yourself,' and many young people became involved in media content creation to 'broadcast themselves' (Burgess & Green 2018). In *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2018), Jean Burgess and Joshua Green review how often the platform was quickly seen in its early years as a place where talent could be discovered and leveraged for fame: "A common assumption underlying the most celebratory accounts of the democratization of cultural production in the mid-2000s was that raw talent combined with digital distribution could convert directly to legitimate success and media fame" (pg. 32). Looking at the rise of reality television during this same era, Nick Couldry (2003) argues that such myth-building frames around the 'democratization' and 'participatory culture' allow ordinary citizens to become celebrities, to move from 'ordinary worlds' to 'media worlds' when they gained access to media representation. While reality television offered such access, online content creation also helped foster a sense of DIY celebrity through DIY content. One such example of DIY celebrity, in which 'ordinary' people become celebrities through their own creative efforts and often through 'broadcasting themselves,' included the discovery of Justin Bieber on YouTube, which occurred in 2007. Scholars Crystal Abidin (2018) and Tyler Bickford (2016) explore Internet celebrities, using

Bieber as a prime case study. In turn, the discovery phase became the basis for several tween famecoms, like Nickelodeon's *Big Time Rush* (2009-13) and Disney's *Austin & Ally* (2011-2016). In fact, *Austin & Ally* mirrors the discovery narrative of Justin Bieber as its protagonist Austin Moon becomes an overnight Internet sensation after he uploads a video of himself singing [See Figure 26 below]. This premise models the frames that YouTube could help vault an unknown into the realm of celebrity: "The promise that talented but undiscovered YouTubers could make the leap from their 'ordinary worlds' to the bona fide 'media worlds' was firmly established in YouTube itself, evident in a number of YouTube's talent discovery competition and initiatives" (pg. 33-34).

Figure 26 – Austin's discovery. (In *Austin & Ally*, Austin Moon's discovery from home-made viral videos and eventual superstar status, right, parallels Justin Bieber's story, left).

For famecoms with wannabe celebrities, young protagonists constantly aspire for their big break, and the goal of achieving celebrity and fame invariably also inevitably leads to financial success. For characters from lower or middle-class backgrounds, becoming a celebrity follows the quintessential American rags-to-riches narrative in which becoming famous offers a quick and easy access to achieving the American Dream. Karen Sternheimer presents this historical portrait of American society in her book *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility* (2014). According to Chris Rojek (2001), celebrities could be categorized as *ascribed* (through family relationships), *achieved* (through talent and accomplishments), and *assigned* (such as through reality tv participation), where achieved celebrity most successfully embodies Dyer's 'myth of success.' Richard Dyer (1979/1998) explores this myth in his studies around stardom and celebrity, examining how American media perpetuates the 'myth of success' where certain celebrities are found to be 'deserving' of their fame. In this myth, "American society is sufficiently open for anyone to get to the top, regardless of rank" (1998, pg. 42). As Melania Kennedy (2019) points out, the

wannabe celebrity needs to prove themselves worthy of their status through demonstrating their natural talents and authenticity. Maintaining authenticity, remaining 'true to oneself' and 'keeping it real,' all become essential to the achieved celebrity. Kennedy notes that Rojek's celebrity categorization can include a fourth model of 'potential' or 'not-yet-achieved' fame, a model which is featured prominently in the tweencoms (Kennedy, pg. 62-3).

Many tweencoms in the Disney Channel decade feature characters who aim to become potential celebrities. In Nickelodeon's *Taina* (2001-02), getting accepted into the Manhattan High School of the Performing Arts is only the first step. Entering the school for the very first time with her friend Renee, Taina stops to reflect, "We're about to take our first stop on the road to fame and fortune" (S1E1, "Be Careful What You Wish For"). In Disney's *Shake It Up* (2010-13), best friends Rocky and CeCe become background dancers in Chicago's local dance show *Shake It Up Chicago*, a twenty-first century updated version of Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* (ABC, 1952-1989). The two friends embrace opportunities to become 'rich and famous' by attending the host's house party where he promises Oprah will appear (S1E7, "Party it Up") and by being selected to dance with teen popstar Justin Star, described by one of the characters as 'the most famous teenager in the world.' The character Justin Star, played by Chris Trousdale from a short-lived boyband Dream Street, clearly parodies Justin Bieber. In the end, the girls accidentally reveal that Justin Star is a crafted teen persona and that he is really a married man in his mid-twenties. When he departs, Justin thanks them for revealing his secret, saying that he enjoys the fact that he can quit pretending who he is and 'live a normal life like any young billionaire' (S1E6, 'Age It Up'). This episode, along with the entire premise of Disney's *Hannah Montana* and Nickelodeon's *Big Time Rush*, mark such celebrity personas as constructed.[61] This episode from *Shake it Up* also offers a reference point to Graeme Turner's response about the limits of DIY celebrity and the democratization of the media (2004, 2006). Turner argues that ordinary people becoming potential or temporary celebrities suggests 'demoticization' rather than 'democratization.' For Turner, the 'demotic turn' describes the increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' in the media, a motif theme of the tweencoms in the 2000s. In the tweencom realm, the frames of democratization are highlighted when characters try to break into the industry, as in *Shake it Up*, and when they exert their agency. For example, in Nickelodeon's *Big Time Rush*, the band members

[61] Robert van Krieken (2012) and David Marshall (2014) have detailed how such celebrity personas are constructed either through self-formation and self-branding or as institutionally manufactured. Laura Grindstaff (2012) also looks at this production of celebrity within reality television.

consistently push back against their record company's demands, such as by rejecting a fifth band member that the company wants to give them (S1E4, "Big Time Bad Boy").

Aspiring celebrities, which include the tweencom characters Taina or Rocky and CeCe from *Shake It Up*, internalize the 'myth of success' of the American Dream where they could be discovered at any moment. Taina often speaks about her 'career' and her 'big break' while attending a performing arts school, such as when she receives the opportunity to star as the lead in a school play directed by a prominent theatre director (S2E6, "The Big Show") and gets a dance lesson from Shakira (S2E8, "Abuelo Knows Best"). According to Karen Sternheimer (2011), "In the mythology of the American Dream, opportunities abound and are rewarded to those most deserving: the hardest workers, the brightest, and the most talented. This dream supports the notion of individualism, so central in American political doctrine" (pg. 8). In this chapter, I look at one case study, *Shake It Up*, that affirms the American Dream through achieved or potential celebrity.

5.2.2 American 'Tween' Idol: Tweencoms as Famecoms

In this section, I offer a brief overview of tween famecoms and highlight the repetitive nature of these narratives through a taxonomy of these series. While Disney's famecoms originated with *The Famous Jett Jackson* (1999-2001), Nickelodeon's famecoms originated with the aspirational *Taina* (2001-2), set in a performing arts high school where the young characters all aspire to become entertainers, a premise that Nickelodeon would later return to with *Victorious* (2010-3). By the early 2010s, the fact that both Disney and Nickelodeon produced several famecoms over the previous decade meant that tweencom audiences were constantly inundated with repetitive narratives, where being young, gifted, and famous seems to be part of everyday life.

When considering the career aspirations of many of the tweencom protagonists of the 2000s, distinct patterns emerge: many characters seek to become fashion designers, actors, and/or singers/dancers/musicians. In other words, these characters often aspire to work within the creative industries. These famecoms follow the characters along some stages of this career trajectory. Series like *Taina*, *Romeo!*, *Victorious,* and *A.N.T. Farm* present before-they-were-famous narratives as the shows all take place in a performing art school setting or gifted school program. Other series like *Big Time Rush, Austin & Ally*, *iCarly*, *Sonny with a Chance*, and *Shake It Up* present discovery narratives where the protagonists are recently 'discovered' and/or are in the phase of just launching their careers in entertainment. Gillan (2015) refers to these

series as 'stars-in-the-making' sitcoms. She points out how these series emphasize the need for 'broadcasting yourself' on a media platform as a necessary first step for a star's career trajectory, a term she coins 'brandcasting.' The final cycle of tweencom narratives, including *The Famous Jett Jackson*, *Hannah Montana*, *Jonas*, and *The Naked Brothers Band*, feature characters already famous at the start of the series, so the narratives often revolve around them coping with fame.

In fact, the ubiquity of these famecoms makes it possible to create a taxonomy of Rojek's notion of achieved celebrity. Here, famecoms celebrating achieved celebrated could be further broken down by referring to them as aspirational, discovery, and already-famous famecoms [See Figures 27 and 28 below]. Aspirational famecoms either take place in a school as the primary setting (*Taina* and *Victorious*) or contain protagonists who are still young pre-teens (*A.N.T. Farm* and *Romeo!*). This allows the protagonists to still be in the process of forming their identities – and talents. The next cycle of famecoms narratives revolves around characters who are recently discovered or are in the process of launching their careers in the entertainment business. They are all 'stars-in-the-making.' Since these series run for several seasons, audiences often follow the protagonists from being discovered to achieving fame by becoming full-fledged stars. For example, as previously mentioned, *Austin & Ally* follows a quick rise-to-fame story that parallels Justin Bieber when Austin becomes a viral sensation. Austin sings, Ally writes his songs, and their friends manage their business, a tween version of *Entourage* (HBO, 2004-11). Gillan calls it 'Disney's quintessential brandcaster sitcom' because the series centers around a youth embrace of technology and self-promotion:

> Their quick success is attributed to their access to DIY production and promotion technologies and platforms. The sitcom taps into collective yearning to engage in enjoyable, meaningful, but lucrative labor… Its appeal is because it is exactly the stuff of middle school fantasy. *Austin & Ally* makes brandcasting not only a desirable future, but also an achievable one, with a little help from your friends (Gillan, pg. 162)

Here, these DIY elements from *Austin & Ally* serve the characters' fame aspirations and the need to broadcast themselves, which they can do themselves. Formatting as a show-within-a-show, *Shake It Up* begins with two thirteen-year-old best friends CeCe and Rocky working as background dancers on a weekly show *Shake It Up Chicago*. The final cycle of famecoms follows protagonists who are already famous, with plots focused on their dealing with their star status. Within these famecoms that blur the boundaries between the every day and the superstar, this duality between the star as 'special' and as 'normal' reflects Richard Dyer's scholarship on star theory where he examines the paradoxical nature of celebrities as both ordinary and

extraordinary (Dyer 1979). Within the famecom genre, I turn to one discovery series, *Shake It Up*, in greater detail to examine its fame narrative and its relationship to class concerns and class construction.

Aspirational	Discovery	Already Famous
Taina (Nick, 2001-02)	*Austin & Ally* (Disney, 2011-16)	*Hannah Montana* (Disney, 2006-11)
Victorious (Nick, 2010-13)	*Sonny with a Chance* (Disney, 2009-11)	*Jonas* (Disney, 2009-10)
Romeo! (Nick, 2003-06)	*Shake It Up* (Disney, 2010-13)	*The Famous Jett Jackson* (Disney, 1998-2001)
A.N.T. Farm (Disney, 2011-14)	*iCarly* (Nick, 2007-12)	*The Naked Brothers Band* (Nick, 2007-09)
	Big Time Rush (Nick, 2009-13)	
	Bizaardvark (Disney, 2016-19)	

Figure 27 - Categories of Famecoms

Jonas/Jonas LA *Austin & Ally*

Figure 28 – Disney's Famecoms. In famecoms, musical performances are prevalent.

5.3 Disney Channel Case Study 1: *Shake It Up*

In this section, I consider how the themes and representations of class and celebrity are constructed in Disney Channel's *Shake It Up* (2010-13). Created by Chris Thompson, a veteran of television who had written episodes for *Laverne & Shirley* (ABC, 1976-1983), *Shake It Up* presents a modern tween parallel of the prior series: two inseparable best friends with polar-opposite personalities get into a series of misadventures with slapstick results. The best friends Rocky Blue (Zendaya) and CeCe Jones (Bella Thorne) even live in the same apartment building in Chicago, and Rocky joins CeCe's family on vacations. While Rocky portrays an honors-level student who enjoys volunteering and has maintained a perfect attendance record at school, CeCe portrays a slacker who often gets the two friends into crazy situations. While CeCe's family is white and Rocky's family is African-American, the series continues the tweencom pattern of ignoring any discussion of race.

With a show-within-a-show format, the series follows the friends at home, school, and on the set of a live weekly television show named *Shake It Up, Chicago*. As thirteen-year-olds who win spots on the popular local show in the pilot, the girls aspire to one day become more than just local celebrities. Unlike most other famecoms that featured protagonists as musicians or actors, this series focuses on dancing. The two protagonists are thus able to carry the show without having to carry a tune on the show (although the actresses do sing on the soundtracks), but Disney's synergistic marketing allowed it to promote its music division throughout the series. Musical numbers as long as two minutes frequently punctuate episodes, and musical guest stars often appear, many of whom are signed to Disney's labels. In fact, the series spawned four soundtracks, and one of Disney Channel's most recognized talents at the time, Selena Gomez, sang the theme song for the series. The first soundtrack, *Shake It Up: Break it Down*, was released in July 2011, combining a CD with a DVD to show the dance steps, and debuted at number 22 on the US Billboard 200 (Shake It Up Music Wiki). Disney also promoted the series internationally. The season two finale took the form of a ninety-minute Disney Channel movie, *Shake It Up: Made in Japan*, and follows Rocky and CeCe flying to Tokyo in a private jet with the dance crew from *Shake It Up Chicago* after they are selected to star in a video game. Disney Channel India also adapted the series as an Indian sitcom, as it did with *The Suite Life*. The sitcom's focus on dancing also tapped into current pop culture trends across media. By the time *Shake It Up* debuted, several dance-focused reality and competition shows were on air: *So You Think You Can Dance* (Fox, 2005-), *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC, 2005-), and *America's Best Dance Crew* (MTV, 2008-). In the theatres, the *Step*

Up movie franchise released several films after the first one premiered in 2006. In addition, a decade after *Dance Dance Revolution* popularized the rhythmic action video game, a new motion-based game series *Just Dance* launched in 2009 for Wii.

In addition to the show and soundtracks, *Shake It Up* followed in *iCarly*'s footsteps to seek interactive audience participation. For *iCarly*, audience interaction with fans played a key role in its premise and to success of the series. Within the show, Carly and Sam ask fans to send in their own videos. In real-life, clips sent in by kids watching the series could be featured on both the series and its companion website icarly.com. Days before the series even premiered, as many as 40,000 people registered on the site and submitted 2,400 video clips (Larsen 2007). As the creator, Dan Schneider, explained, "Kids want to be on (television), kids want to perform, and on a show like *iCarly*, it's a perfect venue to showcase kids' talents. Plus, just from a marketing aspect, how great an idea to say, 'Hey, here's a new show that everyone's going to love, and guess what, you're invited to play'" (Larsen 2007). This viewer interaction became an "integral element of the show" and served as a form of "self-reflexive meta-reality" (Holz 2017, pg. 194). *Shake It Up* follows a similar concept. During the show's first two seasons, Disney announced an annual dance talent competition, called *Make Your Mark: Ultimate Dance Off*. In the competition, kids could upload their dance videos for a chance to compete in a televised dance-off on Disney Channel, where finalists could work with professional choreographers to win the grand prize – an actual appearance to dance on an episode of *Shake It Up*. Viewers could then vote for the winner through an online vote, text, or phone call [See Figure 29 below].

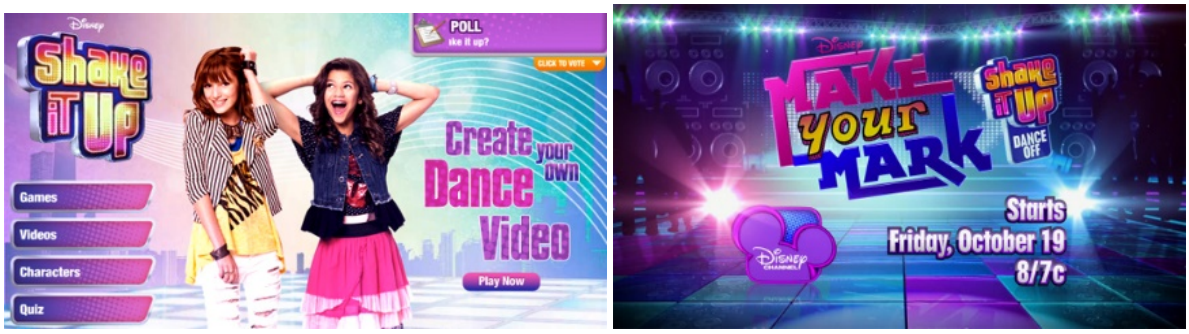

Figure 29: *Shake It Up*'s paratexts and promos

For Jennifer Gillan (2015), *Shake It Up* and its participatory action-based paratexts, like the DVD dance instruction manual and dance competitions, represent several strains of Disneyology. Gillan argues that Disney often responds to current ideological flashpoints, like

environmental or economic concerns or childhood obesity, by offering reassuring counter-narratives that it could market. In the wake of growing concerns about childhood obesity in America and First Lady Michelle Obama's initiatives to get kids to eat healthy food, Disney introduced a dance show and products where dancing could be seen as a healthy exercise habit. Gillan also points out how the famecoms, or stars-in-the-making sitcoms as she calls them, also present reassuring counter-narratives around economic expectations: "Disney Channel offers the broadcast yourself myth story about the feasibility of transforming teenage passions into adult professions" (pg. 156). In one way, Nickelodeon and Disney 'give fans a voice' by allowing their interactive participation in the series *iCarly* and *Shake It Up*. At the same time, though, the participatory actions of fans uploading their clips, getting the most clicks/likes, getting discovered and winning contests also involve neoliberal competition. In contemporary culture, this competitive, entrepreneurial spirit and turn to the self are hallmarks of neoliberalism (McGuigan 2014). In sum, the ideology of famecoms supports the model of 'empowered citizen consumers' (Banet-Weiser 2007) as these narratives often privilege individualized aspirations, as these series and their paratexts focus on self-promotion and self-construction.

5.3.1 Fame and Class Mobility in *Shake It Up*

In famecoms like *Shake It Up*, the aspiration to fame and fortune for the two protagonists represents achieving the American Dream, in which music and entertainment figure prominently in facilitating upward mobility fantasies. Although both Rocky and CeCe want to achieve this dream together, there is much more at stake for CeCe. In the first season, Rocky receives an opportunity to sign a modelling contract, which would mean moving to New York City. As she gets into a limo to take her to the airport, she decides to pass on the opportunity because she doesn't understand modelling and doesn't want to leave her friends and family (S1E18, "Model it Up"). Unlike Rocky who achieves high grades, CeCe struggles in school, in part due to the fact that she has dyslexia. Even though they still live in the same apartment building, there is also the implication that their family's economic situations and social backgrounds are different. CeCe lives with a brother and a single mother, who is employed as a uniformed police officer. Rocky's family includes a brother and parents who are both professionals. Her mother owns two beauty salons, and her father works as a doctor for Doctors Without Borders. Since Rocky's father lives overseas, his first appearance occurs only in the second season. Expecting both his son and daughter to grow up to become doctors,

he demands that Rocky quit dancing on *Shake It Up Chicago* and give up her dreams of being a dancer because she will need to focus on her medical career. However, after he sees her dance and realizes how good she really is, he relents by reasoning that she could still do both (S2E5, "Doctor it Up").

Both Oppliger (2019) and Blue (2017) refer to *Shake It Up* as a sitcom set within the world of the working class or the working-middle class, noting this as a rarity for tweencoms. Both CeCe and Rocky live in the same apartment building, but only CeCe's apartment serves as a primary setting, along with the dance studio. In addition, CeCe's mother is the only recurring parental character, while Rocky's parents and apartment rarely appear throughout the series. The fact that the two characters live in the same building even though they come from different backgrounds, racial and class-based, allows them then to be seen as equals. Living in the same apartment building enables them to seemingly belong to the same class. Racial differences are also downplayed through colorblindness, a common strategy observed throughout Disney in the twenty-first century, a topic I will return to in the next case study on *The Suite Life.* In her study of race in television, Sarah Turner (2011) looks at how Disney Channel often highlights interracial friendships that promote colorblindness. Turner writes:

> What seems to bond them together, then, is their desire to succeed, and that desire works to negate any differences based on race; instead of being seen as two friends, one of whom is black and one of whom is white, they are seen as the personification of the American Dream's melting pot, where everyone has the ability to better herself (pg. 244).

Here, Turner identifies a central theme of *Shake It Up* as promoting equal access to the American Dream and upward mobility through having the two characters shared the same desires and opportunities.

Although she lives in a single-parent household headed by a blue-collar mother, CeCe has no sense of financial responsibility and could represent a prototypical 'class-passer.' By the second episode, both Rocky and CeCe decide to open bank accounts for the first time with the money they've earned dancing for *Shake It Up Chicago*, where they earn $40 a week. After getting their first debit cards, they use them to go shopping and quickly overdraw their bank accounts (S1E2, "Meatball it Up"). When Christmas shopping on Christmas Eve in another episode, CeCe decides to buy herself an expensive purse but then realizes she has no money left to buy a scarf for her mother (S2E10, "Jingle it Up"). In the third season, she travels with her family and Rocky to France, where her main goal is to purchase designer shoes in Paris (S3E21, "Oui Oui It Up"). For her sweet sixteen birthday, she plans a birthday

extravaganza inspired by something she could see on MTV's reality show, *My Super Sweet 16* (2005-17). She wants a party with a stretch limo and DJ (S3E22, "My Bitter Sweet 16 It Up). For Patrice Oppliger (2019), the birthday episode reveals CeCe to be a 'spoiled brat.' When she's told she can't have a DJ because it's not in the budget, she yells to her mom, "You are the worst mom ever," but when her mother eventually gives in and lets her have one, CeCe tells her that she is the 'best mom ever' [See Figure 30 below].

Figure 30 - *Shake It Up*: Rocky and CeCe get paid and enjoy a sweet sixteen party.

As someone who seeks a career in entertainment and obsesses about appearance without any understanding of money management, CeCe presents a figure of a 'class-passer,' as someone who claims a different socioeconomic class as their own. In her book *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture (2015),* Gwendolyn Foster defines 'class-passing' as negotiating, experiencing, and performing class in the same way we do with gender and race. Linking the concept to the American Dream and social mobility, Foster considers how class-passing has become more mediated and celebrated in recent years. Foster suggests how conspicuous consumption and celebration of celebrity culture work to facilitate class passing.[62]

5.3.2 Class Blindness in *Shake It Up*

I would like to add a new term to the notion of class-passing which I refer to as *class-blindness*, which ignores or refuses to represent class realities and class differences.

[62] Foster looks specifically at reality television of the early 2000s where the governmentality of self-surveillance offered narratives around 'improvement.' In such series like *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire* (Fox, 2000)*, I Want a Famous Face* (MTV, 2004-05)*, Extreme Makeover (ABC, 2002-07), Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (ABC, 2004-12), *Extreme Weight Loss (*ABC, 2011-15), *The Swan* (Fox, 2004)*, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo, 2004-07), and *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-17), one could get a new job or spouse, interior decorating or plastic surgery and, in doing so, 'improve one's status.

While I understand class-passing to be a deliberate and constructed act, my notion of class-blindness refers to strategies of unconsciousness, or neglect, in understanding economic, financial, or socioeconomic concerns. As I have suggested in looking at Disney series like *The Wizards of Waverly Place*, these instances often occur when characters live in circumstances beyond their means. Class blindness may be considered synonymous with 'class unconsciousness,' which contrasts with 'class consciousness.' According to Diana Kendall (2011), class consciousness refers to "the degree to which people at a similar location in the class system think of themselves as a distinctive group sharing political, economic, and social interests" (pg. 14). Class unconsciousness refuses to recognize or think of class. By referring to class 'blindness' rather than 'unconsciousness,' I suggest that 'blindness' does allow some conscious moments of recognizing class or socioeconomic concerns. A strategy of class blindness could include moments where one's class standing and economic finances are a concern in one moment but in the next are forgotten or not mentioned. In *Shake It Up*, CeCe demonstrates class-passing by constantly shopping and wanting to become a celebrity. In another way, though, she can be seen as class-blind by not recognizing what she can or cannot afford. While class-passing also refers to the actions of individuals, I also suggest that class-blindness occurs through narratives where characters can slip in and out of economic need because of storylines that do not consistently explore, understand, or realistically portray their socioeconomic positions. For example, CeCe's bedroom gets a redesign between season 1 and season 3. Unlike episodes of *iCarly* and *That's So Raven*, her bedroom makeover does not figure within the plot of an episode. [See Figure 31 below].

Figure 31 - *Shake It Up*: CeCe's bedroom/s

Therefore, characters may slip in and out of economic need and even class position either deliberately through class-passing or unconsciously as class-blindness. For example, while the third season sweet sixteen episode of *Shake It Up* presents a mother-daughter conflict over finances, I find it interesting that this one episode near the end of the third (and

final) season offers a rare moment when CeCe's mother Georgia makes any references to the economic realities of living as a single parent and a blue-collar police officer. The arguments over the expensive sweet sixteen party only come to a head when CeCe's desires become too extravagant, but Georgia has already caved in by giving her a fancy ballroom party with a DJ. The fact that the previous episode features the family going on a trip to France makes this even more remarkable and again presents these plots as examples of class-blindness. Of course, the trip became possible because Rocky figures out a way to maximize Georgia's frequent flyer miles, and they also find a family in France to swap homes with, so a trip for four to France suddenly becomes possible through economizing. At the same time, Georgia agrees to go on the trip without having to consider her work or realistically consider that four individuals traveling from Chicago to France would incur additional expenses. Of course, such moments of class-blindness underscore the very episodic nature of the sitcom, as I have argued that contemporary tweencoms still adhere most closely to the most conventional sitcom structure from the traditional domestic comedy.[63]

Still, class-blindness occurs as part of the tween networks' disinterest in exploring class. Even throughout the first season of *Shake It Up*, several moments of class-blindness occur to showcase how the series is not too concerned with socioeconomic realities. While the girls get a $40/week job as dancers in the first episode, they have a great deal of money by the second episode, but one could simply reason that more narrative time has passed. They very quickly spend all their money when they end up overdrawing their bank accounts. Throughout the first season, however, there is no other mention of any financial concerns, or an understanding of financial management, for these characters who are considered to come from working-class backgrounds. When CeCe and Rocky ask their mothers to embark on a two-week road trip for a summer vacation by renting an RV and driving to the Grand Canyon, both mothers agree after a moment's deliberation (S1E13, "Heat it Up'). As I have pointed out in my analysis of class in tweencoms, there is an overrepresentation of middle- to upper-middle-class families. For tweencom families who fall below the line of upper-middle class, it should also be noted that their socioeconomic states are not fully represented.

To understand the concept further, I explicate other class-blindness strategies. Here I reiterate that class-blindness should be understood as a different conceit than the simple underrepresentation of lower-class individuals (Butsch 2003, 2016) or the complete lack of

[63] In *End of Comedy, The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition* (1983), David Grote discusses how the traditional sitcom is characterized by its episodic nature.

such representation, what George Gerber refers to as 'symbolic annihilation' (1978). Class-blindness instead occurs when issues of social class and social status are raised but then elided, and in this way, help to affirm America as a classless society. It also occurs when members from different social classes meet. In an episode of *Hannah Montana*, Miley falls for a boy named Trey Harris, and she discovers that he has extremely wealthy and snobby parents (S2E27, "Test of my Love"). Even though the Stewarts are financially comfortable or even wealthy, they are classed as 'new money' by being coded as Southern and from the country (Blue 2019, Kennedy 2019). Since both Mr. Stewart and Miley built their careers as performers, the family would also considered new money as they earned rather than inherited wealth. When Miley dines with Trey's parents, she immediately feels out of place at the fancy restaurant. Miley tries to impress them by saying her father worked as a diplomat in England and later asks her father and brother to roleplay when Mr. and Mrs. Harris want to meet them. Attempting class-passing by putting on a faux British accent and referencing their experiences in London, Miley's family quickly exposes their ruse by their inability to class-pass, and Mr. and Mrs. Harris storm out of their house humiliated. However, Trey remains behind as he genuinely likes Miley and her family, and he joins them for a simple family meal, French fries, and chicken wings. As Melanie Kennedy (2019) suggests, these examples indicate how class can be often inflected geographically, linked to regional and urban vs. rural identity. Because Miley's family is originally Southern and rural, they are coded lower-class even though they now live in Malibu and possess wealth. In this episode, Miley and Trey like each other, and the ending suggests that they may pursue a relationship despite the objections of Trey's parents when Trey stays to dine with the Stewarts. Instead, they do not a relationship. The character Trey doesn't appear in any more episodes, a narrative strategy that essentially stalls any further commentary on social or class differences [See Figure 32 below].

Figure 32: Disney's Class Passers (Hannah Montana's family attempts to pass as sophisticates and *Shake It Up's* CeCe and Rocky aspire to become celebs. Both reflect narratives of class passing).

In the next section, I will explore how class-blindness also occurs within part of a another tweencom theme that I refer to broadly as vicarious living, where characters get to live and experience 'lifestyles of the rich and famous' even if they can't personally afford it. One example can be found in *Cory in the House*, where Cory Baxter gets to live in the White House and attend an elite private school simply because his father works as the President's chef.[64] It should be noted here how both class-blindness and vicarious living essentially work to present a consumer fantasy. In these narratives, tween characters can become consumers without consequence, like CeCe in *Shake It Up*, since they are removed from thinking about financial concerns. As I have noted, tweens became defined principally as a market demographic (Siegel & Coffey 2004). In this way, popular media narratives about tweens, such as the tweencoms, seek to address them, and portray them, as 'the ideal consumer' just as they once did with the suburban housewife in post-war America (Haralovich 1989, Spigel 1992). The Disney signature series responsible for highlighting the narrative theme of vicarious living is *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*.

5.4 Disney Channel Decade's Signature Theme 2: Vicarious Living

In the previous section, I wrote about the cultural context and aspirational ideology of Disney Channel's famecoms and introduced the terms 'class passing' and 'class blindness.' In this section, I explore how these concepts also occur within another narrative theme that I refer to as 'vicarious living.' I use the term to convey the fact that tweencom protagonists often enjoy idealized lifestyles and inhabit idealized spaces. This class privilege, though, is belied by the fact that these protagonists enjoy a life that they realistically could not afford and navigate through a world of wealth and luxury even though they are not actually members of the upper class, which helps keep the characters relatable. I refer to these characters, like Zack and Cody, as 'class floaters,' which I discuss further in the chapter.

Of course, on some level, the strategies of 'vicarious living' pervade throughout the tweencom genre, especially famecoms, as tween protagonists usually inhabit nice domestic spaces and possess attractive lifestyles centered around their own independence and agency. Still, I understand the 'vicarious living series' as an entirely separate category from the famecoms. In defining the famecoms, I emphasized that the ideology and aspirations of fame,

[64] *Cory in the House* also offers a particular racialized framing of class which could be similarly compared to the previous sitcom, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990-96) by centering on the 'fish-out-of-water' trope.

as well as the performative acts within the shows, are at the foreground in these series. While most tweencoms over-represent middle-class households, as I have pointed out in the previous chapter, the world of the vicarious living sitcom now introduces extremely wealthy characters and expensive homes. In sum, while famecoms idolize fame, vicarious living series idealize wealth. In these narratives, Disney Channel offers a Disneyfied version of what Richard Dyer (1977) defines as utopia, defined as an "image of something better to escape into or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (pg. 20).[65] The construction of these 'utopias' are often predicted on the spectacles of luxury – penthouses, upscale hotels, royal courts, private planes, and luxury cruise ships.

As I have previously noted, several scholars have addressed the glorification of wealth in contemporary media narratives. Scholarship in the 2000s often critiqued the youth demographic's engagement with consumer capitalism. In *Born to Buy* (2004), Juliet Schor examines consumerism within childhood and details how an overriding goal of children ages ten to thirteen is to get rich. Diana Kendall's book on media representations of class provides an especially useful guide for this thesis. In *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America* (2005), Kendall concludes that media frames on class "glorify the material possessions and lifestyles of the upper classes" (pg. 211). These frames exist in television series because "narratives are standardized and frequently repetitive" and agendas are set by writers and producers (pg. 5). Such media portrayals of wealth from television reality shows of the 2000s such as *Platinum Weddings* (WE, 2006-10), *The Fabulous Life Of…* (VH1, 2003-13)*, MTV Cribs* (MTV, 2000-)*,* and *Keeping up the Kardashians* (E!, 2007-21) help cultivate conspicuous consumption through "price-tag framing," where a person's worth is measured by their possessions. As Kendall's research claims, media consumption leads viewers to identify with how other people, usually those belonging to a superior class, live. In an episode of *Jessie,* (S2E3, "Make New Friends, But Hide the Old"), a visitor asks the family butler Bertram how he feels about being a member of the 'oppressed servant class.' Bertram replies sarcastically that he'll think about that while he eats caviar in his jacuzzi, emphasizing that he enjoys the perks of living in access to great wealth, even though he is a servant. As I have suggested, strategies like class blindness or vicarious living effectively

[65] In "Entertainment and Utopia," Dyer looks at the musicals of the Great Depression of the 1930s and how they offered audiences the emotive feel of utopia. In understanding how these films offered audiences 'escape' and wish fulfillment,' he states how the film Golddiggers of 1933 displays utopian sensibilities with a mise-en-scene full of symbols of wealth and abundance, through exaggerated spectacles with music and choreography. This utopian sensibility then contrasts with the 'real world' the audience lives in.

dismiss any realistic depiction of class or socioeconomic concerns from the characters beyond individual episodes, so the protagonists do not often possess self-awareness of their own class status or economic concerns.

The tweencoms that I categorize as vicarious living series are replete with examples of class-passing and class-blindness as these series mix members of different classes in the same setting, suggesting that America is indeed a melting pot in regard to class. On the other hand, Evan Cooper (2015) points out that such interclass mixing, especially on the part of the elite, is far more prevalent in media fiction than in reality. In this chapter, I have already looked at class-blindness to discuss a media frame that denies class realities or class differences. Vicarious living presents another frame around class, this time around an admiration of wealth and luxury. In these vicarious living series, class fantasy becomes especially visible as markers of the upper class are evident from the sets presented on screen.

5.4.1 Better Tween Homes & Gardens - Space and Place in Disney Tweencoms

As I referenced previously, between the 1990s and 2000s, tweencom settings moved from the suburbs to the city. Frequent establishing shots of the city streets of both New York City and San Francisco signal the urban environments in *Taina* (Nick, 2001-02) and *That's So Raven* (Disney, 2003-07), respectively. Doyle Greene (2012) reflects that the city settings found throughout tweencoms help to represent hipness for the young characters. I suggest that such locations are also classed due to the higher cost of living people frequently associate with cities and that the nice homes in these settings offer visible markers of class comfort. Among the plethora of famecoms that I analyzed in the previous section, most protagonists live in Los Angeles or New York City as the nation's entertainment capitals. In turn, these characters possess greater opportunities for social and class mobility with the chance of being 'discovered.' Within the discovery famecoms, the protagonists of *Big Time Rush* and *Sonny with a Chance* just recently moved to the city as a result of getting their big break.[66] Similarly, the Martin family in *The Suite Life of Zack* moves to Boston, and the eponymous protagonist *Jessie* arrives in New York City in the opening scene of the series.

[66] In *Sonny with a Chance*, the pilot begins with Sonny moving from Wisconsin to L.A., while the pilot of *Big Time Rush* likewise shows the group from Minnesota moving to L.A. to become a boyband. In contrast, the trope of having the tween move to the city to 'discover their true self' offers a reversal to the trend that Diane Negra observes in *What a Girl What? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Post-feminism* (2009) where adult women in movies return or retreat to small-town locations, which "reinforces conservative norms as the best choices in women's lives (pg. 4).

By emphasizing the mise-en-scene of Disney Channel's utopias, visual storytelling becomes important in studying tweencoms. Jeremy Butler (2018) has written about television aesthetics by examining how such elements as camera style, lighting, set design, editing, and sound combine to produce meaning. I will focus my analysis on set design, as it becomes a signifying factor in establishing images of access-to-wealth in the 'vicarious living' series like *The Suite Life* and *Jessie*. For the Ross family in *Jessie*, wealth is signified explicitly by the main setting, a Manhattan duplex penthouse apartment. In the background, a private elevator from an exclusive building opens directly into the main foyer. Vistas of the city landscape can be seen from the high windows and terrace. A recurring exterior location is a park where the children frequently play, suggesting that the building is located next to Central Park. In *The Suite Life*, the Tipton hotel lobby mixes wood panels, furniture and fabrics, vases, and chandeliers to give the location upper-class aesthetics.[67] For both *Jessie* and *The Suite Life*, the high-rise buildings signal urban and upscale locations [See Figures 33 and 34 below].

Figure 33 – *Jessie's* penthouse

Figure 34 - *The Suite Life's* hotel

[67] Throughout the series, the hotel's guests and employees frequently refer to the luxury of the hotel and its 5-star restaurant, but the references inflate luxury. The exterior shots of the hotel were filmed at the Fairmont Hotel in Vancouver, and the Tipton's address is located at the real-life Fairmont Copely Plaza in Boston, and both hotel rooms can be booked for far less than the $2,000-a-night fee that the Tipton charges for an average room (S1E1, "Hotel Hangout").

The theme of vicarious living is extended across many Disney Channel tweencoms, where creating a 'utopic' location becomes a principal goal in the set designs. While I have explicated a depiction of the ideal bedroom possessed by multiple female characters from Clarissa to Carly, here I consider the other spaces that tween characters often inhabit in the tweencoms. Many tweencoms, after all, employ fun and attractive - and quite extraordinary - communal living or hang-out spots as the primary or secondary settings, blurring the boundaries of public and private spheres. *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* takes place throughout the various hotel locations, with the lobby as a primary location. The communal lobby, though, is at the same time marked as exclusive as the hotel manager indicates the $2,000 price tag to stay in the hotel. Its spinoff, *The Suite Life on Deck*, takes place on a luxury cruise ship. While that series again uses the communal space of the ship's main deck as its primary location, the fact that entry to access this private space is classed needs to be emphasized. Several times in the series, certain passengers are identified as first-class passengers to indicate that they deserve special attention.

These spaces continually highlight material comfort. After all, brightly lit and colorful set designs play a large role in presenting the fantasy world that many tweencom characters inhabit on screen. In some cases, the protagonists transform their communal spaces into giant arcades - or they are able to possess access to such private spaces. For example, in the first episode of *Austin & Ally* (Disney, 2011-15), Austin uses the money he makes from his first hit song to transform Ally's cluttered bookkeeping office above her father's music store into a fantastic multi-purpose game and music room to inspire her song-writing talents (S1E1, "Rockers and Writers"). Similarly, on Nickelodeon's *Big Time Rush* (2009-13), the four aspiring boyband members move into a second-rate Palm Woods Hotel in the first episode. By the third episode (S1E3, "Big Time Crib"), they are desperate to improve their rundown apartment, as it still reflects the wear and tear of former tenants, including a hole in the wall and chocolate milk vomit stains on the carpet. This includes intertextual digs at contemporary youth celebrities, as former occupants included Shia LaBeouf and Lindsay Lohan. When the boys shoot a music video, they enjoy the set so much that they end up hatching a scheme to tear down the set and move it into their apartment, complete with an indoor slide, pinball machine, and air hockey table, effectively stealing these items to improve their living space [See Figures 35 and 36 below].

In this tweencom universe, practically anyone can live an upper-class lifestyle. The vicarious living series offer explanations for how this is possible; Jessie moves into a

penthouse to become a nanny, and the Martin family moves into a luxury hotel, both as a result of employment. In *Victorious*, the characters inhabit settings that do not seem financially feasible. Indeed, one of the fantastical elements from the tweencoms during the Disney Channel Decade is the fact that families continually enjoy a middle-income or even high lifestyle even if they cannot seem to afford it. The realities of financial, geographic, and socioeconomic conditions do not affect the fantasy of this lifestyle; effectively, families can live in nice homes in some of the most expensive housing markets in the country. At the same time, parents are rarely seen. Therefore, parental occupations are rarely mentioned so any understanding of how the family can maintain this upper-class lifestyle is often unexplored.

Figure 35 - *Austin & Ally's* workspace

Figure 36 - *Big Time Rush's* apartment

The tweencoms *Victorious* and *Shake It Up* provide an interesting comparative analysis since both series include parents whose occupation is in law enforcement. As I pointed out, *Shake It Up* takes place in Chicago and features CeCe's apartment as one of the primary settings. The series has been referred to as representing working-class families by portraying the fact that CeCe lives in an apartment, not a house, and that her mother works as a blue-collar police officer. The set design of CeCe's 3-bedroom and open-concept apartment in a small building, not a high-rise penthouse, further helps ground the series within economic

reality even while certain episodes and plots do not. On the other hand, in *Victorious*, Victoria's father works as a detective in L.A. while her mother's occupation remains unknown. The family, though, lives an affluent lifestyle in a large two-story modernist-styled home and can afford to send two daughters to a performing arts school. With my use of the term class-blindness, I suggest how characters live in homes and enjoy lifestyles that presumably belong to a class one or two rungs above what they could realistically enjoy [See Figures 37 and 38 below]. This presents inaccurate measures of class, especially for young people. As studies have shown, millions of Americans believe they are middle class, measured by income levels, when they are not (Olya 2019, Martin 2017).

Figure 37 – apartment in *Shake It Up*

Figure 38 – House in *Victorious*

5.4.2 Disneyfied Simulations of Space and Place

Disney Channel's simulations of space and place in the vicarious-living series, especially in *The Suite Life on Deck*, invite readers to examine how Disney transforms understandings of the physical environment. In *The Suite Life on Deck*, Zack and Cody Martin travel around the world on a cruise ship to visit various countries around the world. While the

ship serves as the primary setting in most episodes, the passengers on occasion step ashore to visit 'real' or imagined places. In the first season, they visit Greece, Miami, India, Lichtenstamp, Rome, and Hawaii, with one set design serving to represent the location. In Greece, the characters visit an antiquities museum. In Rome, they spend time at an Italian restaurant. In India, the Martin brothers climb a mountain to visit a famed Swami's retreat (even though the location suggests northern India which that would be far from any port). While I will return to look at this series in further sections, I will here emphasize how the series treats the world as a theme park while the young protagonists are privileged with an 'all-access' pass. While the young protagonists aboard the cruise ship attend a school-at-sea program, they spend little time in classrooms. The excitement of life at sea contrasts with the dullness of life back home. One of the main characters, Bailey Pickett, arrives from a farm in Kansas and is excited to explore the world away from her farm. Padma, a girl from India, says that she has no wish to return to her little village, where "it's so boring even our elephant ran off to join the circus" (S1E12. "The Mommy and the Swami"). Throughout this series, the whole world gets to be experienced as fantasy, play, and spectacle, as in a theme park.

Several scholars have looked at the cultural impacts of Disney's theme parks and other built environments (Davis 1997, Willis 2004, Hermanson 2005). The authors of *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions* (Budd & Kirsch 2005) offer an interdisciplinary look at Disney's corporate empire, a global reach that extends to its control of the physical environment, including the Animal Kingdom theme park. In *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power* (2011), Stephanie Rutherford looks at the Animal Kingdom as a case study of how Disney packages and sells nature. With its catchphrase, "the was wild was never this wild," Disney "seeks to reimage and (re)produce nature as a site of sanitized, controllable, 'family-friendly,' adventure-filled fun" (pg.44). These simulations of spaces, such as in the set designs, must also be associated with the concept of Disneyfication, which Alan Bryman (2004) defines: "To Disneyfy means to translate or transform an object into something superficial or even simplistic" (pg. 5). In simplifying the world, Disney envisions a utopia that is "not only middle class but is, perhaps, unsurprisingly, also white" (Rutherford pg. 51).

Theme parks offer sites for consumption, as is the world in *The Suite Life on Deck*. Much like the critique of a theme park's 'synthetic world' from Stephen Mills (1990), *Suite Life* offers "perpetuating over-simplified, stereotyped views of the world" (pg. 73). The episode where Zack and Cody visit India (E1S12, "The Mommy and the Swami") serves to parody the commercialism of tourist traps. While the boys want to meet a famous guru, Swami

Banukapatu, to receive lessons in how to take yoga classes and how to find nirvana, the boys end up finding out that the Swami runs a tourist trap to swindle people out of their money by selling high-priced souvenirs and charging for his lessons. Unable to afford their lessons and rooms, the twins end up paying the Swami back by working in his call center. As I will explore in a section on cultural imperialism, *The Suite Life on Deck* revels in such cultural stereotypes and simplifications. At the same time, the setting of India helps to create distance between the Swami's retreat and Disney theme parks, which are themselves ripe with over-commercialism.[68] Through narratives that invoke class-blindness, though, Zack and Cody only occasionally must worry about the expenses they incur from their travels.

5.5 Disney Channel Case Study 2: *The Suite Life*

As a franchise, *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (2005-08) and its sequel *The Suite Life on Deck* (2008-2011) altogether ran for a total of six seasons and 162 episodes, setting a sitcom record for 'the longest-running continuous characters on air and the most episodes in Disney Channel history" (tvbythenumbers, April 26, 2011). The ratings for the sereies through its final season rivaled even Disney hits *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011) and *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-2011) among the key demographics of kids aged 6-11 and tweens aged 9-14. Still, there has been little analysis of *The Suite Life* series in the academic literature of Disney sitcoms. The few scholars who have examined the series privilege the theme of gender in their analysis by considering how the series, among other tweencoms, presents gender representations, beauty ideals and anti-feminist messaging, which are important subjects given that Disney Channel attracts large numbers of young girls as its target audience (Northup & Liebler 2010, Myers 2013, Oppliger 2019). I would, however, like to expand this analysis of *The Suite Life* series by arguing again how class ideology, class fantasy, and cultural imperialism pervade this series, especially as the series' own title plays upon the very notion of class fantasy.

Debuting before famecoms started to dominate the schedules of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, Disney's *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* presents an ultimate fantasy in

[68] It has been noted that the rising prices of park tickets resulted in the doubling of ticket prices between 2002 and 2015, so the rate of inflation of Disney's theme park tickets is at the same level as college tuition and health care costs in the United States (Westfall 2014). Discussion on class privilege in the Disney Parks in recent years has continued to focus on how the middle class is being priced out of the parks (Cameron 2019, Krause 2021).

vicarious living. Zack and Cody Martin are twin boys who live with their divorced mother in a five-star hotel in Boston, The Tipton Hotel, where rooms cost one to two thousand dollars a night.[69] The mother, Carrie Martin, works as the hotel's lounge singer and receives a free suite as part of her contract. The series revolves around the adventures and misadventures the twins have around the hotel as they frequently run into trouble with the uptight but benign hotel manager, Mr. Moseby, who later manages the *SS Tipton*. The twins befriend Maddie, a teen who works at the hotel's candy counter, and London Tipton, another resident of the hotel. As the billionaire heiress of the Tipton empire, London's name and personality easily link her to Paris Hilton, who went from headline-grabbing socialite to reality-television star with *The Simple Life* (Fox, 2003-07), so the series both mocks and sustains the culture of celebrity. London's extreme wealth is parodied through references to her having a stretch limousine with a pool and lifeguard and a private submarine that stores her shoe collection. In *The Suite Life on Deck*, London joins Zack and Cody aboard the cruise ship as they travel around the world. While the first series presents class dynamics of the hotel's upstairs and downstairs characters, the second series functions as a travelogue, but both privilege the first-class worldview as they, respectively, take place in a luxury hotel and luxury cruise ship.

Set almost entirely in the hotel, *The Suite Life* offers audiences a setting belonging to the upper class, a departure from the previous tweencoms (such as Nickelodeon's *Clarissa, Kenan & Kel*, and *Drake & Josh* - and Disney Channel's *Lizzie McGuire, Even Stevens, That's So Raven*) that had all been previously set in the domestic middle-class realm with nuclear families. Rather than offering a traditional domestic setting, *The Suite Life* also uses the adventures and interactions the twins have with the hotel's staff and guests to provide most of the comic action of the series. The hotel lobby functions as one of the primary sets, offering a space that Douglas Tallack refers to as a 'negotiation between the private and public spheres' in his examination of hotels in American film and literature (Tallack 1998, pg. 7).[70] In addition to mixing characters from upstairs and downstairs, *The Suite Life* also presents racial and

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[69] One of the inspirations for *Suite Life* was likely Kay Thompson's series of books on the character Eloise, written in the 1950s, about a young girl who lives on the top floor of New York's Plaza Hotel. As a godmother of Liza Minnelli, Kay Thompson reportedly based the character on her, at least according to legend (Shire, 2017).

[70] In their book *Hotel Life: The Story of a Place Where Anything Can Happen* (2015), authors Caroline Levander and Matthew Guterl discuss how hotels are ultimately spaces that blur boundaries, particularly between public and private and between labor and leisure.

ethnic diversity in its cast, with an African-American hotel manager and the mixed-raced hotel heiress. However, the sitcom's attempts to reflect an American melting pot are problematic as it continues to privilege a class fantasy and uphold cultural imperialism, evidences which can be seen especially in the sequel *The Suite Life on Deck*.

Exploring the interracial best friendships as central to the Disney series *Shake it Up* (2010-3) and *Good Luck Charlie* (2010-4) and the multiracial casts in Disney series like *Suite Life*, Sarah Turner (2014) suggests in *The Colorblind Screen* that these representational strategies around diversity reflect 'colorblind racism.' This strategy allows Disney Channel to offer "diversity in such a way as to reify the position and privilege of white culture and the white cast members" even as it seeks to exemplify colorblindness, a worldview suggesting "it is not necessary to see race because in fact America has moved 'beyond color or race' and instead is able to focus on the content of a person's character" (pg. 239). As Turner suggests, not seeing racial differences effectively erases recognition of race with the suggestion that 'we are all the same,' and denies "the existence of social, culture, economic, and/or political disenfranchisement" (pg. 239). Colorblind racism also employs the representational pattern of what Angharad Valdivia (2008) refers to as an era of ambiguity or hybridity, where "easily identifiable ethnicities are replaced by one or more ambiguous body that can sign in for more than one ethnicity," which Disney can then market as an embrace of multicultural representations (pg. 273).

5.5.1 Vicarious Living, Class Floating, and Class Fantasy in *The Suite Life*

In both *The Suite Life* and the series *Jessie*, these tweencoms present worlds of 'vicarious living' and class fantasy that obscure the traditional American Dream, where hard work and achievement precede and allow for class mobility (Cullen 2004, Samuel 2012). In these series, the American Dream is defined through luxury and consumption and does not need to be achieved to be enjoyed – it can be experienced vicariously. These series, therefore, present the ultimate embodiment of class fantasy. In his overview of fantasy literature, Mark Fabrizi (2016) describes how escapism works by putting a character (or audience) into exotic activities or situations. For vicarious-living series, fantasy and escapism are inexorably tied to class. In *The Suite Life on Deck*, this escapism becomes even more pronounced as the characters travel in luxury to exotic locations around the world.

As a model of vicarious living, *Jessie* opens as its protagonist has just moved from Texas to New York City following her high school graduation to pursue her dreams as a

musician. When she realizes that her wallet has been stolen, along with her $800 savings, which is an improbable amount to live on in the city, she ends up being thrown out of a cab. Moments later, she gets hired as a live-in nanny for a rich and famous couple and moves into their exclusive penthouse address. Over the course of three seasons, Jessie meets a number of famous figures and actors, performs a duet with Austin Moon (in a crossover episode with *Austin & Ally*), gets cast as a stunt double for a major movie production, understudies on Broadway, takes a trip to space to chaperone her charges, and gets engaged to the wealthy son of her neighbor. Not a bad outcome for someone who moved to New York City with little money but big dreams [See Figure 39 below].

Figure 39 - *Jessie* shows vicarious living and class-passing (Here Jessie dresses as Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly to post an image of herself at her fabulous new address to her social media account to impress her friends back home.)

Likewise, in *The Suite Life*, Zack and Cody move into the Tipton Hotel and get to enjoy all the hotel's amenities, including room service, a game room, a swimming pool, and a candy counter at their disposal. In short, the 'suite life' is a fantastic life. In the pilot episode, they use the hotel to impress the cool kids at their new school, inviting them to the hotel as their guests to enjoy its amenities (S1E1, "Hotel Hangout"). At the same time, however, their mother often reminds the twins of their precarious class position, telling them that the job is the best gig she's ever had and that they finally have a good thing going for them. The family's backstory suggests that the mother was previously employed intermittently and often on the road, leaving the boys in the care of their grandmother. Yet, as unruly twelve-year-olds, the twins constantly run amok through the hotel, destroying paintings, skateboarding in the lobby, and playing elevator football, without consideration of whether their activities will put their mother's job in jeopardy (Felski 2000).

In referring to the characters as 'class floaters,' I emphasize the temporality and liminality of their class status. Within critical spatial theory and migrant studies, floating refers

to the experiences of marginalized groups who don't belong. The term 'floating population' and 'floating class' refer to those who live/work for a short time in one place before seeking other opportunities (Tu 2020, Engbersen 2016). In queer studies, 'floating' likewise refers to the experience of not belonging, disconnected and separated from others, as 'being out there floating' (Ingram 1997). While a 'floating class' suggests a larger population, I discuss class floating or class floaters as an individual experiences.

By referring to Zack, Cody, and Jessie as floaters, I acknowledge that their class status is liminal as they can inhabit the world of wealth and luxury even if they do not permanently belong. Their time in the Tipton Hotel and SS Tipton is temporary, and this temporality functions much like floating as it is commonly understood. Acknowledging the critical theory around 'floating,' I apply the term differently to the tweencoms characters, though, as I refer to floating as more like hovering, which implies a floating that is suspended or in a fixed location. Hovering allows the characters a greater sense of belonging than if they were 'floating' as the characters become friends with the rich (Zack & Cody) or part of the family (Jessie). Hovering allows the characters to stay almost as if they were fixed in the location, as the characters enjoy their world of newfound class fantasy as the new normal. The Martin twins certainly get to enjoy the amenities of the Tipton Hotel more than any of the other employees of the hotel, such as the bellboy Estaban or handyman Arwin. The series *Jessie* ends when the character leaves the Ross home to move to Hollywood after landing an acting role in a movie. Here, hovering has allowed her potential entry into the upper class. For Zack and Cody, their status as class floaters is more precarious as it is dependent on their mother's employment at the hotel. In both the famecoms and vicarious-living series, the characters are often privileged with this social capital, networks of relationships, that help them access high society and pursue aspirational ambitions.[71] At the same time, though, the narratives of the show remain ambivalent about their class. Zack and Cody alternate between over-indulging in their vicarious living at the hotel and protecting their status and their mother's job, both as their source of income and their entry into the hotel.

[71] As I have previously written in my study of Clarissa, the concept of linking social capital to class is noted throughout the tweencom genre, as young people are reliant on their friendships, family, and social networks. Pierre Bourdieu identifies three types of capital: social, economic, and cultural. Social capital is defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1983, pg. 249). Social capital can then be converted into other forms of capital, like economic capital.

Just as the character CeCe from *Shake it Up* embodies class-blindness, I suggest that Zack and Cody are likewise continuously culpable of ignoring/dismissing class and monetary concerns. In fact, this pattern of class-blindness repeats itself from *The Suite Life* to *The Suite Life on Deck*. In the first series, the boys overindulge in the hotel's amenities, from constantly ordering room service to getting their socks dry cleaned. Their mother is shocked when she receives her first month's bill, since her contract stipulates that while the room is free, the hotel's other services are not (S1E5, "Grounded on the 23rd Floor). In *The Suite Life on Deck*, Zack once again splurges money by gifting people rounds of food and drinks, quickly maxing out his and his brother's meal cards, so the boys have to find employment in service on the cruise ship to earn money (S1E3, "Broke N Yo-Yo"). In both series, the boys are quickly and easily blinded by the class fantasy offered by their setting, causing them to consume a piece of this fantasy that leads them to mismanage money.

As two series around class floating and vicarious living, both *The Suite Life* and *Jessie* repeatedly present plotlines revolving around class passing and class blindness, emphasizing yet again how class can be constructed and performed (Foster 2005). In an extreme example of class blindness and class passing, London's father loses and regains his fortune over the course of a single episode (S1E13, "Poor Little Rich Girl"). After her father loses his fortune in a land deal, London moves out of her hotel suite and stays with Maddie's family. Mr. Tipton remains in absentia from the hotel as he is wanted for questioning. Everything returns to normal by the end of the episode, though, when Mr. Tipton's land purchase eventually reveals it contains a huge diamond mine, allowing London to return to her fabulous life.

5.5.2 *The Suite Life* and Class Ideology

In the *Suite Life* series, the multiracial casts of characters occupying different levels of social and class hierarchies invite considerations of the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and class. At the Tipton Hotel, Zack and Cody Martin interact with a range of guests and staff – counter-attendant Maddie, bellboy Esteban, the manager Mr. Moseby, billionaire heiress London Tipton, and the hotel's guests. London lives alone in a penthouse suite and rarely sees her parents, surrounded by a staff that she constantly bribes to do her bidding. Mr. Moseby, as the manager of the hotel and later the cruise ship, serves as her primary caretaker. On the *SS Tipton*, the Martins are joined by Mr. Moseby, London, and Bailey. When the latter two share a cabin, much to London's consternation, they grow to become friends even though London feels embarrassed to admit she "lives with regular people" when she meets another heiress on

board (S1E9, “Flowers and Chocolate”). While both series present visions of class mixing, scholarship often points out how class difference perpetuates class inequality across classrooms and workplaces (Gray & Kish-Gephardt 2013, Aronowitz 2003).

Still, in the two *Suite Life* series, the hotel and cruise ship settings continually allow protagonists Zack and Cody Martin the opportunity to class-mix and class-pass with the upper class as they interact with the hotel guests and ship passengers. One episode of *Suite Life on Deck* (S1E4, “Kidney of the Sea”) mimics the plot of *Titanic* (1997), sans iceberg, with Zack meeting a first-class passenger, Violet, and her overbearing boyfriend, Ashton, who gifts her a flashy necklace. Zack borrows a tuxedo to join them for dinner and impresses Violet with his humor and sincerity, leading her to break up with Ashton and drop his necklace into the ocean. London then drops her jewelry box overboard as well, claiming that her jewels are ‘so last season.’ While the twoseries parody London’s wealth and ostentation (using $100 dollar bills as gift paper because she couldn’t find paper), they nevertheless often employ London’s great wealth to solve narrative problems. She writes a check for $10 million dollars to help a tropical island replant its trees (S1E2, “Parrot Island”) and saves a Greek museum worker’s job when she threatens to tell her father to stop funding the museum (S1E7, “It’s All Greek to Me”). Most times, though, London is a comic character with no common sense, someone who finally learn the alphabet at fourteen. The very comic nature of characters like London, and of the vicarious living series altogether, illustrate Diana’ Kendall’s critique of media representations of class in America in her book F*raming Class* (2011):

> Rather than providing a meaningful analysis of inequality and showing realistic portrayals of life in various social classes, the media either play class differences for laughs or sweep the issue of class under the rug so that important distinctions are rendered invisible (Kendall, pg. 210).

By playing class difference and inequality for satire or for laughs, American popular media ignores offering any real analysis or commentary on class.

Throughout *The Suite Life*, the class fantasy of living a wealthy lifestyle is always maintained. London may receive a comeuppance in the episode where she loses all her money, but she quickly reverts to her old ways when her fortune is restored. As noted by Patrice Oppliger (2019), London became a popular character and often served as a guide for the show’s ancillary products. Her character is identified by Oppliger as a ‘fan favorite’ [See Figure 40 below]. In the first series, one episode (S3E15, “Tiptononline”) from December 2007 revolves around London hosting a web-based TV show, in which Cody works as her producer, in a storyline that mirrors *iCarly*, which debuted that fall. As with *iCarly*, viewers

could access and interact with London's site, called "Yay Me!" after her recurring catchphrase, just as they could with *iCarly*'s site. Often wearing designer clothes, heels, makeup, and jewelry, London's concern with her appearance is one of the character's defining traits. Her excessive displays of hyper-femininity manifest notions of 'sparkle' and 'luminosity' defined by feminist scholars as a ubiquitous trend in mainstream girl culture of the twenty-first century which seeks to affirm youthful femininity (Gill 2007, Kearney 2015, McRobbie 2009, Kennedy 2019, Blue 2013). Kearney argues that celebrity culture provides the primary source of 'sparklefication' where "the visibility, glamour, and wealth associated with celebrities have particular implications for female youth" (pg. 264). As a character obsessed with self-branding herself while broadcasting herself, London manifests one form of sparkle that Kearney identifies as "the adornment of girls' bodies via glittery makeup, sequined clothing and bejewelled accessories" (Kearny 2009, pg. 269). Sparkle and luminosity predicate class vis consumerism, and while London's sparkle appearance allows the character agency, her great wealth intensifies this sparkle.

Figure 40 - London Tipton used in paratexts and promos for *The Suite Life*.

5.5.3 *The Suite Life on Deck*: Racial & Cultural Imperialism

The Suite Life and *The Suite Life on Deck* ostensibly present a diverse cast, but closer analysis reveals how the two series often reduce ethnic groups to problematic stereotypes and constructs ethnic identity through Othering. Othering is a process in which groups who are marked as Others are considered fundamentally different. According to Bendixsen (2013), "This idea of difference enables hierarchical and stereotypical thinking, which is why the effect of Othering resembles racism" (pg. 110). In the case of *The Suite Life on Deck*, the SS

Tipton travels to lands and frequently meets native Others, who serve as representative attractions of the foreign or exotic for the ship's protagonists. As I have referenced, *The Suite Life on Deck* presents a 'simulated imperialism' like Disney's own theme parks. After all, it is important to remember that throughout *The Suite Life* franchise, the figure who sits at the top of the social and economic hierarchy is the unseen white male billionaire industrialist named Wilfred Tipton. Married over a dozen times, he buys up land and property around the world and essentially treats marriage as another commodity transaction. While he can be easily coded as representative of 'the ugly American,' he still is the one character who makes the very world of *The Suite Life* possible as the CEO of Tipton Industries through his infinite wealth. London's mother is rarely mentioned and remains unseen throughout the series.

At the beginning of *The Suite Life*, the diverse cast already belies an ethnic and racial – along with its socioeconomic - hierarchy and othering. The Latin bellboy Esteban speaks with a Spanish accent, has a pet chicken, and refers to the Martin twins as 'little blonde peoples.' Eventually, though, it is revealed that he was born into the Peruvian royal family who left the country after they were deposed. The African-American hotel manager Mr. Moseby holds the highest position of authority at the hotel but gets fired in one episode, revealing that his position and employment can always be revoked by figures above him (S1E4, "Hotel Inspector"). In one reading, he can also be coded queerly through his meticulous attire, fondness of ballet, and lack of romantic relationships. His defining characteristic, though, is that he is married to his job, and his sole identity rests on being the manager of the Tipton Hotel so much that he decorates his apartment in the same style as the hotel lobby, demonstrating his commitment to the class identity he serves. As someone in charge of the hotel, or the Tipton house, and tasked with London's upbringing as her primary caretaker, he can also be read as a male 'mammy,' subsuming his own identity for the Tipton family (Bogle 1994).

For London Tipton (played by Brenda Song, who is half Hmong Chinese and half Thai American), her mixed-race background as half white and half Thai marks her as 'racially ambiguous,' as her Asian heritage is never mentioned in any episode until the second series (Valdivia 2008). As a spoiled and vacuous young girl, concerned only with clothing and shopping, London destabilizes the cultural stereotypes of the intelligent, hard-working Asian, according to Sarah Turner (2011). Turner points out, though, how London's representation is problematic since Song was one of the only Asian-American actors on Disney Channel during this era. At the same time, London's Valley Girl accent and hyperfeminine 'sparkle' persona

invite similar critiques leveled at Disney's theme parks. In an examination of the Disneyland's ride "It's A Small World," Stephanie Hom (2013) argues that the while the ride aims to provide a multicultural tour of a global village, it instead simulates imperialism. Hom writes that it "reveals an idealized world to be one erased of all difference in favour of a white, English-speaking, and culturally American utopia" (pg. 25). In a similar way, *The Suite Life on Deck* cruises throughout the world, meeting guest characters all over the world who always speak English and are often played by American actors. For example, one episode (S1E2, "Parrot Island") takes place tropical island in the Global South where the resident Simms is played by an American actor (Stuart Pinking). This episode offers a microcosm of American imperialism. Mr. Tipton has bought the island for development, cutting down the trees and causing the native parrots to leave. Upset by the loss of his land, Simms imprisons London and the other characters as revenge. Upon her release, London vows that she will make restitution by giving Simms a check for $10 million to replant the island's trees. In this case, rich Americans are the ones responsible for pillaging - but also - saving the island.

Throughout the *Suite Life on Deck*, Othering becomes even more blatant with guest characters and is particularly pronounced with Asian stereotypes, including when the twins visit India. When the *SS Tipton* travels to Thailand, London meets her grandmother for the very first time (S2E6, "Family Thais"). She is very quickly dismayed to learn that her grandmother is a poor rice farmer. Her grandmother lives in a thatched hut, possesses a pet elephant, and serves crickets as a snack. In these examples, *The Suite Life* franchise can be examined as standing in for the Disney corporation itself in much of the academic critique of Disney. Like the SS Tipton, Disney travels around the world. As a media conglomerate, Disney offers ideology within its products and can be seen as the epitome of the spectacle, as the company's ideology and propaganda pervade all aspects of culture and society (Giroux 2010; Bryman 2004; Hebdige 2003). This examination also implicated Disney in cultural imperialism by noting how Disney's cultural values have spread throughout the world (Dorfman & Mattelart 1971). In his book *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Giroux (2010) provides a content analysis of many of the television shows and films from Disney to explore how they promote racial, cultural, or gender stereotypes along with conspicuous consumption in the endless merchandise marketed through the *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana* franchises.[72] At the same time, *The Suite Life* presents class

[72] Giroux looks at these representations in *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), and *Aladdin (1992).*

fantasy and consumerism as a spectacle while at the same time offering a rich case study on racial, cultural, and gender representations.

5.6 The Disney Channel Decade Comes to a Close

In this chapter, I detailed patterns of tweencom content in the 2000s on Disney Channel. I also explored how, despite an explosion of original content in this genre, the two tween networks heavily recycled narratives and premises of fame and fortune. In part, as I suggested in Chapter 3, this could be explained by the fact that after the mid-2000s, a single production company created the majority of the content for each channel: It's a Laugh Productions produced series for Disney and Schneider's Bakery produced series for Nickelodeon. Considering the marketing imperatives of American television and the cultural context of the contemporary media industry that conflated reality and celebrity, I argued that these replicated tweencoms invariably centered around class aspiration and fantasy. I identified two class-related patterns that dominated tweencom programming from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. Famecoms, such as *Hannah Montana* and *Shake it Up*, dealt with protagonists who were either established celebrities or wannabe celebrities. Vicarious-living series, such as *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* and *Jessie,* dealt with protagonists who got to experience or inhabit a world of wealth and privilege. In the next chapter, I look at tweencoms from 2013 to 2019 to write about how fantasy and aspirational series continued as one trend in tweencom programming but note that another trend responded with more realistic portrayals of contemporary tweenhood.

6. Tweencoms in the Transitional Era (2013-2019)

In this final chapter, I focus on the short timeline of the half-dozen years between 2013 and 2019. While I refer to the 1990s as the Golden Age of Nickelodeon and the 2000s as the Disney Channel Decade, I note that the 2010s is characterized as a period of transition for the tweencom genre, a period distinguished by the corollary trends of the rise of streaming services and the decline of cable television. This transitional era serves as an important marker and bookend for the tweencom genre. First, this transitional era emerged when some of the most popular programs from both Nickelodeon and Disney ended between the 2011 to 2012 seasons, including Disney's *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011), *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-2012), and *Suite Life on Deck* (2008-2011) and Nickelodeon's *iCarly* (2007-2012). While this transitional era continued the explosion of content, there was at the same time both an erosion of cable audiences and a high turnover of content, with many series lasting little longer than one or two seasons. The continual decline in ratings of the two networks, and the changing dynamics of the television and media industry, rendered contemporary sitcoms from these networks as far less prominent within tween and media culture than they had previously been. Audiences may have still enjoyed sitcoms like *Girl Meets World* (Disney, 2014-2017) or *Game Shakers* (Nick, 2015-2019), but the two networks no longer found the type of robust fan base or the marketing and cross-platform potential to turn their series into full-fledged media franchises. At the same time, audiences found opportunities to view content from these networks on multiple streaming services, including Disney+ which launched in 2019.

As a result, I acknowledge the relative absence of identifiable 'signature series' for each network from this time period. I first identified the 'signature series' from Nickelodeon during the 1990s and then from Disney Channel in the 2000s. However, while I discussed signature programs in the previous chapters, I will not do the same for this chapter. Instead, I look at broader signature themes or categories from this era. The two patterns I identify during this transitional era include *fantasy tweencoms*, series classified as either magicoms or as aspirational famecoms or vicarious living series, and *realistic tweencoms*, series that ground its protagonists with real-world situations without granting them fame, wealth, or supernatural abilities. Ironically, as Matthew Klickstein (2013) points out, Nickelodeon became the network that increasingly turned to fantasy in this decade to compete with Disney. On the other hand, Disney began creating more realistic sitcoms at this time, including *Girl Meets*

World and *Andi Mack* (Disney, 2017-19), two domestic series noted by their focus on coming-of-age storylines and lack of any fantastical elements typically present in magicoms.

I will explore this binary further, along with an analysis of the television industry landscape and tweencom programming from this transitional era. I then look at both networks equally to include a case study from each. For the fantasy/aspirational case study, I examine Nickelodeon's *Game Shakers* (2015-19) as my case study. For the realistic series case study, I select Disney's *Andi Mack* (2017-19). With both tweencoms, I reflect on how each series portrays and relates to the broader themes surrounding class. By choosing *Game Shakers* and *Andi Mack*, I look at two trajectories of tweencoms in the contemporary era. Since *Game Shakers* deals with two pre-teens who launch a multi-million-dollar gaming company, it continues the tweencom obsession with aspiration, fantasy, wealth, and success, themes central to the famecoms and vicariously-living series abundant during the Disney Channel Era. *Andi Mack*, however, represents something different. It offers a realistic comedy-drama, having tween protagonists face everyday problems and personal drama. There were a number of Disney tweencoms that emphasized realistic, as opposed to fantastic, premises during this transitional era. *Andi Mack*, along with S*tuck in the Middle* (2016-2018) and *Girl Meets World* (2014-17), added relevancy to the network that once produced series about superstars, wizards, and talking dogs. This programming reversal repeats an earlier pattern found in American television history when the escapism found in a glut of magicoms from the 1960s were replaced by the relevant and realistic Norman Lear-esque sitcoms of the 1970s (Kenton 2016, Jones 2016).

By exploring both program patterns, tween television - like the tween demographic - could no longer be viewed as monolithic. The final case study *Andi Mack* offers an interesting case to explore precisely due to its departure from the tweencom formula. The series stands in such stark contrast to other tweencoms in Disney and Nickelodeon programming history that it may need to be categorized as a new subgenre – the realistic tweencom. The show's realism can be explored through its content and aesthetics. Perhaps one of the most significant departures of *Andi Mack* from traditional tweencoms is the fact that the show offered a serialized storyline. With serialization, A*ndi Mack* foregrounds character development and realistic narratives over the fantastical plots and slapstick comedy that previously characterized the genre of tweencoms, from *Kenan & Kel* (Nick, 1996-2000) to *Game Shakers* (Nick, 2015-2019).

The serialization of the show also marks the continued influence and reliance on media convergence for the tween networks. In *Convergence Culture* (2008), Henry Jenkins defines the term media convergence as a space "where old and new media collide" (pg. 2). Fan sites, fan fiction, social media, and other media paratexts all help to engage loyal and connected audiences with television shows. At the same time, multiple digital platforms are employed as sites of this convergence. As I explored in the last chapter, such convergence in tweencoms was already present in the series *iCarly* by its innovative use of webcasts within the series and with fan sites. This practice of media convergence proliferated in the next decade, from Nickelodeon's *Game Shakers* (2015-19) developing of game apps to Disney's *Bizaardvark* (2016-2019) showcasing a YouTube-like setting for the main characters to produce their own content. The distribution and marketing of *Andi Mac*k's likewise exemplified this convergence. At the same time, the show's serialized storylines offered increased engagement that lent itself to streaming at a time when Disney was shifting content into digital platforms until it would officially launch Disney+ in November 2019. Disney Channel's *Andi Mack* debuted on television on April 7, 2017. However, its pilot had already premiered on the Disney Channel app on March 10 and was later made available on Disney.com, Disney Channel YouTube, iTunes, Amazon, and Google Play (Aguilera, 2017). In this way, *Andi Mack* may serve as a series marker to reflect on how Disney Channel's engagement with audiences increasingly shifted online, both through these marketing efforts and through the show's narrative structure.

By looking at both *Game Shakers* and *Andi Mack* as case studies, I will give equal consideration to Disney Channel and Nickelodeon during this era. In the previous chapter, I focused on the Disney Channel in the 2000s, even referring to the era as the Disney Channel Decade. While ratings of Disney Channel surpassed Nickelodeon through the 2010s (Makarechi 2012, Kissell 2015), I conclude that the Disney Channel Era has, by the transitional era, come to an end. In part, this is because audiences of cable networks, especially Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, fell precipitously throughout the decade (Amidi 2018). At the same time, online content and platforms multiplied, creating new spaces for tween programming and audiences. Meanwhile, Nickelodeon and Disney series often became indistinguishable, as noted by both industry veterans (Klickstein 2013) and audiences alike (Sim 2018).

I end my analysis of the tweencoms with 2019 as an important marker. Coincidentally, both case studies in this chapter ended in the summer of 2019 after airing approximately sixty

episodes each. Between 2019 and 2020, though, there were much more remarkable developments for the two cable networks that suggest that the next decade may bring further changes to the content, programming, development, and distribution of their live-action series that I will discuss in the concluding chapter. The launch of Disney+ in 2019, for example, has already generated much discussion about what content on Disney Channel will look like and how it will have to compete with its partner streaming service (Spangler 2019, Coffey 2020). In 2019, the partnership of Dan Schneider and Nickelodeon also dissolved, with the last series produced by Schneider's Bakery – *Game Shakers* and *Henry Danger* – bowing out in 2019 and 2020, respectively. By emphasizing this era as 'transitional,' I ponder the future of Nick and Disney's tweencom programming. Will the binary between fantasy and realistic narratives continue, or will one grow more dominant? What strategies will the networks utilize to reach audiences as they launch more content on streaming platforms?

6.1 Signature Themes for Tweencoms in Transition

In this section, I will conclude with a brief observation of the signature themes from the tweencoms during the transitional era. In the first two chapters, I connected certain signature series to each network as I explained how they helped build the brand of the channel. As I have suggested, this consideration of 'signature series' no longer works during this transitional era.[73] In part, it proves difficult to justify how certain series stand out according to the definitional model provided by Joseph Turow (1997) as helping to brand a network after they've already established a network identity. By the transitional era, these networks were already well-known quantities. Instead, I argue that broader themes of the tweencoms work better in understanding the programming patterns from Disney and Nickelodeon from this

[73] One could make the argument for certain series as signature series for the 2010s. The superhero-themed *Henry Danger* (Nick, 2014-2019) became Nickelodeon's longest-running tweencom, while the spy-themed *K.C. Undercover* (Disney, 2015-2018) utilized Zendaya's growing celebrity star power. However, I suggest these series never became linked to each network in the way that 'signature series' are meant to. Their popularity never created multi-media franchises, as Disney did with its popular series during the Disney Channel Decade such as *Hannah Montana*. Instead, I suggest that the broader theme of fantasy, which both utilized, became more of a signature theme of this era. Another justification for ditching the concept of 'signature series' by the time was due to the fact that audiences could watch these series anywhere, anytime without the need to link or identify them to a particular network. For example, the fact that Zendaya worked across film and television at this time meant that she was never exclusively identified as a 'Disney Channel actress' as she was when she starred in her first Disney Channel series, *Shake it Up*. This contrasts with Miley Cyrus who worked solely (as contractually obligated) for Disney entities during her five-year stint on *Hannah Montana* (Hogan 2015).

time period. In the chart below, I characterize the tweencoms during this era and, for the sake of brevity, include only those sitcoms that were renewed for multiple seasons).

The two binary categories include series grounded in fantasy and those grounded in realism, as I chart below. Within fantasy series, kids go to work – as spies, executives, and moguls. In other tweencoms, such as *The Thundermans* (Nickelodeon, 2013-18) and *Henry Danger* (Nickelodeon, 2014-20), they have magical powers. The number of magicoms during this decade speaks to the influence of the superhero film franchise, with some even claiming Hollywood has become overrun with superhero franchises (Hertz 2014). Other series that focus on relevance and realism revolve around family, friends, and 'life lessons,' countering the criticism that the tweencoms from this era do not offer this quality. I note, though, that apart from the possible exception of *Andi Mack*, these series all return to the model of the traditional family sitcom with a middle-class nuclear family. In a review of *Andi Mack* in *The New York Times*, Brooks Barnes suggests that the show offered an attempt for Disney to represent a new direction to appeal to older children and their parents, with a show with 'more edge and authenticity' than the channel's previous mainstays (Barnes 2017). I consider *Andi Mack* as a case study to examine its attempt to create social realism and relevancy, particularly around issues of representation and class.

While I offer case study of the fantasy and realism categories, I also note that a third programming pattern has emerged among the tweencoms during this era. In the nexus between fantasy and reality, there is nostalgia [See Figure 41 below]. Nickelodeon and Disney have produced many series in recent years that can appeal to a sense of nostalgia for their audiences who grew up watching their networks and are now adults, and presumably parents. The Disney Channel series *Girl Meets World* and *Raven's Home* offer reboots from popular series in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. This phenomenon around reboots considers how they are viewed as "safe bets" financially for media giants to capitalize on existing intellectual property rights and audience familiarity (Hein 2018, Scott 2021). On the other hand, an article from *Time*, examining the 'reboot phenomenon' across film and television, offers the suggestion that domestic sitcom reboots of popular series also help 'manufacture' optimism during uneasy times, and offers contemporary audiences to continually seek this manufactured optimism "for a world that never existed" (Berman, 2022).[74]

[74] Scholars have, in turn, looked at the popularity and the manufacture of reboots and sequels and spinoffs in *Cycles, Sequels, Spinoffs, Remakes and Nostalgia* (Klein & Palmer, 2016), *Remake Television* (Lavigne, 2016), and how television reruns and syndication set this in motion in *Rerun Nation* (Kompare, 2004).

Of course, Disney and Nickelodeon have long been manufacturers of nostalgia. With its movie vault, the re-release of its animated films in theatres, and the releases of VHS/DVDs throughout its history, Disney has always attempted to offer its classic films to each generation of children. Nickelodeon's forays into nostalgia became part of its brand identity when it debuted the evening programming block Nick at Nite in the 1980s, and later launched the channel TV Land in 1990s, which aired classic sitcoms such as *Dennis the Menace* (CBS, 1959-63) and *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957). In the new era, Disney and Nickelodeon continue to offer spinoffs and reboots of their own products, but my case studies in this chapter focus on the binary themes of reality/fantasy.[75] As the two networks continue to develop content for their digital platforms, and as audiences mature in age, this trend with reboots with likely continue, along with a need to study this theme in more depth.

Fantasy	**Reboots/Sequels**	**Relevance/Realism**
The Thundermans (magicom) (Nick, 2013-18)	*Girl Meets World* (Disney, 2014-17)	*100 Things to do Before High School,* (Nick, 2014-16)
Henry Danger (magicom) (Nick, 2014-20)	*Sam & Cat* (Nick, 2013-14)	*Andi Mack* (Disney, 2017-19)
Austin & Ally (famecom) (Disney, 2011-16)	*Bunk'd* (Disney, 2015-)	*Stuck in the Middle* (Disney, 2016-18)
School of Rock (famecom) (Nick, 2016-18)	*Raven's Home* (Disney, 2017-)	*Nick, Ricky, Dick and Dawn* (Nick, 2014-18)
Bizaardvark (famecom) (Disney, 2016-19)		*Liv and Maddie* (Disney, 2013-17)
Game Shakers (workcom) (Nick, 2015-19)		*I Didn't Do it* (Disney, 2014-15)
The Haunted Hathaways (magicom) (Nick, 2013-15)		*Sydney to the Max* (Disney, 2019-)
Dog with a Blog (magicom) (Disney, 2012-15)		
K.C. Undercover (workcom) (Disney, 2015-18)		

Figure 41 – Main Categories of Tweencoms during the Transitional Era (2013-2019)

[75] Disney tried to reboot Lizzie McGuire in 2020 before it scuttled those plans while Nickelodeon launched a *Henry Danger* superhero spinoff, sans create Dan Schneider, titled *Danger Force* (Nick, 2020-). *iCarly* was also given a reboot in 2021 on Paramount+.

6.2 Tweencom Signature Theme 1: Fantasy in *Game Shakers*

Among contemporary tweencoms during the transitional era, *Game Shakers* (Nick, 2015-19) provides a prime example of a fantasy series, but one based around entrepreneurial capitalism rather than magical powers. While the series revolves around young girls building a gaming empire, the premise helps affirm the mythology of the American Dream around social mobility by suggesting that anyone can succeed as an entrepreneur with the right idea, determination, or sheer luck. In this section, I show how this tweencom contributes to an ideology around aspirational labor in creative industries and, simultaneously, models entrepreneurial capitalism for young people in the 2010s. In order to understand the context and ideology of this series further, I will consider the discourses surrounding young adults, gender, capitalism, and entrepreneurship.

The series follows two twelve-year-old girls who start a company designing apps. Paired together during a class assignment, outgoing and street-savvy Babe and high-strung, tech-savvy Kenzie make unlikely business moguls since they still attend middle school, yet they succeed in building a gaming empire virtually overnight. In the pilot, their first game, Sky Whale, becomes the best-selling mobile game of the year. They then use the profits to buy a building in Brooklyn and start a company named Game Shakers to design more games. The team at Game Shakers adds new members. Affable but dim classmate Hudson enjoys hanging out at the company, so the girls keep him around as a test dummy for gaming research. Lacking any understanding of business practices or copyright law, the girls illegally sample the song used on Sky Whale's soundtrack from the famous jet-setting rapper Double G, played by Kel Mitchell from *Kenan & Kel*, who then sues the girls but eventually joins them as business partners. Double G becomes a co-owner and helps promote the company but does not really play an integral role in running the business. However, his young son Triple G (Trip) enjoys the Game Shakers headquarters, so he joins the company as a gaming consultant. Essentially, the four tweens are the only regular employees of the company. Designed as a playground, the company functions as a fun place for the tween characters to work and create as cultural producers.

It's necessary to place *Game Shakers* within the trajectory of tweencoms from the 1990s to the 2010s to understand the depictions and ideology around work representations. After all, among the very first tweencoms was *Hey Dude* (Nick, 1989-91), which created a new subgenre of the teen/tween workplace comedy. In this series, a group of teens spend their

summer living and working as summer employees at the Bar None Dude Ranch. Away from their parents, the kids could enjoy adventures with friends, but their work was far from glamorous or high paying. Before the era of famecoms, tween characters who sought employment followed a realistic model: they almost always worked part-time, low-skilled, service-orientated jobs or sought employment intermittently in individual episodes when they felt the need for more independence or spare cash. In the first season of *Clarissa* (Nick, 1991-94), Clarissa gets a job at a carnival (S1E11, 'Parents Who Say No!') only to learn the job isn't nearly as fun as she thought it would be. In *Kenan & Kel* (Nick 1996-2000), Kenan works as a store cashier. In *Drake & Josh* (Nick, 2004-07), the protagonists work periodically in a movie theatre as cashiers/attendants. In the last season of *That's So Raven* (Disney, 2003-08), Raven gets a prestigious internship with a fashion company, but her delusions of grandeur erode when she finds that instead of having her own office, she barely gets a place to sit (S4E3, "Dues and Don'ts"). Other tween series following the advent of the famecom present narratives where characters pursue their passions and get rewarded. The famecoms from *iCarly* (Nick, 2007-12) to *Austin and Ally* (Disney, 2011-16) provide examples where the young protagonists become cultural producers or are self-employed due to their talents as entertainers. In other series, business acumen becomes yet one more talent that they possess. Tweencom characters find lucrative employment that offers them managerial authority, such as being a corporate executive in *True Jackson, VP* (Nick, 2008-11), a tweencom that some scholars have examined regarding its idealization of, and accessibility to, entrepreneurship and creative labor (Tanti 2014, Greene 2012). As a more recent workplace tweencom, *Game Shakers* provides a rich case study for understanding ideologies of class fantasy and capitalism in contemporary tweencoms. This series demonstrates one more model of what I refer to as 'producer citizenship' in which tween subjects learn self-determination, responsibility, and empowerment in order to become economically productive citizens.

6.2.1 Nickelodeon & *Game Shakers*: A Business Model

The narrative premise behind *Game Shakers* reflects many simultaneous developments within Nickelodeon Studios. As referenced earlier, both Disney Channel and Nickelodeon continued to respond to digital competition and plummeting ratings with convergent strategies. The show-within-a-show format, used throughout famecoms, became one strategy for a series to highlight the creation of media products and application of technology and then market their products. Dan Schneider's *iCarly* (2007-12) embraced interactivity as it offered a premise that

emphasized media production and audience interaction. Developed by the same producer, *Game Shakers* provides another example of convergent television, multi-platforming practices, and transmedia storytelling typical of Nick and Disney. As Dare-Edwards (2014) points out, convergent television and the notion of 'participatory culture' became a hallmark of the Schneider-coms, as they complicate traditional notions of media spectatorship and the distinctions between media producers and consumers as audiences are invited to participate, or can pretend to participate, in the processes of production.[76] In both Schneider-coms, the protagonists become cultural producers and influencers who reflect the growing tensions of Web 2.0 economics. For example, Burgess and Green's history of *YouTube* (2018) trace these tensions between the site's social networking intentions *(iCarly*) and its commercial business imperatives around content creation and commercialization (*Game Shakers*).

With both Disney and Nickelodeon recognizing the centrality of digital media in young people's lives, many of their programs in the Transitional Era revolved around creating media. The networks have simultaneously developed online content as an extension of the programs, encouraging online participation and interactivity. In the mid-2010s, Disney and Nickelodeon developed programs revolving around digital platforms and technology. Disney Channel's *Bizaardvark* uses a studio stage as its principal setting and showcases influencers on a YouTube-like platform as they are employed to originate new material for the platform's channels. Nickelodeon's *Game Shakers* features many episodes where the two tween entrepreneurs/content creators, Kenzie and Babe, design a new app. In tandem with these storylines, Nickelodeon released the actual versions of the games online. In the pilot episode, an actual version of the game app that was designed by Kenzie appeared across digital outlets, including the network's website (nick.com) and iTunes. Nickelodeon developed series like *Game Shakers* to play into this digital convergence. Senior VP of animation and games, James Stephenson spoke about the importance of games to the network's animated programs, but his interview could be just as applicable to its live-action series *Game Shakers*. As he stated, "Games are hugely important to our audience… we're finding ways that the productions we're doing are driving all different kinds of content, including games, so when the audience finds our games they feel like they are dynamically connected to the shows" (Flores & Idelson, pg. 45).

[76] According to Henry Jenkins (2009), participatory culture refers to how fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content' (pg. 290).

The fictional company portrayed in *Game Shakers* stands in as an idealized microcosm for Nickelodeon Studios. In 2015, the year the series debuted, Nickelodeon also built a new headquarters in Burbank to house all of its brands, from live-action to cartoon productions, under one roof to facilitate the network's convergence and synergy. When the Game Shakers company unveils its headquarters in the pilot episode as a place to work and create online content, it serves as a self-referential point for Nickelodeon, which built a 'fun-tastic' corporate facility at the same time [See Figures 42 and 43 below]. Regarding the company's new headquarters, Nickelodeon's president Cyma Zarghami stated, 'We wanted a space that inspires people to do their best work, and we've come up with a sophisticated playground that makes people feel good" (McDonald 2017, pg. 89). In this way, the bright colorful décor of the five-story glass structure is used to symbolize the company's creative and youthful culture. The complex also contains an on-site café, requisite conference and screening rooms necessary for any media company, a courtyard, a game room replete with vintage arcade games, and a theatre entrance with a brightly lit marquee.

Figure 42 – The *Games Shakers* game. The workspace of Game Shakers incorporates playbour, fun and play at work. Apps and games were developed for audiences to become participants, allowing them to be in the Game Shakers studio.

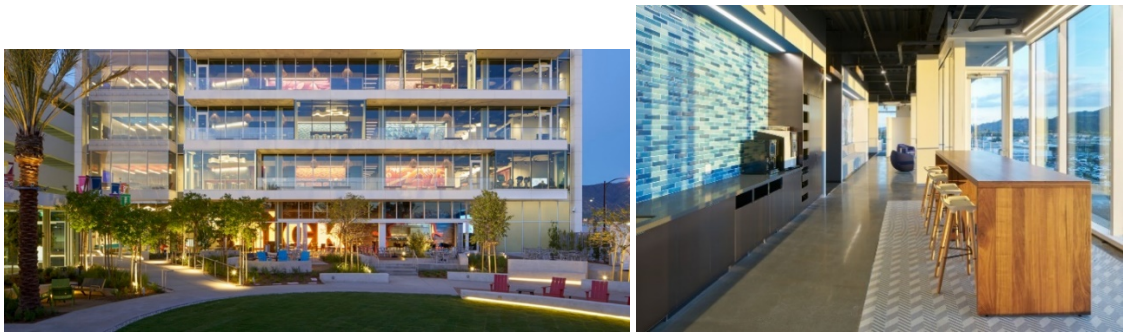

Figure 43 - Nickelodeon's new headquarters. At the same time Nickelodeon built this new corporate headquarters, *Game Shakers* envisioned a work and play environment, which is a discourse modeled by other tech and entertainment companies like Google and Pixar.

The description of the new office building as a playground blurs the distinction between work and play, as I have discussed with the term playbour. To reiterate, playbour refers to the collapse of the distinction between worktime and playtime. Christian Fuchs (2017) refers to how this collapse between work and play ideologically converges as neoliberal discipline: "Workers are expected to have fun during worktime and playtime becomes productive and work-like. Playtime and worktime intersect, and all human time of existence tends to be exploited for the sake of capital accumulation" (pg. 580). Since Julian Kucklich (2005) first applied this term to the video-game industry, *Game Shakers* provides a prime tweemcom that models this concept, as characters get to 'play with' employment and 'play at' their work.

At the same time, a mythologized presentation around playbour belies realities in the creative industries.[77] The fact that inequalities within the media industries persist has been noted by scholars of media production studies, who point out that women are still heavily underrepresented in the gaming industry while they are over-represented across the creative industries in lower-paying or more precarious positions compared to men (McRobbie 2016; Banks, Gill, & Taylor 2013). The idea that creative industries are 'cool, creative, and equalitarian' are some of the myths that surround creative industries. The fact that many women are employed in this sector also belies a post-feminist affirmation that equality has already been achieved (Banks, Gill, & Taylor 2013). However, the gaming industry, especially, remains dominated by a male workforce (pg. 191-192).[78] At the same time, young women contribute unpaid or underpaid labor across the creative industries. In *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love* (2017), Brooke Duffy looks at how the career myth or 'mantra' of the creative industries – that they are cool and will one day lead to fulfilling, creative and well-paying work - leads many young women to partake in what she terms unpaid 'aspirational labor.' Duffy focuses on those who work as social media producers and suggests that young

[77] Nickelodeon's new facilities were described as open and inviting spaces where employees feel freedom and inspiration. Workspaces were designed for greater collaboration and mobility between the various production arms (Berkshire 2015). In more critical terms, though, the open and inviting spaces and abundance of glass walls suggests a space where one is always visible, which offers increased surveillance, another hallmark of neoliberalism (Ouellette 2009).

[78] The backlash against women in the field can be observed in the male toxicity of GamerGate, which refers to an online campaign of gamers to criticize video game journalists that quickly devolved into expressions of misogyny within the gaming community.

women contribute free labor precisely due to the fact that they have a more difficult time breaking into the creative industries through conventional (i.e., salaried work) channels. I then consider it necessary to look at further messages surrounding gender in *Game Shakers*.[79]

6.2.2 *Game Shakers* and Post-Girl Power

In this section, I reflect on how *Game Shakers* references post- and pop-feminist discourse around empowerment and visibility. As a show about a pair of girls who become business moguls, *Game Shakers* offers Nickelodeon a chance to nod to its programming history around 'girl power' since *Clarissa Explains it All* debuted in 1991. Reflecting on the discourse around 'girl power' in popular culture, Elline Lipkin (2009) notes how the phrase "has come to stand for the idea that girls can be strong agents of their own wills" as they become "increasingly visible and powerful within popular culture," with the goal of "creating a society in which all genders are treated equally" (pg. 167). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) describes how 'girl power rhetoric' became a slogan of post-feminism's emphasis on choice and individualism while repeatedly privileging "whiteness and the middle class as ideal subjectivities" as its primary subject. Banet-Weiser defines post-feminism as a "set of ideologies, strategies, and practices that marshal liberal feminist discourses such as freedom choice and independence and incorporates them into a wide array of media, merchandising, and consumer participation" (pg. 153). Banet-Weiser implicates post-feminism as an embrace of neoliberalism:

> "Indeed, post-feminism is enabled by a neoliberal capitalist context, where values such as entrepreneurship, individualism, and the expansion of capitalist markets are embraced and adopted by girls and women as a way to craft their selves. Post-feminism is thus not only a shift from collective mobilization to an individual subjectivity, but the abandonment of feminist politics and the embrace of neoliberal capitalism" (Banet-Weiser 2018, pg. 154).[80]

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[79] Among the production credits of *Game Shakers* from imdbpro.com, there are a few female production staff. Among them include co-producer Jana Petrosini and co-executive producer Robin Weiner who have both worked with Nickelodeon and Schneider's Bakery for several years. Among the eight credited writers on staff, though, Petrosini is the only female writer for the series, and there have been no female directors listed for any episodes.

[80] In *Authentic* (2012), Banet-Weiser takes a further look at how the concept of 'commodity feminism,' in which mass media and businesses appropriate feminism for commercial purposes to sell products and services, proliferates in popular culture.

Rosalind Gill (2017) and Banet-Weiser (2018) note how a more recent iteration of feminism has emerged as 'popular feminism.' According to Banet-Weiser, popular feminism – like girl power - privileges visibility (and still centers on white, middle-class, Western women). At the same time, popular feminism recognizes there are gender inequalities and tries to find 'neoliberal solutions' to address those inequalities, such as increased participation in the workforce. Like post-feminism, popular feminism is shaped by neoliberal discourses around entrepreneurship and empowerment and "are intimately connected to cultural economies, where to be 'empowered' is to be a better economic subject, not necessarily a better feminist subject" (pg. 155).

As I have suggested, *Game Shakers* empowers its female protagonists as entrepreneurial subjects, while its embrace of popular feminism allows it to acknowledge the structural inequalities within the cultural industries. After all, the premise of *Game Shakers* may have been influenced by discourses of girls underrepresented in STEM fields. In 2012, Reshma Saujani founded the non-profit organization Girls Who Code to support and increase the number of women in computer science. In the first season of *Game Shakers*, this organization is even references in an episode. In the first season finale (S1E19, 'Revenge @ Tech Fest'), the Game Shakers team attend a tech convention where they meet some real-life members of Girls Who Code, allowing Nickelodeon to plug the episode as an embrace of girl empowerment (Freeze 2016). In another episode (S1E13, "The Girl Power Awards"), the 'girl power' movement is referenced when Kenzie and Babe receive an invitation to a ceremony as nominees for a Girl Power Award.

However, *Game Shakers*, like many contemporary tweencoms, presents contradictory messages around gender. While the tweencom genre signals girl power, it often conceals any genuine embrace of adult female role models, a point made by scholars of the genre (Kennedy 2018, Blue 2017). In *True Jackson*, True's male boss serves as an encouraging mentor while another female designer in the company serves as the antagonist. While the only adult figure with any authority in *Game Shakers* is Double G, his character mostly provides B plots, and he serves as a model of the male buffoon that Richard Butsch examines in working-class male characters (Butsch 2003). For example, when the tween members of Game Shakers scramble to meet a deadline, Double G rents a submarine to cut the trans-Atlantic cable to shut down the Internet so people will not see an embarrassing photo that the paparazzi had taken of him.

I suggest instead that *Game Shakers* presents ambiguous messaging around girl power, as it is simply a narrative that commercializes feminism and girl power and operates more as

an embrace of neoliberal feminism that privileges individual over collective agency. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) points out in her scholarship around media campaigns for products like Dove or Revlon, the use the trendiness of feminism (like girl power rhetoric) to sell products (a trend referred to as 'femvertising') relegates women empowerment to individual consumption. Products that promote empowerment, and media narratives that do the same, like *Game Shakers*, operate like organization, Girls Who Code. On the one hand, efforts to encourage STEM participation offer girls empowerment and visibility. On the other hand, the growing movement to privilege STEM fields and STEM education creates further competition within education and positions such education as investments for future economic productivity (Lyn Carter, 2017).

The episode featuring the 'Girl Power Awards' presents one storyline that seems to affirm girl empowerment but instead offers ambivalence. Kenzie and Babe receive an invitation to an awards banquet, believing they are being nominating for the award to honor their achievements in building Game Shakers. When they arrive at the ceremony, though, they instead find out the event is a sham. The organizers of the 'award' are actually two young boys who sent out the invitations to meet girls. When all the invitees discover this ruse, they express their disappointment by beating up the boys. This scene recasts an earlier moment from the episode. When Babe and Kenzie first receive their award invitation, Hudson and Trip argue they should be nominated for the award as well; after all, they are part of the Game Shakers team. Kenzie and Babe do not assert their rights to the award as the two founders of the company. Instead, they simply point out the award is only given to girls, so the two boys cannot join them. Feeling left out, Hudson and Trip decide to don dresses and wigs because they feel they have a right to attend anyway, thereby imitating girlhood and girl power for comedic effect.

I believe that this empowered ambivalence, which I define as moments in which empowerment is both acknowledged and then canceled or withheld, can be found throughout the series. At the same time, hegemonic signifiers of gender, like costuming, are often shown. The second episode of the series, ("Lost Jacket, Falling Pigeons," S1, E2), places a central importance on clothing when Babe uses her first paycheck to purchase an expensive jacket, loses it, and then searches the New York subways to retrieve it. It's interesting here to consider the linkages between *Game Shakers* and Barbie. The narrative model provided by *Game Shakers* of blending work and play coincided with toy company Mattel releasing Entrepreneur Barbie in 2014, a lightning rod that provoked diverse reactions around role-

model positivity (Greve 2014) and romantic naivete that obscure persistent gender inequalities (Duffy 2017). The character Babe offers a presentation as a Barbie-like figure in the series through continual displays of commercialized feminism and femininity, symbolized by her wearing pink and by the connotations of her name. Babe has several crushes on different boys and pursues relationships with them over the course of the series. When Kenzie takes her along to meet her coding club, Babe only has an interest in getting to know the attractive boy in the club. When Babe's first major purchase includes a pink/magenta jacket with black trim, the jacket mirrors the image of Entrepreneur Barbie. As I point out in the next section, though, *Game Shakers* embraces entrepreneurship and capitalism much more explicitly than it does feminism [See Figure 44 below].

Figure 44 - Entrepreneur Barbie and *Game Shakers* as 'commodity feminism'

6.2.3 Television Entrepreneurs/Tween Entrepreneurs

Within the twenty-first century, the increased presence of business personalities as 'entertaining entrepreneurs' in television has been observed, which help reify the American Dream in uncertain economic times that followed the Great Recession and the rise of precious labor and the gig economy (Horowitz 2020) and shape the public's understanding of business (Kelly & Boye 2016, 2020). In the United States, such long-running and highly visible

programs include *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-17), *Undercover Boss* (CBS, 2010-), and *Shark Tank* (ABC, 2009 -). The fact that the latter two debuted after the Great Recession (2007-2009) suggests an implicit affirmation of the capitalist system through hard-work and an entrepreneurial spirit. Around the same time, the first tween entrepreneur sitcom debuted with *True Jackson, VP* (Nick, 2008-11), with a teen protagonist working as an executive for a fashion company. This narrative operates on the same level as the tween famecoms that I observed in the previous chapter by portraying the American Dream as one that can be rapidly achieved by anyone. In this case, Doyle Greene (2012) argues that identity politics also became integral to the series. As an African-American teen, True's successful entry into the business world reflected political gains of representation from women and African Americans.

While *True Jackson* may be considered a forerunner of *Game Shakers*, there are significant differences. As Doyle Greene observes, True indeed exhibits the 'true' spirt of the worker in neoliberal economic times: "True represented the 'model worker' who took her job seriously and expressed that dedication through hard-work, innovative ideas, and pragmatic adaptability to situations, while still keeping the job pleasant for herself and her colleagues" (pg. 93). It's important to remember that tweencoms like *True Jackson* and *Game Shakers* target a young audience who represent an emerging workforce by easing them into the expectation that 'fun, friendship, and hard work were inherently related and mutually productive' (Greene, pg. 98). With *Game Shakers*, though, the fantasy becomes even more heightened or exaggerated, with tweens now running the entire company. If I would offer a subtitle for the series, I would even suggest 'how to succeed in business without really trying.' As a duo, Babe and Kenzie build the gaming empire overnight in the pilot, and subsequent episodes offer a similar formula where simple resourcefulness becomes a substitute for hard work by following the conventional sitcom narrative structure. Beginning with the pilot, several episodes (S1E5, "Tiny Pickles"; S1E8, "Lost on the Subway"; S2E11, "Bear Butt Laser Runner"; S2E21, "Dancing Kids, Flying Pig) follow the same narrative plots: the girls have an upcoming deadline to design a new game or pitch a game idea in a business meeting, a problem arises, and they find a last-minute solution.

As I reflected earlier, it's necessary to look at the trendline and context of tweencoms regarding labor and capitalism. While several characters in pre-famecom era series were *engaged in* labor, it is only in the post-famecom era that these characters have been *in charge* and became increasing obsessed with pursuing business-related careers. According to Melissa Tanti's analysis of *Austin & Ally* and *True Jackson, VP*, sitcoms involving youth entrepreneur

became a visible trend in the 2010s (Tanti 2014). According to Tanti, these shows focus on futurity, collapsing childhood and adulthood, by "almost entirely doing away with childhood" as they present young people already engaged in professional endeavors (pg 295). While these young protagonists are young enough that they need to attend school, they spend their spare time engaged in working, which Tanti argues characterizes late capitalism by exemplifying 'the conversion of social life to productive time' (pg. 295). Rather than work as 'aspirational laborers,' as reality would suggest, *Game Shakers* presents yet another model that reinforces the (un)attainable goals of the American Dream and offers another reassuring example of this system.

6.2.4 Tween Capitalism

In this final section, I suggest that tweencom series like *True Jackson* and *Game Shakers* operate as reassuring counter-narratives for young audiences during a time of growing cultural discourses and uneasiness around work, labor, and capitalism following the Great Recession. Several recent studies offer trenchant accounts of the nature of late capitalism and growing anxieties about neoliberal labor conditions that has eliminated long-term job security with economic recessions, downsizing, automation, outsourcing, and the precarious labor of independent contractors as the hallmarks of a new era of capitalism (Fleming 2014 & 2015, Mueller 2021, Benayav 2020, Gray & Suri 2019). At the same time, the American people have continued to question and critique the American Dream as they find themselves saddled with debt by coupling this Dream with materialism and find themselves unable to achieve upward economic mobility (Kamp 2009, Whippman 2016).[81]

During this time of discourses around 'capitalism in crisis,' popular media continue to display narratives around class fantasy, including in my case study around Nickelodeon's *Game Shakers*. As I have maintained throughout this thesis, tweencoms affirm this theme. Jennifer Gillan (2015) analyses the Disney brand as one built around myths, which works across both tween networks. In the previous chapter on famecoms, one such myth centered

[81] While Kamp acknowledges how people at the beginning of the Great Recession were losing faith in the American Dream, Ruth Whippman's article – also for *Time* – makes for the case for why. Referring to a contemporary study from the Brookings Institute, Whippman writes about how the American Dream "can be both moving and inspiring, but it is also problematic, not least because it is false." Whippman's article states how "American social mobility is among the lowest in the developed world" while noting the troubling statistic that "a child born in America is more likely to remain poor than in any other comparable country," due in part to the country's disinvestment of social welfare programs (Whippman 2016).

around 'brandcasters' as entrepreneurial producers and marketers. Gillan traces the need for such a reassuring counter-narrative to the contradiction between neo-liberal entrepreneurialism and the actual state of jobs and behavior of corporations in a new economy. This contradiction has, in turn, produced a 'demand for new myths' to manage and respond to the growing gap between the promise and actuality of the American work ethic that had once guaranteed admittance to the American Dream (pg. 157). While Greene (2012) writes that *True Jackson* valorizes work and workplace ethics for young audiences, *Game Shakers* and other entrepreneurial sitcoms take this one step further. They uphold the very ideology behind ownership or entrepreneurial capitalism and offer 'brandcasting' myth around business rather than celebrity. Holding the status of owner or producer within the narrative essentially allows them the constant reassurance of independence, actualization, and success within this system.

The ideology surrounding business ownership and capitalism starts with the small business. Within American culture, the small business – like the middle class – has long been idealized as an 'essential pillar' of society (Bunzel 1955). At the same time, American political discourse often targets small business interests and affirms the small business model. In the American Dream model, being middle-class has become synonymous with owning/operating one's own business. Indeed, political discourse and political ideology continually remarks on the importance of the small-business owner.[82] Likewise, small-business ownership is prevalent throughout tweencoms of the 2000s. In previous chapters, I reflected that many tweencom parents from the 1990s to early 2000s were professionals. Now, another noteworthy trend in the 2010s can be seen in the fact that many of these parents are often self-employed as small-business owners. The parents of *Stuck in the Middle* (Disney, 2016-18) own an outdoor supplies store, the parents of *Ricky*, *Nicky, Dicky, and Dawn* (Nick, 2014-18) own a sporting goods store, Ally's father owns a music store in *Austin & Ally* (Disney, 2011-16), and the father of *Sydney to the Max* (Disney, 2019-) owns a bike shop. In addition to allowing the parental characters to have a great deal of autonomy, the fact that they own their own business gives the children access to another location, even using it to 'practice business.' In some plots, the children reflect their parent's business drive. In *Stuck in the Middle*, the children use their parents' store to create a supplemental income, turning the store

[82] NPR looks at how often politicians praise small businesses. According to Frank Luntz, a GOP pollster, "The small-business owner is always the good guy in the movies," says Frank Luntz, a GOP pollster. "Being a small-business owner is the American dream. It's the epitome of success. People respect that individual" (Keith 2012).

into an overnight AirBnb. In another episode, protagonist Harley comes up with an idea for selling smoothies in the store by employing her younger brothers in a marketing strategy that significantly improves the store's overall business. However, in series that present tween characters as business owners or entrepreneurs in their own right, they also prove to be adept both at being able to thrive in the current economic climate. They also prove that, as entrepreneurs, they can outdo their parents. In essence, this helps affirm the concept of upward mobility implicit in the American Dream.

By referring to entrepreneurial sitcoms as 'reassuring counter-narratives,' it is clear that such reassurance of the concept of upward mobility has become increasingly necessary. Since millennials grew up during the Great Recession, reports and studies have repeatedly shown that American youth are at odds with capitalism. This only intensified over the decade of the 2010s, creating much political discourse and debate in the United States. As part of this dialogue, academic studies and publications ranging from *Teen Vogue* to *The Guardian* have looked at the attitudes and relationships of young people to capitalism and even trace a growing movement of younger Americans embracing ideas of socialism (Kelly 2018, McGreal 2017). In a collaborative study from Rutgers University's School of Management and Labor, the professors conclude that "today's youth reject capitalism" by charting how young Americans aged 18 to 29, those who would have grown up watching tweencoms of the 2000s, held more negative views of capitalism than older demographics (Blasi & Kruse 2018). Within this context, the number of tween sitcoms set in the workplace offers a model, a counter-programming strategy as it were, for younger people of the next generation to idealize America's economic model around neoliberal capitalism. These series offer models where tweens don't just find work but have creative and fulfilling jobs, are rapidly successful, and are in control of their own destinies. Plus, they can complete this work in their free time after school.

6.3 Tweencom Signature Theme 2: Realism and Relevancy in *Andi Mack*

Throughout the decade of the 2010s, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel produced many series orientated around fantasy and aspiration fulfillment, revolving around tween wizards, musicians, actors, talking dogs, and wealthy kids. In this chapter, I showed how Nickelodeon's *Game Shakers* (2015-2019) exemplifies this fantasy theme with tween entrepreneurs. Two other long-running series from the network, *The Thundermans* (2013-18) and *Henry Danger* (2014-20), provide examples of magicoms that capitalized on the superhero trend. For the

writers and producers who worked for Nickelodeon during its Golden Age of the 1990s, the network's initial brand identity became unrecognizable to them by the 2000s. Interviewed in Matthew Klickstein's book *Slimed* (2013), Alan Goodman, a writer for *Clarissa*, faults Nickelodeon for trying to copy Disney's 'Pinocchio formula' about dreams coming true and abandoning narratives "that identifie[d] with the 'regular kid' stories" (pg. 227). Since Disney is often associated with such fantasy narratives, a noteworthy, and perhaps ironic, trend occurred in tweencom programming throughout the 2010s: Nickelodeon continued programming fantasy, but Disney now launched more realistic series about ordinary kids with ordinary families. A trio of these tweencoms includes *Girl Meets World* (2014-17), *Stuck in the Middle* (2016-18), and *Andi Mack* (2017-19). Of these, I find *Andi Mack* to be the most interesting to develop as a case study as it combines both realism with social relevancy and presents generic flexibility within the tween sitcom format.

In a review of *Andi Mack* for *The New York Times*, Brooks Barnes suggests that Disney created the series to appeal to older children and their parents, since the show possesses 'more edge and authenticity' than the channel's previous mainstays (Barnes 2017). According to a review from *The Columbus Dispatch,* the 'edgy' material of the show helped Disney Channel rebrand itself by recognizing its competition with Netflix (Barnes 2017). *Andi Mack* generated a litany of attention due to its atypical tweencom content – namely, a teen pregnancy and a gay coming-out storyline. Groups including GLAAD, PFLAG, and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy praised the series, while conservative groups like One Million Moms criticized it for its 'adult content' (Ong 2017). Previously, I explained that such press attention can be seen as one hallmark of a network's 'signature series,' but it's rather difficult to argue that *Andi Mack* could be classified as a Disney Channel signature series since it was produced outside Disney or its partner, It's a Laugh Productions. It also remains to be seen whether the series will serve as a precursor for future dramatic content creation by the tween networks.[83]

As I consider how Andi Mack departed from conventional tweencoms, I again turn to the role of class in the series. I point out how class now becomes acknowledged within the series and in the economic realities of the characters. While the show embraces intersections of identity around gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, class remains an element within these

[83] Since the debut of Disney's *Andi Mack*, Disney+ debuted the comedy-drama series *Diary of a Future President* (2020-2021) and *Doogie Kamealoha, M.*D. (starring *Andi*'s Peyton Elizabeth Lee). Netflix has also produced the series *Never Have I Ever* (2020-23), inspired by creator Mindy Kaling's own childhood.

intersectional identities as the characters at times experience financial hardships. In this case study, I now employ the term 'class-crossing' to describe how social class and class differences are conceived and acknowledged. This contrasts with the term 'class-blindness' which I had written about in the previous chapter when series ignored class realities. Reviewers of *Andi Mack* focus on acknowledging the diversity of the show in its depiction of race, ethnicity, and sexuality, so I would again like to reclaim an awareness of recognizing the role of class (Takasaki 2017, CAAM 2018). I argue that the acknowledgment of class realities and differences through class-crossing offers an attempt at presenting *Andi Mack* as a realistic, socially relevant series. At the same time, I explore how this series engages with neoliberal strategies around 'identity investment' through identity entrepreneurship and around social mobility through family reinvestment.

6.3.1 Identity Formation through Identity Entrepreneurship

As I have suggested, the show's serialization allows for character growth, change, and development in a way that previous tweencoms did not explore. As a coming-of-age narrative, *Andi Mack* revolves around creative middle schooler Andi, her family, and her childhood best friends, Buffy and Cyrus. One storyline follows her relationship with popular Jonah, who becomes the object of a crush in the first season, her boyfriend in the second season, and a good friend post-breakup in the third season. In the first episode (S1E1, "13"), Andi celebrates her thirteenth birthday with the unexpected arrival of her older sister, Bex, the free-spirited, prodigal daughter of the family. The first episode establishes their connection immediately. In the opening scene, Andi embraces her budding maturity and rebellion by trading in her bicycle for an electric scooter without asking permission from her overprotective parents, and in the next scene Bex arrives home on a motorcycle. Inside the home, the camera reveals a close relationship between Bex and Andi as they are framed by a two-shot composition, crosscut by their parents framed by another two-shot. By the end of the episode, Andi learns that Bex is actually her mother and gave birth to Andi as a teen. Realizing that she could not take care of a baby, Bex decided to let her parents raise Andi as their own. Within the first season, Andi deals with this revelation, meets her father, and moves out of her grandparents' house to live with her mother. In this move, she has to adjust to living in a new environment (a one-bedroom apartment) that is far less comfortable than her grandparent's middle-class home where she had her own bedroom and a crafting shed in the backyard that she named Andi's Shack [See Figure 45 below].

Figure 45 - Andi's Shack

Andi's embrace of crafting symbolizes her investment in her identity formation. The main title sequence illustrates this emphasis on identity formation by showing Andi entering her crafting shack. The theme song, 'Tomorrow Starts Today,' plays, as various shots around her shack highlight her DIY supplies: paper, paint, scissors, yarn, etc. The main cast's credits are then integrated with these various DIY elements as the actors are overlayed across the paper, post-its, drawings, and collages. I highlight how these multiple DIY elements emphasize the coming-of-age narrative of the show. While Andi enjoys crafting by making bracelets and otherwise engaging in creative pursuits, she – along with the other main characters – are crafting their own identities along the way [See Figure 46 below below].

Figure 46 – *Andi Mack* intro credits

This polysemic DIY emphasis around crafting creativity in *Andi Mack* offers another example of what I refer to as 'empowered ambivalence.' Similarly, Angela McRobbie's *Be Creative* (2015) considers how the embrace of creativity has an ideological effect in which young people buy into an idea of self-entrepreneurship and individual achievement. The wish to be seen as creative, described as 'the romance of being creative' (pg. 33), allows one to give

up concessions regarding wages and social security within a market environment to succeed on one's own terms.[84] Andi feels empowered by her creativity, taking joy in making objects like bracelets and lamps, as it allows her to express her individuality. However, as I noted with Clarissa, Andi has middle-class advantages to be creative and feel empowered since she has her own space, a crafting shack full of supplies.

Andi's embrace of crafting and creativity also helps empower her to become an 'identity entrepreneur.' Legal scholar Nancy Leong (2016) defines an 'identity entrepreneur' as "someone who leverages his or her identity as a means of deriving social or economic value," and notes that the practice can be either beneficial or harmful when out-groups (minorities), members engage in practices to derive value from in-groups (pg. 1336). Such entrepreneurship takes place within a system of identity valuation described as 'identity capitalism.' Leong continues, "Individuals and institutions engage in identity capitalism when they derive social or economic value from identity categories such as race, gender, sexual orientations, class, and disability" (pg. 1337). In an episode that emphasizes Andi's racial identity, (S3E16, "One Girl's Trash), Andi becomes an identity entrepreneur when she creates an art project using trash after experiencing an unpleasant moment in her classroom. In class, students play a game to describe and try to identify one another without using physical descriptions. A popular girl has to describe Andi but didn't really know much about her, so she describes Andi as someone who probably likes computers and plays either the piano or violin, even as Andi protests these clues don't accurately describe her at all. After class, Andi notes that these descriptions are Asian stereotypes, since she is a quarter Chinese. She then creates the art project at school, naming it 'Trashing Stereotypes – Do You See Me Now,' as a mosaic of her face [see Figure 47 below]. Arriving at school to see and photograph the project the next day, Bex tells Andi how proud she is of her creativity and encourages her to pursue a career as an artist. In the next few episodes, Andi visits a high school for the visual arts, prepares her application and portfolio, stresses about getting accepted into a school with a 5% acceptance rate, and finally decides to attend the school after she gets an acceptance offer. In

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[84] McRobbie (2015) offers some optimism looking at how some small-scale social enterprises can engage in practices driven by social democratic thinking rather than embracing individual neoliberalism. Since the 2000s, a wide range of scholarship has engaged with theorizing the cultural and creative industries, the DIY movement, and the diversity of creative work. Such scholarship includes John Hartley's *Creative Economy and Culture* (2015), Susan Luckman's *Locating Culture Work* (2012), Sarah Lowndes' *The DIY Movement in Art, Music, and Publishing* (2016), and Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill, and Stephanie Taylor's *Theorizing Cultural Work* (2013).

the finale episode, (S3E20, "We Were Here"), Andi clears out her shack, noting to her friends and family that she is ready to move out of her crafting space and into an art studio.

Figure 47: Andi's art project

The character Andi and the series can both be described as engaging in identity capitalism. Film and television engage in identity capitalism when they employ racially diverse casts and inclusive narratives by recognizing how they attract ratings, critical attention, and advertising dollars (Lisa Leong pg. 1344-45). For Disney Channel, Andi Mack became a series of firsts - as the channel's first live-action series to focus on an Asian-American family and the first series to feature a gay main character. According to Andrea Baker (2020), while Andi's family reunification storyline occupies the central story arc of the series, Cyrus' coming-out storyline, the first on Disney Channel, in the second season nearly overshadowed Andi's storyline. The series garnered award recognition for that season, including winning a nomination from the Peabody Awards and receiving an award from The Television Academy Honors, which allows the tweencom series to be labeled as 'quality programming.'

6.3.2 Identity and Representation: *Andi Mack* as Quality Tween Programming

As a show that stood out from its contemporary tween programming with 'edgy' and realistic content, *Andi* offers an attempt by Disney Channel to embrace 'quality television' (McCabe & Akass 2007). As I suggested in the introduction, Disney Channel's attempt at programming realistic series helped to distinguish such programs from the glut of fantasy and unrealistic series that dominated tweencom programming. In *Andi Mack*, Disney Channel broadcast storylines highlighting realistic and topical issues around gender, sexuality, and

race/ethnic identity for young people.[85] Developed by writer/producer Terri Minksy, *Andi Mack* continued her long track record of writing strong and relatable female characters.[86] The tweencom served as her return project to Disney Channel after she previously created the tweencom series *Lizzie McGuire* (Disney, 2001-4). Several parallels can be found in the two series as they both revolve around a trio of best friends navigating middle school (both sets include two girls and one boy as the initial friend trio). With *Andi Mack,* though, Minsky could create much more progressive storylines around multicultural and sexual identity. With a multicultural family, Andi is three-quarters Caucasian and one-quarter Chinese, and her family celebrates Chinese New Year and the Chinese Moon Festival. Her friend Buffy is also multiracial (the actress Sofia Wylie is part African American, Korean, and Caucasian) and experiences racially-motivated criticism in one episode when a teacher tells her that her big curly hair is a 'distraction' to a student who sit behind her (S1E5, "It's Not About You").[87]

The issues around intersectional identity and contested representations of race and ethnicity are evident throughout *Andi Mack's* production and reception. Originally, the titular character was conceived to be a white Jewish girl, but the audition and casting of Peyton Elizabeth Lee as the series protagonist led the producers to rewrite the background of the character.[88] Playing the main character, Lee states how the show 'normalizes diversity' regarding Asian American identity (CAAM, 2018). In interviews with The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), the three actresses who play the three generations of the Mack family all state a similar message, referring to the inspiration and positivity they find in the growing representation of Asian-Americans in popular media.[89] At the same time, the positive

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[85] *Andi Mack* follows the trajectory set earlier by earlier sitcoms produced by MTM and Norman Lear that embraced such realistic storylines and narratives of inclusion (Kenton 2016, Jones 2016).

[86] In addition to creating Lizzie McGuire and writing/producing the teleplay for the proposed *Clarissa* sequel (1995) that was never picked up, Terri Minsky has had a long career in television as a writer/producer known for crafting female-driven series. She has been a writer/executive producer for series *Cashmere Mafia* (2008), and *The Carrie Diaries* (2013-14). She has also written scripts for the series *Sex and the City* (S1E10, "The Baby Shower"). Andi Mack's premise around her birth and parentage was also similarly explored by Minsky in a drama series *Finding Carter* (2014-2015) in which a teen finds out she was abducted as a toddler and now returns to her biological family.

[87] That episode recalls connections between hair and identity experienced by Black Americans within conversations of power, bodies, and disciplines present in contemporary American culture, a potent history that is the subject of Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair* (2009).

[88] Kristen Warner writes about colorblind casting in *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (2018).

[89] Such portrayals could be found in the network sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC, 2015-20), which became only the second network sitcom to center around an Asian American family since Margaret Cho's *All-*

affirmations and normalization of mixed-race and multicultural identity obscure the very realities that mixed-race individuals still experience racism, as Andi and Buffy experience (Orphanides 2017).

Issues around gender and sexuality are also addressed through the main character Cyrus when he acknowledges he is gay in the second season. In the first season, he becomes worried by his gender performance when he receives a text message from Jonah that reads 'U R girlie' only to be later told that Jonah's message of 'U R gnarly' was autocorrected. His coming-out narrative becomes a season-long story arc throughout season two, and he first reveals his identity to Buffy in the season two premiere by saying he too has a crush on Jonah. Later, he tells this fact to Andi during his Bar Mitzvah. In the third season, he says "I'm gay" for the first time, the first for a tweencom (Kiley 2019).[90] These character developments lead Cyrus on his own path of identity formation, much like Andi, showing how multiple characters in a tweencom can have coming-of-age narratives rather than remain static characters. The coming-out narrative of Cyrus became an important television milestone. *Andi Mack* marks the first time that a Disney Channel lead character came out as gay, and this historic first generated headlines around the representation of gay youth in tween television. The popular media overwhelmingly treated the storyline positively by describing Cyrus' narrative as "thoughtful and realistic" (Kiley 2019) and "ground-breaking" (Stern 2019). On the other hand, conservative critics maintained that the series promoted an 'LGBT agenda' and were troubled by its 'adult content' (Ong 2017).

Andi Mack, however, generated much more praise as a 'quality television' series.[91] With its realistic storylines that embraced identity politics and aesthetics that departed from

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American Girl (ABC, 1994-95). At the same time, the blockbuster film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) became the first major Hollywood studio film to feature a majority Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), a film that starred Lauren Tom, who plays Andi's grandmother.

[90] The coming-out storyline experience by Cyrus coincided with the first major Hollywood film to focus on a gay teenage romance, *Love Simon* (2018).

[91] Quality television is defined by Robert Thompson in *Television's Second Golden Age* (1997) as television that 'stands out' from regular television. Thompson establishes that quality television has the following characteristics: It breaks established rules of television and stands out from what came before, it is produced by people with backgrounds in the industry, and it attracts a certain 'quality' demographic as an audience. Other texts that have defined quality television include Mark Jancovich and James Lyons' *Quality Popular Telvision: Cult TV, The Industry, and Fans* (2003) and Janet McCabe and Kim Akass' *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (2007). In *Legimating Television* (2011), Michael Newman and Elena Levine describe how quality television embraces serialized storylines, ensemble casts, and a visiual aesthetic that makes use of location shooting.

traditional tweencoms, such as its serialization and absence of a laugh track, *Andi Mack* was frequently noted as an atypical tween sitcom. *The New York Times* listed it as #10 in a top ten list of the best shows that ended in 2019, describing the series as a 'sweetheart show' (Poniewozik, Hale & Lyons, 2019). The press attention, controversy, and positive attention that *Andi Mack* received allowed the series to become part of television's 'cultural forum,' a concept that Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch proposed for conceiving how popular television can become part of a public forum, or public sphere (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983), by generating conversation and debate. As I have emphasized*, Andi Mack*'s embrace of inclusivity and identity politics at the same time also allows the series to engage in identity capitalism.

6.3.3 T(w)een Television: Tweens, Teens, and TV Genres

While I previously traced the tweencom's origins to the traditional family sitcom in previous chapters, I argue here that *Andi Mack*'s embrace of melodrama and social realism suggests that its main source of influence lay within teen drama.[92] With the rise of teen dramas on the WB and CW in the 1990s and 2000s, in shows such as *Dawson's Creek* (WB, 1998-2003) to *Gilmore Girls* (CW, 2000-07), the teen drama became a familiar television genre on American television.[93] In *The Television Genre Book* (Creeber 2015), television scholar Rachel Moseley discusses how the televisual devices employed by this genre included 'seriality,' 'multiple storylines,' 'parallel plotting,' and 'cliff-hangers.' Such televisual elements 'enable the genre's exploration of adolescent identity processes and relationships' as a strategy for audience engagement and intimacy with the characters (pg. 39). These elements can be found throughout *Andi Mack*, distinguishing the series from other tweencoms. However, the series is still identified as tween television rather than teen television primarily due to its broadcast on Disney Channel, which ensures optimistic resolutions and conservative moral frames. As Andrea Baker (2020) attests, the reunification of Andi's parents and their

[92] The origins of teen drama on television have been traced to teen films from the 1950s to the 1980s in Roz Kaveney's *Teen Dream* (2006) and Timothy Shary's *Generation Multiplex* (2014). In *Teen Dreams,* Kaveney identifies and analyzes the characteristics found in the teen film genre, including its use of suburban settings, the status of lead characters as outsiders or underdogs, sexual chemistry or other intimate bonding between characters, and a focus on teen problems and their personal lives.

[93] Another notable genre-blending series centering around young people and intersectional identities that preceded *Andi Mack* was the teen comedy-drama-musical *Glee* (Fox, 2009-2015).

eventual marriage helps restore the 'traditional social order' of the nuclear family, a topic I will return to a later section (pg. 233).

The narrative storylines of Andi and Andi's friends offer a Disney version of teen television, as the series attempts "to stay relevant to the contemporary tween audience" (Baker 2020, pg. 229). Conventions within teen drama highlight how that genre possessing its own generic formulas around character and narrative. In *Teen Television* (2008), Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Stein detail how teen dramas commonly deal with family problems, issues with identity, romances and relationships, and disruptions to life such as divorce or financial problems. The series often revolve around more serious and personal issues than are found in episodic tweencoms. In *Andi Mack*, its main characters face dilemmas that are more typical of teen dramas. Andi becomes entangled in romantic triangles. In the first season, she develops a crush on Jonah even though he already has a girlfriend, Amber. In the second season, she begins a relationship with Jonah only to find she also likes Walker, a young painter. Meanwhile, Jonah suffers from anxiety disorder and takes music lessons as a coping mechanism. Andi's mother, Bex, and father, Bowie, reunite and engage in an off-again-on-again romance until they marry in the third season. Thus, despite the conservative backlash of *Andi*, the Disney tweencom essentially engages in conservative ideology by reuniting the nuclear family. These relationships and personal dramas engage in identity formation as the characters grow, mature, and develop different facets of their identity. This becomes a key difference between the teen series – and by extension, *Andi Mack* – and the traditional tweencoms. These drama series focus on developing the character's inner life while the tweencoms, especially famecoms, engage in public performance.

As a half-hour program on Disney Channel, *Andi Mack* does not easily fit into a ready-made television genre label. In American television, the tween drama as a genre does not have the history that the teen drama does. As I have emphasized, the serialized plots and dramatic subject matter allow *Andi Mack* greater character depth and growth than any other tween series. Within the history of Disney and Nickelodeon programming, one of the only few series that incorporate an attempt at serialization was the program *Fifteen* (Nick, 1991-93), which aimed at being a teen/tween soap opera and was produced in Canada (and starred a young Ryan Reynolds). In American television, the tween drama has been an anomaly that primarily can be found in television imports, such as the Canadian franchise *Degrassi*, which spanned across five different series as well as television specials and made-for-TV films. The long-running *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (CTV, 2001-15) aired on TeenNick and was notable

for often tackling challenging subject matter such as sex, teen pregnancy, bullying, violence, sexuality, drug use, etc., that were not typically seen in American programs targeting younger audiences. Scholarship on Canadian networks like CTV and British networks like CBBC from Sharon Marie Ross (2008) and Sarah Godfrey (2018) emphasize that the public television model from the two countries offers a supporting environment for producing challenging and realistic programming and do not find many (or any) parallels to these programs in America's corporate television model. *Andi Mack*, therefore, represents something entirely new for the Disney Channel, a series that possesses a stronger link to teen dramas than to previous tweencoms. I refer to it as 'tween drama,' a subgenre that has been entirely underdeveloped in programming history of the two tween networks.

The aesthetics of *Andi Mack* also help distinguish it from the typical tweencom and help it look more like a 'comedy drama,' a term used by Brett Mills (2009) to describe how certain sitcoms incorporate both elements in a single series, such as Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019-). Aspects of realism or melodrama distinguish these series from more traditional sitcoms. With a serialized storyline and no laugh track, each episode begins with a montage of clips from the previous week and closes with a preview of the next episode, as the episodes indeed often end with cliff-hangers for viewers to anticipate the next episode. For *Andi Mack*, visual aspects quickly distinguish it from other tweencoms. Filmed on location in Salt Lake City, Utah, it foregoes the studio settings of the Los Angeles-based productions and the self-referentiality of the entertainment industry that proliferated throughout the famecoms. The series also often utilizes medium close-ups and reaction shots, visual techniques associated with soap operas to emphasize emotions and intimacy – and performance (Butler 2010, pg. 43-44). For example, intimacy, sympathy, and identification are established through the frequent use of dramatic close-ups in *Andi Mack*, including the scene where Cyrus announces he is gay to Buffy [See Figure 48 below]. The close-ups emphasize a natural acting style, a contrast to the broad comic performances from other tweencoms, like *Kenan & Kel*.

Figure 48 - The use of close-ups in Andi Mack

A final key dimension of the teen dramas needs to be acknowledged. In the teen series that proliferated on American television between the 1990s and 2010s, class and socioeconomic status, and class difference, played an important role in the narratives. Scholarship on teen television (Ross & Stein 2008, Davis & Dickinson, 2004) address how class status plays a role in the characters' lives within the genre. In *Beverly Hills*, *90210* (Fox, 1990-2000)*, 90210* (CW, 2008-13), *The OC* (Fox, 2003-07), *Gilmore Girls* (WB, 2000-07), and *Gossip Girl* (CW, 2007-12), the main characters are often defined by their class background. These dramatic series also mixed characters of different classes. Daniela Mastrocola (2017) examines how the first episode of *Gilmore Girls* blends class-based conflict with generational tension. As I have repeatedly emphasized in the previous chapters, class is either ignored or taken-for-granted in the lives of tweencom characters. On the other hand, *Andi Mack* does attempt to show socioeconomic status and difference. Here, I suggest that the term 'class-crossing' can be useful in understanding how the series engages in class identity.

6.3.4 Class-Crossing and Family Values in *Andi Mack*

I previously addressed how the aspirational tweencoms utilized class-passing and class-blindness by eliding or ignoring any acknowledgment of class, but *Andi Mack* provides a different case study altogether. Here, the series begins with Andi living in a comfortable middle-class home with her grandparents. By the end of the first season, though, she moves in with Bex and they share a one-bedroom apartment, reflecting a status of downward mobility. In one episode (S1E10, "Home Away from Home"), they adjust to these new living quarters, including the fact that Bex does not properly know how to wash clothes and that they blow an electric fuse each time they plug in too many devices in the kitchen. Between Andi's mother and grandmother, they discuss whether Andi should move back in with her grandparents, and Bex allows her to move back into their comfortable home. Later that same evening, however, Andi's grandmother returns her back to Bex and concedes that Andi's new home is now with her mother. This provides an example of what I term 'class-crossing.'

In previous literature, the concept of 'crossing' has been used across intersectional identity, a term associated more often with race rather than class (Salesa 2011, Provine 1973). Within these historical conceptions, racial 'crossing' has sometimes been used interchangeably with 'passing' or to describe the practice of interracial marriage. For class, 'crossing' has been used as a way of describing a movement, usually upward, from one class into another (Maguire 2005). Here, a working-class individual with the right education and

employment may be able to cross into the middle class. In this way, crossing suggests a movement across a particular fixed border. I employ a different understanding of class-crossing, where it's not simply described as a one-way crossing but is instead a movement back and forth. The concept of class-crossing then refers to how one individual may move and mix in different socioeconomic circles. In doing so, of course, this acknowledges that there are different classes to begin with. Teen dramas, such as *Gossip Girl* and *Gilmore Girls*, have employed this strategy in having characters move between the rungs of middle class and great wealth. In the last chapter, I explored how tweencoms like *The Suite Life* likewise engaged in class-crossing by allowing individuals upward social mobility, or entry into the wealthy class. Andi Mack, though, presents class-crossing with downward social mobility.

For *Andi Mack*, the socioeconomic realities of working-class/lower-middle class are fully realized in a way that previous tweencoms have not fully represented. In the second season, the character Amber, Jonah's ex-girlfriend, finds work as a waitress after her father loses his job. Compared to the characters of *Kenan & Kel* and *Drake & Josh* who work part-time for fun, Amber's circumstances are quite different: she seeks employment due to financial necessity. In the third season, Jonah also experiences financial hardship when his father loses money on a bad investment, and his family moves in with relatives. Like Andi, these characters experience downward socioeconomic status, reflecting economic realities in a world that had recently experienced the Great Recession. When Andi moves out of her grandparents' house to live with Bex in an apartment that they can afford, they have to adjust to the realities of their living situation.

The class-crossing of Andi and Bex, though, still allows the characters to inhabit and benefit from the privileges of middle-classness. Andi's crafting shack remains in her grandparents' backyard, and she can visit it anytime to do her crafting. In the second season, Celia decides to help her daughter financially by purchasing a store for Bex to turn into a salon/spa after she graduates from a professional makeup artist school. This financial support system, therefore, allows Andi and Bex to live on their own, to be 'independent,' while at the same time having a financial backup. Over the course of the second season, Bex becomes yet another one of the small-business owners who are prevalent as tweencom parents. In fact, while the series presents Andi and Bex crossing class, it still offers moments of class-blindness by obscuring class realities. Here, class-crossing blurs with class-blindness. While Celia and Ham Mack are presented as comfortably middle-class and middle-aged, they seem to be able to afford a lifestyle that is well above middle-class. Their occupations are never (or

rarely) mentioned. Instead, they are portrayed and identified by what they enjoy doing: Ham cooks and takes yoga classes; Celia exercises, gardens, and takes dance classes. It's possible that they may have both taken early retirement or they just have independent and well-paying jobs, but they have flexibility from such work or from financial concerns, which fits my earlier term of 'class-blindness' that I discussed in the previous chapter. The two characters possess the luxury of disposable income. At the end of the second season, Ham decides he wants to travel more and announces to his family that he intends to take a year-long sojourn to visit India and Tibet, which seems to be inspired by reading Elizabeth Gilbert's best-selling *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007). At the same time, Celia invests in her daughter's business, so they are both can make tsignificant financial decisions without experiencing any financial hardship.

The fact that Bex's parents helped raise Andi and now help support Bex's business further illustrates 'neoliberal family values,' a term that refers to the governing logic where "the private family (rather than the state) should serve as the primary source of economic security" (Cooper 2017, pg. 69). In *Family Values: Between Liberalism and Social Conservatism* (2017), sociologist Melinda Cooper outlines how neoliberalism evolved in American culture as social conservatives gained political power through the ascendancy of the religious right in the 1980s. In this neoliberal perspective, where the family is a substitute for public welfare, Cooper conceptualizes how neoliberalism affects familial ties through economic discipline and privileges 'traditional households' through discourse on family values and responsibility. The main claim here is that "the effective agent of neoliberalism was never the disembodied individual, but instead the reproductive family unit" (Eich 2019, pg. 243). In tracing welfare reform, rising student debt, the increase in the number of young adults still with their parents/relatives, and growing class inequality, Cooper considers how neoliberal capitalism affected families "in one overarching narrative: the installation of the nuclear family, and not the state, as the privileged site of debt, wealth transfer, and care" (Chappel 2017, pg. 2). In this system, a family's shared expenses on education, for example, are understood as a financial investment.

In *Andi Mack*, going into business together allows Bex and Celia to grow their relationship and allows Bex to transform into a responsible economic agent. In the first season, Bex gets a job as a cosmetologist in a store, The Fringe, where the manager happens to be a young woman that she used to babysit. In the second season, she buys the store, renaming it Cloud Ten, thanks to Celia's help. Andi's father, Bowie, also purchases a small business, a vintage record store, when he decides to give up a career as a touring musician to be closer to

Bex and Andi [See Figure 49 below]. As I have referenced in the previous case study on *Game Shakers*, American culture and political rhetoric often idealizes the small-business owner class.[94] When Andi's parents join this small business class, the family is restored by such demonstrations of commitment and responsibility – which also restores their 'worth as a parent' (Baker 2020, pg. 236). According to Andrea Baker (2020), Bex initially proves herself irresponsible as a teen mother and loses Andi by leaving her. After she returns and reclaims Andi, though, she is redeemed as a parent, and Andi calls her 'mom' for the first time. This moment occur after Bex moves into a new apartment with Andi, assuming responsibility as her guardian. By reuniting with Andi's father, pursuing an educational certificate, and starting a business, Bex continues to prove herself to be a responsible parent. According to Baker, "Disney frames the concept of mother around themes of responsibility, restraint, and discipline. It is in these interactions that Disney underscores the traditional behavior associated with being a mother" (pg. 231). Still, the fact that Bex has the support of her parents to raise Andi and financially support her business allows her a safety net.

The obscuring of class has become a predominant theme in my analysis of tweencoms. While *Andi Mack* goes further than many other tweencoms from Disney and Nickelodeon to address and represent an understanding of socioeconomic reality, it still doesn't maintain this narrative of economic reality very consistently and instead embraces both capitalistic and neoliberal construction. As I have argued throughout my thesis, the narratives of class-blindness and even class-crossing function on both dramaturgical and ideological levels by continuing to uphold aspirational dreams and privileging access to luxury, allowing class fantasy to premise the programming of both Disney and Nickelodeon around class fantasy.

Figure 49: Andi's parents both become small business owners.

[94] In the 2012 presidential election, Mitt Romney took a question during one town-hall from a young person about the problems with student debt and under-employment. Romney's response underscored 'neoliberal family values' when he stated that if a person can't find employment, young people should just start their own business by borrowing the money from their parents (Kessler 2012).

6.4 Class Themes in the Transitional Era Tweencoms

While this chapter has explored how the elements of class fantasy and social realism have coexisted in the tweencom genre in the past decade, I consider that both themes embrace identity formation through neoliberalism. In both *Game Shakers* and *Andi Mack*, the goal of entrepreneurship reifies the American Dream, although Bex's dream of running a salon reflects a far more realistic vision than creating an overnight gaming empire in *Game Shakers*. Both series, through entrepreneurship and DIY identity formation, demonstrate the 'producer citizenship' in which the self is constructed through self-determination, success, and empowerment. Scholars have pointed out that these goals, or 'calls to agency,' serve as primary markers of contemporary girlhood in the tweencom genre (Jackson & Lyons 2013, Godfrey 2018, Kennedy 2014). As I have argued throughout this thesis, narrative incentives for tween protagonists to achieve their 'best selves' reflect not only gender goals but also reinforce the ideology of class mobility. The tween girls of *Game Shakers* are allowed to succeed where the boys of *Kenan & Kel* failed – to get rich quick.

7. Conclusion

In this thesis, I reviewed three decades of tweencoms to look at the programming patterns and signature series from Disney Channel and Nickelodeon. I gave extensive analysis to *Clarissa Explains It All*, *Kenan & Kel*, *Shake It Up*, *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, *Game Shakers*, and *Andi Mack* as selected case studies. I considered how these series shaped the identities of these two networks around class through ideological frames around fame, fortune, and consumption. I used signature or representative series from different eras of tweencom programming to show the prevalence of class ideology.

In chapters 2 and 3, I examined the television history and the industrial context of Disney and Nickelodeon to argue that these tweencoms need to be studied further, especially in the field of sitcom studies. My central thesis rests on the claim that Disney and Nickelodeon branded the tween sitcom genre around class fantasy. As a division of one of the most successfully branded companies in the world, Disney Channel arguably inherited a brand understood as family-friendly. On the other hand, Nickelodeon's branding around empowered youth became recognized after its successful marketing and development of original series, as Heather Hendershot (2004) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) have examined. In the 1990s, Nickelodeon's marketing strategies included promos that ran messages around the theme "Us vs. Them" where kids were pitted against grown-ups (Klickstein 2013). Soon, the network developed other promotional strategies where Nick shifted the message to "Nickelodeon puts kids first" where girl power was exemplified and promoted in *Clarissa Explains it All* (pg. 67). However, I maintained that not all kids were necessarily interpellated in these promotions and programs as these two tween channels consistently offered middle and upper-class hegemonic representations. In chapters 4 through 6, I look more closely at this class ideology within a selection of class cases that I believe helped to define each network's programming.

In my thesis, I identified three eras of tweencom programming – the Golden Age of Nickelodeon of the 1990s, the Disney Channel Decade of the 2000s, and the Transitional Era of the 2010s – but I maintain that common threads run throughout these eras include an emphasis on (entrepreneurial) class fantasy and (self-promoting) neoliberal identity formation. In my introductory chapter, I explained how I twine these two threads together under the term 'producer citizenship,' which updates the original model of 'consumer citizenship' that Sarah Banet-Weiser uses in her study of Nickelodeon, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer*

Citizenship (2007). The fact that Nickelodeon may have originally intended to produce sitcoms where kids are meant to have fun and 'just be kids' can be exemplified in the summer camp series *Salute Your Shorts!* (1991-1993), in which the young protagonists enjoy playing pranks or getting into food fights. However, I trace how the tween networks quickly jettisoned such narratives around kids having fun just to instead produce more and more narratives around kids wanting to become adults. From *Kenan & Kel* to *Game Shakers*, tween protagonists labor under the premise that work is fun. In the famecom subgenre, including *Hannah Montana* or *Shake It Up,* tween protagonists likewise center their identities around aspirational labor in the creative industries. *Bizaardvark* (Disney, 2016-19) combined these two narratives as a series about two tweens who create music videos in order to become successful Internet celebrities who are represented by a twelve-year-old agent.

In Chapters 4 through 6, I detailed patterns of tweencom content from the 1990s to the 2010s. The Nickelodeon series of the 1990s, *Clarissa* and *Kenan & Kel*, helped formulate the tweencom genre. While *Clarissa* embraced identity formation through conspicuous consumption*, Kenan & Kel* fantasized about wealth and fame. Next, I identified two class-related patterns that dominated tweencom programming from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. Famecoms, such as *Hannah Montana* and *Shake it Up*, deal with protagonists who are either established celebrities or wannabe celebrities. Vicarious-living series, such as *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* and *Jessie,* dealt with protagonists who experience or inhabit a world of wealth and privilege. Finally, I looked at how the tweencom *Game Shakers* continued the pattern of embracing an entrepreneurial class fantasy while *Andi Mack* grounded its characters and narratives in social relevancy, serving as a rare example of a tweencom attempting to represent socioeconomic diversity.

As I have examined these series, I have considered how they reflect patterns of tweencom programming over the last few decades. In my categorizations of the tweencoms in each era, I have shown how despite an explosion of original content sitcom development from the two networks, they both heavily recycled narratives and premises, which exemplified Todd Gitlin's earlier critique of television as synthetic or recombinant (Gitlin 1983). As I suggested, this could be explained by the fact that after the mid-2000s, a single production company created most of the content for each channel: It's a Laugh Productions produced series for Disney and Schneider's Bakery produced series for Nickelodeon. These tweencoms repeated narratives of class aspirations, as tween protagonists were defined by their goal to chase fame

and fortune (*Kenan & Kel, Shake It Up*) – or enjoy the experience of having it already (*The Suite Life, Game Shakers*).

As a study of the history of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, this thesis looks at the two cable networks at a time when business practices, new platforms, and emerging and evolving technologies are impacting all facets of television. As the two networks focus more on streaming, questions remain around what Nickelodeon and Disney Channel will look like in the near future, or what their online content will also look like. Will the thematic patterns and class fantasies continue to abound? I have suggested how the digital era has occurred at the same time that I mark the tweencoms in a state of decline. Whether the two networks or their content will undergo rebranding through streaming platforms remains to be seen. In the second half of the 2010s, both Disney and Nickelodeon have tried multiple strategies to stem audience migration with convergent participatory practices that Nickelodeon successfully utilized with *iCarly*. For example, *Coop and Cami Ask the World* (Disney 2018-) presents siblings who run an online channel 'Would You Wrather?' with each episode asking fans in their narrative world to make decisions for them. *Just Roll With It* (Disney 2019-) takes audience participation one step further. Filmed before a studio audience, the show blends improv with a scripted family sitcom, stopping the narrative at certain points to let the studio audience vote on what will happen next. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the necessity to film remotely led Nickelodeon to debut the game show *Unfiltered* (2020-) where audiences guess the celebrity behind an animated filter and voice changer, and the reality series *Group Chat with Annie and Jayden* (2020-) centers around blog chats. While this programming shift certainly filled a need at a particular moment, it remains to be seen what programming patterns will emerge on these networks in the coming years. The possibility that the two networks may turn increasingly to game shows and 'unscripted' reality programs to replace sitcoms across their schedules has a parallel in television history, as American broadcasters did the same thing across primetime in the early 2000s after the success of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (ABC/syndicated, 1999-) and *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-).

I have no doubt that critical media industry studies will analyse the strategies and content development that Nickelodeon and Disney Channel embrace over the next few years in future scholarship. For example, little scholarship can be found on Disney's sister network, Disney XD, which launched in 2009 and targets an assumed young male audience, so comparative studies between Disney Channel and Disney XD programs could look at the different patterns of identity across the two channels. As these two networks increase online

content, these series will no doubt invite critical scholarly attention around production, distribution, and reception. While I have emphasized that my analysis extends only to the live-action series that aired on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, I am sure that similar analysis could extend to other networks as comparative studies. In addition, I have previously acknowledged that my inquiry does not extend to the series that I categorize as magicoms or as reboots/sequels, so future scholarship may find that these genres warrant further analysis. Future studies will need to look at the series on the digital platforms. For example, Disney recently produced a genre-blending series *WandaVision* (Disney+ 2021) and Nickelodeon recently rebooted *iCarl*y (Paramount+ 2021). One may ask to what extend the streaming platforms create different experiences for viewers and embrace different narrative patterns. For *iCarly*'s reboot, much of its premise seems to tread familiar ground as the main character moves back into the apartment/loft building where she grew up in the original series. Her slacker brother, and former guardian, now lives as a wealthy artist. While *Andi Mack* may be one tween series that shows how tweencoms may 'grow up' by embracing reality over fantasy, it remains to be seen whether the series will be a forerunner or an anomaly in embracing social realism and relevancy narratives, including an acknowledgment of economic realities, in tween television.

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