

The Social Media Feeds of *Loose Women*: Taking the Temperature of Popular Feminism

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ITV's *Loose Women* is a live British panel discussion show presented by and for women that attracts daily audiences of up to one million and many more through social media (Degun 2020).¹ The show recorded an audience of 1.7 million on 19 February 2021 and greater audience share as a result of the pandemic (Thinkbox 2021). As the only all-female daytime programme on UK mainstream television, it claims to offer “real, authentic and empowered women having an upfront and candid discussion” (ITV 2017) but given its preoccupation with showbiz values and submission to commercial logic can it realistically offer a subversive and grounded form of feminism? As a manifestation of what Banet-Weiser has termed “popular feminism”, *Loose Women* seeks to raise its visibility through a cloud of commercialized activity on social media (Banet-Weiser 2018).

This chapter draws on a thematic analysis of two years-worth of programming between 24 May 2017 and 21 November 2019. The dataset consists of two editions a week to May 2018, with additional sampling in quarterly one-month batches to November 2019. All content, including advertising breaks, was noted and analysed, together with a qualitative case analysis of particular social media content on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook relating to three ‘stunts’: a rendition of cosmetic surgery as entertainment (10 July 2018); a spectacular row between a panellist and a guest (29 August 2018); and a guest appearance by the *Baywatch* actress, Pamela Anderson, 53, in bed with her fifth husband (19 February 2021).

The hypothesis behind the research is that *Loose Women* provides an authentic and diverse representation of the dilemmas facing women while also submitting to a relentless and increasingly mediatized commercial logic. In this sense, it can be considered to be a feminist project. Yet as a multi-media brand it “enables some women to have spectacular visibility, while others are obscured and eclipsed” by providing points of discrimination between *we*, the panel, and *they*, the audience (Banet-Weiser 2018, 31). Among the themes explored by the wider study of which this chapter is a part, are ageing, ‘ordinary’ celebrity, showbiz culture, body image and the beauty myth, and the creeping commercialization of screen content. Particular focus is directed at ‘ageing anxiety,’ cosmetic surgery and the digital manipulation of image to examine the extent to which such representation normalizes ‘regulatory regimes’ of the body. This chapter will consider whether *Loose Women* in its

online and broadcast forms offers an empowering and holistic vision of the female life-course that is often absent from mainstream media. How do the opinions of viewers as expressed online differ from some of the assumptions that appear to guide the show's editorial policy? How does the show keep itself true to its founding values while also embracing the chase for audiences?

The Programme

The one-hour format consists of four female panellists with professional backgrounds in entertainment and journalism who discuss topical issues, interview celebrities and others in the news, and mount campaigns such as *Body Stories*, the campaign to inspire women to embrace disability and signs of ageing and childbearing. *Loose Women* has been on air since 6 September 1999 and still features four panellists from its earliest broadcasts. In recent years the show has made a determined effort to promote diversity by including panellists and guests from a range of social, regional, and cultural backgrounds. On 22 October 2020 it became the UK's first daytime television show to feature an all-black panel. This followed the finding that on one day in 2019 just one non-white anchor had appeared on the channel. In response, ITV undertook to increase minority representation within a year (Tweedy 2021). Black panellists numbered five out of seventeen by February 2021. In contrast to claims of a "stunning" lack of voice and representation of women over 60 within the "media buzz" of today's media environment (Edstrom 2018, 89; 77), the show is happy to feature older women in prominent roles. The average age of the regular panel chairs is 50. Two regular panellists, Janet Street-Porter and Gloria Hunniford are 74 and 80 respectively.

ITV Daytime's editor in chief Emma Gormley (a former editor of *Loose Women*) stated in an interview that "our currency is ratings" adding that, as part of a daytime schedule which is committed to being "bold, ballsy and really ambitious", the show needs "eyeballs on screen." Given the demands of a daily live show and its inclusive and feminist remit she acknowledges that *Loose Women* is "a really, really tough show" to make (Gormley 2018). As the fourth magazine element in ITV's live weekday schedule, *Loose Women* is expected to take "the baton" from *Good Morning Britain* (6–9 am), *Lorraine* (9–10 am), and *This Morning* (10 am–12.30 pm), all factual entertainment shows that promise an "abundance of personalities, surprises, warmth and humour" (Gormley 2018). To distinguish its offering from its more conventional rival BBC1, ITV Daytime sometimes sails close to the wind with provocative content. Scandals took the controversial tabloid chat show *Jeremy Kyle* off air in

2019 and led to the departure of the opinionated *Good Morning Britain* co-host Piers Morgan in 2021 following a slew of negative comments about Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex.

The editorial content of *Loose Women* is constrained by a commercialized infrastructure that consists of four ten-minute segments separated by three advertising breaks totalling seventeen minutes. Six minutes out of the editorial time is devoted to an integrated and branded competition. At least a quarter of the show's editorial content is overtly promotional, involving previews of television or live shows, or interviews with celebrities who are publicizing predominantly entertainment outputs, with a strong bias in favour of ITV. *Loose Women* is also required to maintain and grow its inherited audience. It seeks to do this with regular 'stunts' that are designed to attract mainstream and social media attention – sometimes with controversial and damaging outcomes, as this chapter will show. The programme maintains a regular presence on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, regularly conducting online polls and appealing to viewers to post their opinions.

The Ambivalence of Popular Feminism

The term 'post-feminism' offers a challenge to feminism by identifying a particular form of commercialized representation of largely young, thin, and white women as achieving empowerment through body-discipline, self-objectification and sexual assertiveness (Gill 2007). However, it has been suggested that ageism is entrenched not only in advertising but in feminist theory itself, given the dearth of attention to ageing in feminist theory (Woodward 1999). Popular feminism is defined by Banet-Weiser as a form of representation that "manifests in discourses and practices that are circulated in commercial media" so is required to be visible and accessible as part of the wider attention economy. Feminism is accommodated, as are men, only insofar as it can support an economy of visibility "where profit is contingent on number of views" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 1; 27). At the cheaper, mass produced end of popular entertainment such as daytime television, celebrity is likely to be of the ordinary variety, and the closer identification between audience and presenter has both negative and affirmative features (Jermyn 2012).

Several scholars have identified a recent rise in media visibility of the capable and well-groomed older woman who bypasses ageing anxiety by practicing a form of body discipline that extends the 'beauty myth' into old age (Slevec and Tiggemann 2010; Dolan 2014; Carter, Steiner, and McLaughlin 2014). The body of the older woman is widely vilified in popular culture (Fairclough 2012) but the extension of the beauty myth means that such distaste can be hidden or suppressed. Social pressures to conform are disguised through the

ideology of personal choice and a tolerant, individualistic orientation towards surgery and other invasive procedures. Lumby claims that the women's movement exists both within, and in opposition to, popular media, even as it is contested (2007). Ambitious women in television, including the panellists on *Loose Women*, demonstrate their submission to the concealment of ageing through more effective lighting, make-up, hair, dental and cosmetic interventions. The panellists both embrace and criticize their own submission by admitting on air to cosmetic procedures and alluding to dentistry, hair extensions and heavy make-up, thereby registering their own and the audience's ambivalence. However, they remain discreet with respect to the obvious cosmetic interventions of many of their guests, as I shall discuss in the third case study.

Meanwhile, although female audiences are not wholly passive, as participants via social media their roles are extremely circumscribed (Gill 2014; Williamson 2016). If daytime programming is seen as the lowest form of television, their audiences are even more despised. Livingstone has cautioned: "one is most unlikely to learn anything from peoples' everyday practices if one approaches them with the view that they are unworthy of serious study because they are superficial and inauthentic substitutes for a denied alternative existence" (2019, 177). Audiences are not monolithic and with long-running media brands like *Loose Women*, there are likely to be segments of the audience that expect different types of content, namely, those whose attention is fleeting, and those who are older and more loyal (Hill, A 2017). This chapter argues that, as scholars, we should take popular commercialized television and its digital offshoots seriously and try to give credit where it is due, especially when progressive or unorthodox programming takes place in a commercialized and mediatized climate.

Loose Women: A Manifestation of Popular Feminism?

All the *Loose Women* panellists can be defined as 'self-made,' often from humble backgrounds, who draw on their experiences of working life, mainly as actresses, singers, journalists, television presenters and media executives. Many have taken part in one or more of the reality TV shows that became prominent in the early 2000s, thereby achieving greater popular visibility for themselves and the show. The three senior journalists Jane Moore, Kaye Adams, and Street-Porter (a former newspaper editor and senior TV executive) personify professionalism, especially in relation to the law, media, and politics. This includes anecdotal insider knowledge, as when Moore recalled her days as *The Sun*'s Royal Correspondent reporting on the then Prince and Princess of Wales in the early days of their marriage. She

commented that, “he looked like she irritated him; she looked like a lost soul” (Loose Women 2017). The four main anchors, Ruth Langsford, Christine Lampard, Nadia Sawalha and Charlene White, represent television professionalism and all have decades of experience in handling live broadcasts and moderating debate and discussion. This indicates the potential for audiences to develop asymmetric, para-social relationships with members of the panel, for example by commenting in personal terms via social media. Through their ordinary backgrounds, panellists act as a bridge from ordinary obscurity to celebrity, having become well-known through media visibility, and able to move in elite showbusiness and media circles as a result.

This is a neo-liberal, meritocratic discourse but it is also a recognition that ordinary celebrity is a fact of popular culture, that those who experience it are humans too, and that considerable effort and persistence are required to develop and sustain a career through reality TV. There are moments where the panellists expose the artifice of television image-making. In the 11 December 2018 edition, while debating the question – would you tell a friend if they need a facelift? – panellist Andrea McLean, who has been open about cosmetic procedures, was gently mocked by the panel for having used Botox to excess (Mozafari 2018). She has also admitted to wearing hair extensions. Through disclosure of vulnerabilities and showbusiness gossip they act as intermediaries from a more glamorous world that is enticing for the viewers but can also breed resentment and envy that occasionally bursts through, as I shall discuss below. The three case studies explored here exemplify moments when the need to grow audiences came into conflict with the stated ethos of the show.

Findings: Populism versus feminism?

The show’s most viewed YouTube videos reveal a relentlessly tabloid agenda that differs from its broadcast content, with a bias towards spectacle, sensation, and celebrity coverage, as shown in Table X.1. Note that comments are turned off on all YouTube clips uploaded by the programme.

Table X.1: Most Popular YouTube Videos (views recorded April 2019)

Rank	Title	Views
1	Loose Women compare nipples	5.9m

2	Katie Price's son talks about internet trolls	3.6m
3	Katie Price's son asks why she divorced his father	2.2m
4	Zara Holland and Miss Great Britain replacement clash	2m
5	Simon Cowell upstaged by son	1.9m
6	Whoopi Goldberg	1.8m
7	Priscilla Presley	1.4m
8	Megan Barton Hanson ('Love Island')	1.2m

There appears to be a discrepancy between which videos are viewed on YouTube and the negativity about such coverage expressed on Twitter. For example, an appearance on 25 January 2019 by the former *Loose Women* panellist and glamour model Katie Price, then 40, where she downplayed stories of bankruptcy, drink driving and separation from her children, had 308,640 views on YouTube. Yet the 280 responses on Twitter were overwhelmingly critical as were the vast majority of the 743 comments on Facebook. A typically forthright and cynical response stated that the panel were “all laughing behind her back. She said she can't wait to get on the panel. Not a chance! They used her to up the viewing figures.”

I now turn to the three case studies to examine the ambivalence of *Loose Women's* approach to popular feminism and femininity. These three examples were all widely watched and yet vilified, not only by self-declared fans of the show but by those who claim as part of their social media comments to loathe or avoid the programme. The case studies examine cosmetic surgery as entertainment, a spectacular row live on air and an awkward encounter with a former starlet in bed with her new husband.

Case 1: Cosmetic Surgery as Entertainment

The topic of cosmetic surgery was covered in roughly 10% of programmes sampled. One of the show's long serving panellists, Coleen Nolan, is the youngest of the five singing Nolan sisters, and a year before the airing of the show in question on 10 July 2017, one sister, Linda Nolan, had revealed the results of her facelift live on *Loose Women*. On 22 May 2018, the eldest of the sisters, Maureen Nolan, 63, appeared on the show to discuss her facelift plans (*Loose Women* 2018). *Loose Women's* short film insert showed the surgeon, Peter Cumbo, drawing attention to her cheek, noting “a bit of a slide.” While lifting and caressing her face,

he promised to create “you, 10-15 years ago,” and traced what would become a scar running around the hairline and “all the way round the ears.” Maureen Nolan told the panel that she had always been seen as “the pretty one” so perhaps counted on her looks too much and had begun to feel “that’s all you are.” Coleen Nolan was upset at her sister’s decision, saying “I can’t bear the thought of her being in pain,” but “it’s her life. I just want her to be happy ... but for me, personally, nothing can make you more beautiful than the person you are already.” Describing the procedure as “only mild” and referring to “having work done” as “maintenance,” Maureen Nolan explained that, “if I look in the mirror and I’m depressed I will think about surgery.” Street-Porter, who frequently challenges feminine stereotypes, questioned this mindset, arguing “you can’t use cosmetic surgery to tackle depression.”

On 10 July, to loud clapping from the audience, came the great reveal, in a show hosted by Coleen Nolan (Loose Women 2018a). The panel, including Nolan, agreed that Maureen “look[ed] wonderful.” Maureen claimed, “I didn’t feel a thing,” yet praised her sister and sister-in-law who “bathed my wounds.” Nolan recalled her anger at seeing Maureen “tired and in pain.” The usually vocal Stacey Solomon seemed lost for words, repeating “[y]ou look wonderful,” then adding “you looked beautiful before.” The set-up of the show as a live ‘reveal’ complete with fanfare and managed applause, normalised both the notion of beauty as essential to female identity and cosmetic surgery as a rational response to ageing. On the May 22 show, Nolan had already expressed her unhappiness at her sister submitting to surgery because “nothing can make you more beautiful than the person you are already” yet she performed the role of host at the ‘reveal’ (Loose Women 2018).

Such presentation made it difficult or impossible to openly criticise such cosmetic intervention, especially for older women who want to extend their working lives in the entertainment industries. In this sense, the older woman who wants to age naturally is condemned to a form of “symbolic annihilation” (Edstrom 2018, 79). Coverage of the show in tabloid newspapers and magazines was widespread, deploying headlines like “Maureen Nolan shows off her new £7,500 facelift”, demonstrating the role played by mainstream media as a conduit between the show and the social media response. *Loose Women’s* YouTube video received nearly 28,000 views. At the top of Google search together with the other cosmetic surgery advertisements was an interview with Maureen Nolan on the Harley Street Clinic’s website headlined “My Harley Street Journey” – a post that remains on the site at the time of writing (Nolan 2021).

There were 62 comments on the show’s Facebook feed the same day, largely from women. Fourteen were supportive, saying things like “if a bit of surgery gives you more

confidence, why not?” (Loose Woman 2018b). Most of the others were bored, annoyed at what they saw as the narcissism of the Nolan sisters, or critical. One said, “stay fat, it smooths out the wrinkles” while another accused the Nolans of using *Loose Woman* as a cash cow to pay for their cosmetic surgery. Several commented on the contradictions in the approach. One commented, “one minute promoting body confidence then literally the next advocating positives of facelifts,” while another asked, “isn’t anyone allowed to grow old gracefully without surgery?” Maureen Nolan’s reasoning was seen as flawed. One respondent commented, she “said it was pain free ... what kind of a message does that send out to impressionable young people?” The balance of views shown on social media was not reflected on the show, which presented the decision to have cosmetic surgery equivocally – you have the choice to do it or not. The ensuing press coverage followed the show’s line. Any debate about the terms on which older women are permitted to participate in the entertainment industry, or on television, is stifled.

Case 2: A Spectacular Row

The on-air row between panellist Coleen Nolan and guest Kim Woodburn, a reality TV celebrity who had clashed with Nolan when both participated in *Celebrity Big Brother (CBB)* in 2017, took place on 29 August 2018 (Loose Women 2018c). Woodburn, 76, was a former cleaner who came to fame as one of the hosts of the Channel 4 reality show *How Clean is your House?* (2003–09). She was known for being outspoken yet sensitive to criticism from others and had a well-documented abused childhood. Nolan won *CBB* and in an interview afterwards Woodburn commented that, “[s]he shouldn't have won that show. I'm a bit tired of all these people on *Loose Women* winning.” Later, during a television appearance, she referred to Nolan as “a two-faced battle-axe” (Shakhnazarova 2021). A further ingredient in what became a reputational crisis for Nolan, *Loose Women* and ITV was the presence on the panel of Nolan’s sister Linda. Another panellist that day, the actress Linda Robson, had already shown her dislike of Woodburn when coming to Coleen Nolan’s defence on a television chat show. The row broke with the show’s norms in at least three ways: firstly, by insulting a guest, secondly, by using a misogynistic insult, and thirdly, by initiating a controversy that was so damaging that it required the intervention of the television regulator, Ofcom, and brought about Nolan’s temporary withdrawal from the show and public life. Woodburn broke with convention further by exposing the machinations behind television production, including the terms on which she had been commissioned to appear. Yet despite the toxicity of the row, during the first few hours after the show a video of the clash remained

on *Loose Women*'s YouTube feed. It was quickly taken down and is no longer available. ITV has commented little on the incident, as discussed below, but the decision to maintain the video feed, if only for a few hours, and the way in which the row appeared to have been engineered, suggests that the producers under-estimated the sympathy that Woodburn would generate, and the hostility that would be turned against Nolan.

It is not known how the idea for the programme came about since this was not discussed publicly but it is clear that there was a high risk of an on-air clash even though it was billed as a reconciliation between Nolan and Woodburn.² Nolan as chair (a questionable decision in itself), opened by asking "Is it finally time for me to bury the hatchet with my arch enemy?" The item was trailed again during the second segment, with clips of Woodburn calling Nolan "a two-faced maggot" and Nolan saying, "You're vile." In the third segment, Street-Porter took the chair posing as a judge and read out the charge sheet. Woodburn entered the set to Karl Orff's "O Fortuna". The first thing she said was "I didn't ask to come here." She then claimed that Linda Robson had told her that Nolan had admitted to being two-faced.

The sense that Woodburn had been set up is an aspect that prompted many to complain about the programme. Street-Porter responded to Woodburn's claim by stating that, "my understanding is that you were very happy to come here today." Nolan answered the claim of being two-faced by saying, "I didn't tell you how vile you are from day one and I should have done. You're a horrible, self-centred, publicity-seeking witch." The terms "vile" and "witch" were taken up repeatedly in the social media response to the item, whether supportive or critical. It could be argued that such negative and stereotypical representations of older women are akin to racist slurs and should never be used on television. If a racist term had been used, even in anger, the channel, and the programme, would quite correctly have been expected to issue an apology.

The programme's typically polite treatment of its guests was overturned when Nolan's sister Linda joined in to say: "The only way you get on television is by being controversial. You've no talent. What is your talent?" This was greeted with whoops and clapping from the audience. Woodburn was asked why she had come on to the show. She replied, "because they paid me a good amount of money" (laughter, cheers and clapping) and because "they told me 'Coleen wants to say something to you'." This was later denied by Nolan. The clear inference from Woodburn that she was induced to participate was not picked up.

Woodburn was offered the chance to “draw a line under” the feud but declined. She then tearfully referred to her “brutal, rotten childhood,” memories of which she said fed into her experiences of bullying in the *CBB* house. Although “terribly upset” and feeling “picked on” she did not leave *CBB* because “I wanted the money.” She told the *Loose Women* audience: “Don’t go by what you see on television” and walked off the set saying to Nolan “I wouldn’t want to sit and talk to lying trash like you” (sounds of booing from the audience). Nolan went to the break and at the start of the next segment welcomed audiences back to a “calmer *Loose Women*.” She said members of the team are with Woodburn backstage and explained that “we didn’t intend for it to end like that. We were hoping for some kind of reconciliation.”

Ofcom received 7912 complaints about this segment of the programme and an online petition calling for Nolan to be dismissed received 28,000 signatures. Social media responses showed that public sympathy was overwhelmingly with Woodburn. Newspaper reports suggested the show lost a quarter of its audience that day (Greenwood and Pritchard 2018). Of the 29 comments on the #LooseWomen twitter feed soon afterwards, twenty were supportive of Woodburn, five loved the show, describing it as “gripping”, “pure gold” and “hilarious”, and four identified Woodburn as the bully. Those critical of the show referred to it as “disgusting” and “uncomfortable” while one accused “the damn series” of pandering to ratings.

Neither ITV nor *Loose Women* responded publicly, apart from a short statement after the show and in their official submission to Ofcom. In the immediate aftermath, explanations were left to Nolan. On 4 September she appeared live on ITV’s *This Morning* to promote her forthcoming solo tour. At this stage though, “the campaign to get me fired” was at its height and Nolan broke down in tears.³ She said she felt sorry for Woodburn, who needed help, but that the show’s producers had told her that Woodburn was “genuinely coming on to make amends.” She had received hate messages and even death threats on social media, including some that said, “why can’t you get cancer/why can’t you die like your sister” making this “the worst week of my life.”⁴ *This Morning*’s co-host Phillip Schofield, firmly blamed “nutters who take to social media” and suggested she switch off from them. Coleen said she was “off everything now.”

On 6 September Nolan announced on Twitter that she was cancelling her solo tour and taking a break from *Loose Women* and her other public commitments, citing the “constant online bullying, trolling and misrepresentation.” Of the 130 replies to her tweet that day, 32% were critical of Nolan and 55% supportive. One commented: “I’m completely

against Coleen's actions – and have expressed my opinions. I haven't bullied or trolled – and neither have hundreds/thousands who were upset with what happened so please stop dismissing us as trolls!”.

On the same day a representative for Nolan tweeted this message, distancing her from *Loose Women*'s editorial decision-making: “For clarity – Coleen did not ask for Kim Woodburn to come on the show nor ask to be reunited with her – @loosewomen organised the show. Coleen has no say in their choice of guests – Coleen stayed as calm as possible whilst being insulted live on air which was incredibly unpleasant.” (@NolanColeen 2018) Nolan returned to *Loose Women* on 3 December 2018 to a standing ovation, fake snow, and a Christmas soundtrack, as if a positive seasonal frame could divert attention from the row and facilitate Nolan's return. She remains a regular panellist and occasional chair. In February 2019 Ofcom concluded that *Loose Women* and ITV were not in breach of broadcasting guidelines. In consideration of the rights of free speech, and in recognition of the robust mediating role of Street-Porter, they stated “we did not consider the content was likely to have exceeded what regular viewers would have expected of a live edition of *Loose Women*” (Ofcom 2019, 98).

The crisis appeared to be over and internal lessons will have been learned but those responsible for setting up the item and placing a vulnerable older woman at its heart, did not account for themselves. Nolan alone was left to explain the fiasco despite not having agreed to the item in the form that had apparently been presented to Woodburn. Woodburn's submission to Ofcom concluded: “the distress suffered by Ms Woodburn could have been avoided if ITV had filmed and handled this segment of the programme in the manner Ms Woodburn had expected according to what she had been told by ITV” (Ofcom 2019, 97). *Loose Women*'s sister programme *This Morning* firmly blamed social media trolls for Nolan's decision to withdraw from public life, not her exposure to risk on the show. The debate about the ethics of popular television that were raised on the programme by Woodburn, and which were aired on social media in the aftermath, were never discussed.

Case 3: Pamela Anderson, 53, in Bed with her Fifth Husband

The panel on Friday, 19 February 2021 consisted of four of the more opinionated and politically engaged panellists, Sawalha (Chair), Brenda Edwards, Solomon, and Adams (Loose Women 2021a). The item was a heavily previewed “exclusive” about the former Baywatch starlet, Pamela Anderson, then 54, that consisted mainly of mumbled innuendos from Anderson and her new husband Dan Hayhurst, speaking from their bedroom at home in

the US. The show's promotion of what turned out to be an interview almost devoid of content, contrasted with a widely praised interview with the veteran British actress Dame Sheila Hancock on the same show, that was barely previewed. As an articulate and outspoken older woman, Hancock can be seen to represent the stated ethos of the show, in its claim to offer "real, authentic and empowered women having an upfront and candid discussion" (ITV 2017). The Anderson interview diverged from that ethos and was punished by viewers as a result.

At the start of segment three, Sawalha told the audience: "we have got a love story for you ... here they are, in bed." Photographs of the wedding were shown and as a warm-up question Anderson was asked how they met. Although she had almost the same appearance as she had had 30 years previously on *Baywatch*, this was not mentioned. Conversation was minimal and questions asked by the panel were met with giggles and innuendo. The event itself appeared to be filmed by the participants on a mobile phone as they lay (apparently unclothed) and covered with a duvet. At one point, Hayhurst offered to "take you guys under the covers," and Anderson stated, "it's nice to be with a real man who can actually change a lightbulb." Sawalha kept the interview going but Edwards looked disapproving while trying unsuccessfully to pose a question. Solomon ended optimistically, saying: "I love seeing how much in love they are!" (Loose Women 2021a).

Of the 120 responses on the *Loose Women* twitter feed that day, 80 (67%) were negative, 23 (19%) neutral and 27 (14%) positive. Negative terms used included: "nauseating", "awful", "cringeworthy", "awkward", "unprofessional", "gross and embarrassing", "uncomfortable", "rubbish", "horrendous", and "totally inappropriate". There was criticism of the production team with comments like: "car crash TV", an "all time low for this programme", "new low today", "shambolic", "it's time *Loose Women* had a shakeup" and "even the *Loose Women* looked uncomfortable with their faked laughs." Some tweets rudely challenged the whole basis of the programme, describing it as "garbage TV" and "a bunch of snobby Karens around a table talking sxxt," and asking whether watching *Loose Women* is "completely normal."⁵ Another opined that the "show is sxxt tier anyway." One respondent was "cringing so much," which is "why I never watch this rubbish." Another was ashamed of "admitting to the world" that they watch *Loose Women*. Positive comments included a plug for Pamela Anderson's charity, indicated a desire to have "whatever Pamela Anderson is on" and enjoying the fact that the actress was "clearly out of her face." Others described the appearance as "iconic", "bold", and "funny", while one congratulated Anderson for "trolling the absolute sxxt show trash that is *Loose Women*," (Twitter 2021). Tabloid and

regional press coverage too focused on the ‘bizarre’ nature of the interview and complaints from viewers (Hill. R 2021).

Discussion and Conclusion

The case material discussed here identifies several biases that constrain *Loose Women*’s capacity to examine important issues relating to the representation and self-determination of older women. The show has demonstrated resilience over 22 years but during this time has had to manage pressures to hold on to its viewers despite the increasing fragmentation of the audience. The panels are largely comprised of women over 40 who have achieved success in popular journalism and the entertainment industries – sectors which valorize youth and beauty and require older women to observe and yet render invisible the practice of strict body discipline in order to remain in the business. Taken together these biases lead to blind spots and conflicts of interest that limit what can be said. Challenging the normalization of cosmetic surgery and critiquing the conventions of popular television is extremely difficult under these circumstances. When faced with criticism, panellists choose to depict the show’s online critics as social media ‘trolls’ who then become useful scapegoats. As relatively ‘ordinary’ celebrities, the panellists themselves, when exposed to criticism, as I discussed with reference to Coleen Nolan, must pay the price for their participation in the increasingly desperate struggle for audiences, while the production team remains silent.

The analysis of social media content is indicative rather than complete, but it suggests that a proportion of the audience is aware of the show’s ambivalence, is critical of populist content, such as the Anderson interview, and uncomfortable with the ensuing evasions and contradictions. This was most apparent in response to the ill-judged attempts to first talk up the feud between Coleen Nolan and Kim Woodburn and then facilitate their reconciliation live on TV. ITV and *Loose Women* left it to the two women to justify their actions, even though both claimed they had played no part in the editorial decisions that exposed them to reputational and emotional harm. Ordinary celebrity, it appears, lacks the bargaining power of Hollywood-style scarcity, underlining the powerlessness of those who exchange their life stories for a way out of poverty and obscurity. Despite this, the show can still deliver unique, subversive, and grounded content rooted in feminist ideals. The interview with the 88-year-old actress Sheila Hancock on the same edition as the Pamela Anderson interview is one such example. Further analysis, including interviews with members of the production team, is needed to consider how the balance of content has changed over time and how the production team ‘reads’ the more critical responses.

Bullet Point Summary

- ITV's *Loose Women* is a live daily panel discussion show presented by and for women that attracts daily audiences of up to one million and many more through social media.
- It faces the contradictory task of providing an authentic and diverse representation of the dilemmas facing women, while submitting to a mediatised commercial logic.
- The show deploys 'stunts' to attract mainstream and social media attention – sometimes with controversial and damaging outcomes. Three of these are examined.
- It offers much content that is specifically of interest to older women yet its attachment to showbiz values undermines its ability to examine and critique issues relating to ageing anxiety and the norms of body discipline.
- Social media responses show that a proportion of the audience is aware of the show's ambivalence, is critical of its more populist content, and uncomfortable with the ensuing evasions and contradictions.

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Endnotes

¹ ITV's ratings for 18 March 2020 showed that *Loose Women* increased its audience by 76% year on year to 1.3 million, with an inheritance of 1.5 million from *This Morning*.

² For a detailed description of the show, with transcripts, and the response from ITV and Kim Woodburn, see Issue 377 of Ofcom's *Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin* issued on 25 February 2019, which ruled that *Loose Women* was not in breach for the programme on 29 August 2018. Accessed at

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/138648/Issue-373-Broadcast-and-On-Demand-Bulletin-25-February-2019.pdf

³ The ITV *This Morning* YouTube video of her appearance received 1.5 million views. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i119SxEkY1c>

⁴ Her sister Bernie died from cancer in 2013 at the age of 52.

⁵ This term is used to critique white women who commit 'faux pas' online.