

Received: 24.07.2025

Accepted: 17.11.2025

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From Bree to Goop: Performing the Affective Scripts of Feminine Happiness

Keywords: postfeminist media culture, happiness imperative, cruel optimism, neoliberal femininity, affective labour

Słowa kluczowe: postfeministyczna kultura medialna, imperatyw szczęścia, okrutny optymizm, neoliberalna kobiecość, praca afektywna

Introduction: Feminine Happiness as a Performance

In contemporary Western culture, the pursuit of happiness is often presented not merely as a personal goal but as a duty and social obligation – particularly for women (Friedan, 2001; Wolf, 2002; Ahmed, 2010; Filipovic, 2017). Whether manifested in a spotless kitchen, a meticulously curated wellness regimen, or a calm emotional disposition, feminine happiness often becomes a form of performance (Casey, 2008; Ahmed, 2010; Pierce, 2022; Lasheen and Dadlani, 2023). This affective state can be shaped, among others, through practices of emotional self-regulation, aesthetic discipline, and the consumption of curated lifestyles (Casey, 2008; Ahmed, 2010; Pierce, 2022). Two culturally resonant examples – *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), the popular American television series, and Goop, American wellness and lifestyle brand founded by the actress Gwyneth Paltrow in 2008 – illustrate how contemporary ideals and visions of feminine happiness are constructed and maintained within neoliberal and postfeminist frameworks that emphasize personal responsibility and the value of individual success (Becker, Hartwich and Haslam, 2021; Appleton, 2023).

Although the series *Desperate Housewives* ended more than a decade ago, its characters remain vivid in the cultural imagination and are still frequently referenced. For example, one of the most memorable Wisteria Lane residents – Bree Van de Kamp – continues to function as an emblem of “perfect womanhood” in the popular imaginary: a hyper-disciplined housewife who embodies not only

“rigorous perfectionism and uncommon refinement” (Virdis, 2009, p. 237), but also moral propriety and emotional restraint. In contrast, *Goop* represents a newer but equally idealized model of female happiness and well-being, offering tools for “self-care and self-maintenance” (Kjær, 2019, p. 702) through detoxes, skincare rituals, and the pursuit of emotional harmony – however vaguely defined. What connects these two cultural phenomena is the “cruel promise of happiness” (Berlant, 2011), offered to women primarily through emotional management and self-regulation, mastery of domestic aesthetics, and – last but not least – controlled consumption (Logan, 2017). Equally crucial is their reliance on affect: both construct the ideal of happy femininity by mobilizing, shaping, and regulating various affective states such as feeling “energetic” (Swan, 2017) or feeling “in control” (Kjær, 2019).

Admittedly, at first glance, pairing *Desperate Housewives* with *Goop* may seem far-fetched. However, the rationale behind this comparison lies in the continuity they represent: from fictional portrayals of seemingly blissful upper-middle-class housewifery (Richardson, 2006) to commercial images of curated feminine well-being, “marketed to a financially privileged class of consumers” (Kjær, 2019, p. 713). In addition, both of these cultural products present affective scripts that – often in subtly “cruel” ways – frame feminine happiness as a reward for aesthetic mastery, domestic control, effective self-regulation, and “good” consumption. Also, as will be demonstrated, these scripts reinforce narrow models of idealized versions of feminine happiness, repackaged through postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric of individualized success, self-management, and personal responsibility.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s concept of the “happiness duty” (2010) and Lauren Berlant’s idea of “cruel optimism” (2011), the following sections explore how *Desperate Housewives* – a television dramedy series – and *The Goop Lab* (2020) – a hybrid production merging elements of documentary, lifestyle television, and docu-soap – construct the fantasy of a woman’s good, happy life grounded in constant aesthetic self-curation, emotional control, self-discipline, and, of course, the right kind of consumption. This study follows the framework of qualitative content analysis, with attention to the affective, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions of selected scenes and episodes from *Desperate Housewives* and *The Goop Lab*. Through their audiovisual aesthetics and narrative arcs, both texts contribute to constructing and normalizing a model of “proper” happiness as a cultural imperative – a form of happiness that is always tied to labor deemed “worth it,” effort that promises a rewarding return.

Mapping the Terrain

Both *Goop* and *Desperate Housewives* have each received considerable scholarly attention. However, it is difficult to find studies that compare both of these cases in more detail in the context of the “cruel” imperative to pursue happiness by women.

Lately, the Goop brand has served as a case study of wellness as a cultural practice, particularly in relation to contemporary consumer culture and the neoliberal ideal of femininity. For example, scholars such as Bridget Conor (2021) examine Goop through the lens of “cosmic wellness” – a blend of New Age spirituality, digital aesthetics, and aspirational lifestyle branding targeted largely at affluent white women. Furthermore, Dana W. Logan (2017) argues that Goop promotes a modern form of asceticism, where carefully curated consumption and practices like detoxing are tied to ideals of purity, discipline, and moral self-improvement. By the same token, Katrine Meldgaard Kjær (2019) focuses on Goop’s detox programs to show how emotional states like feeling “energized” or “in control” become central to these practices, shifting the emphasis away from weight loss toward affective experience. These few studies highlight how Goop frames female wellness as a commodified, gendered, and affect-driven practice, deeply rooted in contemporary consumerism.

Other researchers have mostly described the social and medical contexts that shape Goop’s appeal to women. For example, Jessa Crispin (2018) argues that Goop responds to women’s growing frustration with being dismissed by mainstream Western medicine, offering alternative forms of care – however scientifically questionable. On the other hand, Eva-Lynn Jagoe (2021) interprets the society-building context of Goop through the lens of “solarity,” suggesting that, despite its entanglement in neoliberal and commercial structures, it gestures toward forms of collective intimacy and speculative alternatives for “better” social futures. More critical accounts, like the one from Clare Wilson’s (2020) analysis of the Netflix’s *The Goop Lab*, point to how emotional storytelling and aesthetic appeal are used by Goop to package dubious health advice. While these analyses raise important points, there is still room to investigate how Goop contributes to the production of affective scripts that tie feminine “happiness imperative” to emotional self-regulation, aesthetic discipline, and consumer practices – highlighting how women are encouraged to perform happiness and well-being as part of a broader regime of gendered affective labor in the contemporary Western world.

Like Goop, *Desperate Housewives* has sparked some academic interest. The four main female characters in the show – Bree Van de Kamp, Susan Mayer, Lynette Scavo, and Gabrielle Solis – are each analyzed as representing a different version of housewifery, ranging from the perfectionist homemaker (Bree), to the chaotic single mother struggling with love life and parenting (Susan), the former career woman turned overwhelmed stay-at-home mom (Lynette), and the glamorous yet disaffected trophy wife entangled in infidelity (Gabrielle) (Sharp, 2006).

When it comes to Bree, she is often regarded as the most “perfect” of the four friends – a figure of the ideal housewife and mother, marked by moral rigor, emotional self-monitoring, and the disciplined management of the body (McCabe, 2006, p. 76). It is typically Bree’s domestic activities – such as homemaking, gardening, or cooking – that come to embody and perform this ideal. These kinds of Bree’s performances are often interpreted as emotionally charged and

intertwined with class, identity, and postfeminist ideals (Alberola Crespo, 2022). Moreover, Bree's carefully managed appearance – including her rigid posture and her perfectly styled red hair that never moves, as her first husband Rex disparagingly observes – has also been interpreted through the lens of camp and gender performativity, suggesting a stylized femininity that both upholds and subtly critiques heteronormative norms (Richardson, 2006). In some scholarship, Bree's way of living has also been linked to emotional repression and the pressure to maintain the appearance of perfection at all costs. For example, her manner of speaking – polite and elegant yet distant – reveals the strain of upholding the idealized image (Virdis, 2009). It also has been pointed out how the show reproduces racial and class hierarchies, with Bree's white, upper-middle-class status allowing her to fully inhabit this ideal, even as it proves emotionally suffocating (Wang, 2023).

The existing body of research, however, typically treats Goop and *Desperate Housewives* separately, examining each through a single lens – such as consumerism, medical discourse, or class. Therefore, a comparative view is needed that will show both the character from fictional suburb and the wellness brand functioning as affective scripts of feminine happiness shaped by similar postfeminist and neoliberal ideals. The following sections first examine the wellness culture epitomized by Goop, as the more recent case, then turn to Bree's character arc, tracing how both cultural texts portray happiness as a gendered performance. This will expose a continuity between commercial and fictional narratives, demonstrating how the mandate to feel – and appear – happy becomes a gendered performance of emotional regulation, aesthetic self-control, and disciplined consumption in the Western culture.

Breath, Ice, and Goop

Feminine happiness is very clearly linked to discipline, self-control, and emotional labor in the documentary series *The Goop Lab* (2020),¹ especially in the episode 2 titled “Cold Comfort.” This particular episode presents feminine happiness quite openly as an outcome of a carefully choreographed ritual of self-discipline, aestheticized resilience, and emotional work. Led by the wellness male figure Wim Hof, known as “The Iceman,” the episode follows a curated group of Goop employees – primarily women – through breathing exercises, exposure to freezing temperatures, and guided introspection, all under the promise of reclaiming control over one's emotional and physical state. Set against a visually seductive backdrop of snow-covered landscapes of California and framed in Goop's signature pastel-toned aesthetic, the episode distinctly epitomizes the

¹ There is another Netflix series under the Goop brand – *Sex, Love & Goop* (2021) – which is related to but distinct from *The Goop Lab*. This analysis focuses specifically on *The Goop Lab*, which remains the primary audiovisual representation of the brand's wellness discourse.

neoliberal and postfeminist script of happiness and self-care as based on emotional self-regulation, aesthetic mastery, and disciplined consumption.

At the heart of the episode lies the premise that suffering – be it anxiety, panic attacks, general unhappiness, or medical conditions like depression or Guillain–Barré syndrome – can be alleviated through natural, embodied techniques. Hof’s method, which combines ancient breathing practices, cold-water immersion, and yogic poses (including “snowga” – yoga in the snow), is presented as a transformative experience that not only builds bodily endurance but restores a lost sense of inner agency. The framing of this journey is unmistakably gendered. Out of the six members of the group of Goop employees invited to take part in the workshop led by Hof, five are women. In addition, most of them share personal stories of emotional struggle, while the only male participant of the program is simply “excited” to learn more about Hof’s method. This gendered distribution subtly reinforces the episode’s underlying trope: women are portrayed as in need of emotional healing, while men appear as figures of authority – embodied either by Hof himself as a guru, or by the male member of the group positioned as a knowledge-seeker and a soon-to-be “expert.”

The narrative of the episode is structured around affective testimonials, mostly coming from women. After the first breathing session, female participants of the workshop speak to the camera in close-up shots, recounting their bodily experiences of trembling, numbness, and release. One participant confesses she felt an overwhelming urge to cry during exercises. Another describes having suffered from regular panic attacks, which she claims disappeared after practicing Hof’s method. During the breathing session, the shivering bodies of the women – especially their faces, with furrowed brows and clenched jaws – are closely observed by the cameras and aestheticized as sites of both vulnerability and strength, fitting within contemporary wellness rhetoric, where control over bodily response is equated with empowerment. In this episode, the show’s core message is reiterated – specifically aimed at women – almost like a mantra: “You are in control [...] You are the master of the situation.” This can be read through the lens of the concept of “cruel optimism” – “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (Berlant, 2011, p. 24) that sustains the promise of the “good life.” Here, transformation is promised through aestheticized endurance and emotional control – a seductive vision that may, however, wear women out more than liberates them. Participants are encouraged to believe that suffering, if properly curated, leads to empowerment – a magnetic fantasy of happiness and well-being that guarantees “the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something” despite its exhausting demands (Berlant, 2011, p. 48).

What is also important, Hof himself emerges as both guru and tragic hero, recounting the suicide of his wife – an event he frames as the catalyst for turning toward new way of life. Hof’s personal narrative is interwoven with three additional testimonial case studies from individuals outside the workshop group, which serve to validate the guru’s method. The first centers on a female oncologist – clearly marked as upper-class – who praises the method’s impact

on her overall well-being. The second features a man who claims that Hof's program "cured" his Guillain-Barré syndrome. His healing journey, involving immersions in cold water and breathing exercises, is framed through a family lens, highlighting his relationships with his daughter and son. The third case focuses on a woman who practices the method together with her young son, emphasizing wellness as a shared, intergenerational activity. Collectively, these stories reinforce the idea that wellness is not merely personal but communal, even familial – "something you can do with your family," as one participant puts it. Moreover, these stories clearly underline a person's obligation and responsibility to be happy – again, specifically a woman, as two of the three individuals giving testimony are female. In Goop's framework, emotional and physical healing is a necessary condition of ultimate, life-changing happiness. As Ahmed (2010, p. 10) notes, "not only does happiness become an individual responsibility, a redescription of life as a project, but it also becomes an instrument, as a means to an end, as well as an end." The people giving testimony in the show, needed to prove that they were "back in control," even when the process of "getting happy" was painful or coercive. This aligns with Ahmed's notion of happiness as an affective orientation that disciplines bodies and directs a (female) subject toward specific, marketable rituals.

Furthermore, aesthetic mastery is a crucial component of the episode's visual and rhetorical structure. The Lake Tahoe retreat, presented as a secluded oasis and filmed amid snowy peaks and crisp white skies, resembles a high-end spa or luxury winter resort. Even hardship is made beautiful: at one point, participants of the workshop are shown walking in a single, elegant file through the snow in white robes, likened to a tribe. When they approach the freezing water, the scene is accompanied by soaring music and a montage that evokes triumph rather than discomfort. This is hardship styled as an aesthetic experience – struggle rendered both worthwhile and consumable. Later, some time after the ordeal, the participants are shown relaxing on a leather couch beside a roaring fireplace, sipping wine from elegant glasses or hot tea from mugs, surrounded by warm, earthy tones, enveloped in wood-paneled interiors. This is the reward – they clearly deserve it.

The aestheticization of discomfort, and the promise that it leads to emotional transformation, presents itself in what can be called "happy objects": objects that "not only embody good feeling" but orient us affectively toward a particular vision of the good life (Ahmed, 2010, p. 33). Here, such objects – white robes, warm drinks, cozy blankets, clear blue skies – are deployed to visually signify self-care and healing. Their proximity to scenes of hardship reframes that hardship as an integral part of a journey toward happiness. The cold plunge, the emotional tremble, and the tears are aestheticized and enveloped by a constellation of happy objects that signal progress, reward, and personal growth.

Interestingly, also the use of language throughout the episode reflects the logic of disciplined consumption, where wellness is presented as a purchasable or quickly acquired experience – provided one complies with the ritual. Breathwork is described as wisdom "you can learn in ten minutes," and emotional change

is framed as a commodity you unlock through submission: “Tell your story,” the guru instructs the participants. Paltrow herself, speaking from a carefully curated studio space with green plants and rose-colored chairs, reinforces this narrative. For example, she mentions the somewhat universally feminine “power of breath” (a force that supposedly unites women during childbirth) and shares how she nearly fainted during Hof’s breathing session – positioning herself as a validator, promoter, and consumer of the method: someone who can simultaneously speak from female experience and demonstrate the ability to overcome personal weakness through discipline and “inborn strength.” In addition, her reference to Hof as a “living example of mind over matter” aligns with the episode’s investment in portraying wellness as a performative achievement over the body, made possible, of course, through controlled, marketable practices.

The final scene of the episode takes place besides the fireplace – one can see the wine glasses in participants’ hands and hear acoustic guitar playing. It recasts the intense physical ordeals not as isolated events but as collective ceremonials. “It becomes like a ritual and it feels very empowering,” one participant explains. The community, nature, and aesthetic comfort converge in this moment to produce a sense of (mostly feminine) achievement of happiness through, among others, self-discipline and control. This is not the radical embrace of vulnerability or care; it is the aestheticization of endurance.

“Cold Comfort” thus serves as a quintessential example of how wellness culture, especially when branded and gendered, orchestrates emotional self-regulation, aesthetic mastery, and disciplined consumption into a performance of the “good, happy life.” Here, women are tasked with embodying emotional control, aesthetic order, and productive suffering. However, beneath the soothing images and soft voices lies the cruel optimism of the postfeminist promise: that with the right consumed ritual, one can finally be at peace.

Perfect, More Perfect, Bree

Nowhere in 21st-century American television is the mandate to feel (and appear) happy more striking than in the character of Bree Van de Kamp from *Desperate Housewives*. Her portrayal is carefully constructed to both normalize a model of “proper” feminine happiness and expose its underlying cruelty. Bree embodies a stylized version of idealized femininity – graceful, elegant, and composed – which appeals to viewers through its polished display of control and order. At the same time, however, her character reveals the constraints of this kind of narrow vision of feminine happiness built solely on emotional regulation, aesthetic self-control, and disciplined consumption. Bree is both the ultimate performer of idealized, happy femininity and a critique of its suffocating effects. She simultaneously enacts and undermines the fantasy of happiness as a gendered obligation, laying bare the emotional labor and personal cost of maintaining such a façade (McCabe, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Alberola Crespo, 2022).

Across eight seasons of the series, Bree evolves from a perfectionist homemaker into a more complex, emotionally vulnerable figure navigating loss, addiction, and personal reinvention. Bree's trajectory reveals the psychological toll of maintaining a flawless exterior and the gradual cracks in her polished persona. She begins as a conservative, image-obsessed wife and mother of two teenagers, dealing with the collapse of her marriage to Rex and his eventual death. Over time, she remarries twice (first to Orson, then to Trip), battles alcoholism, struggles with her children's rejection, starts her own catering company and a successful cookbook business, and faces a public scandal and murder trial – all of which gradually teaches her to transform, rather than rigidly uphold, performance of happiness into a more flexible, self-aware mode of being.

The feminine ideal that Bree performs is not only embedded in her looks, behaviors, words, and gestures – it is also materialized in domestic rituals, aesthetic choices, and the structure of everyday life. Two emblematic scenes from the pilot episode of the series illustrate how Bree's character is shaped by a complex negotiation between the need for control, emotional repression, and the cultural imperative to appear fulfilled and serene.

In the famous dinner scene, presenting “the food ritual [...] elevated to the category of liturgy” (Alberola Crespo, 2022, p. 147), set in the impeccably arranged dining room of the Van de Kamp home, Bree presides over a family meal prepared with meticulous care: osso buco, basil purée, and porcelain dishes arranged on a wooden table with floral decorations in the background. The formality of the setting reflects not only Bree's dedication to beauty and order, but also her internalization of a happiness script rooted in control, aesthetic labor, and emotional discipline. Her family, however, resists this script. Danielle and Andrew – the children – complain about the food, yearning for simpler, more familiar meals, and Rex offers no support. Andrew's biting remark – “You're the one always acting like she's running for mayor of Stepford” – undercuts Bree's polished performance by calling out the artificiality of her perfection.

What this scene stages is the dissonance between Bree's visible composure and the emotional labor it conceals. It cannot ever present harmony – “only rupture and fragmentation” (Alberola Crespo, 2022, pp. 147–148). Here, Bree's identity is not just about being happy, but about maintaining the appearance of a perfect wife and mother – a performance that is increasingly met with frustration, indifference, or even ridicule. As Ahmed (2010, p. 50) argues, “the happy housewife is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness” – and happiness becomes a technology of making women “do things,” meaning to follow the “happiness scripts” that are associated with the good life (Ahmed, 2010, p. 59). Bree's efforts to deliver the perfect meal, despite the lack of recognition or affection, illustrate how this “good life” becomes a source of quiet suffering.

The second scene from the pilot – set in the casual, noisy restaurant Saddle Ranch Chop House – offers a stark contrast, showing the Van de Kamp family having dinner outside their carefully curated domestic space. Here, Bree is out of place – in an environment that resists her usual aesthetic control and disrupts

the ritualized order she depends on. As Rex announces his wish for a divorce, Bree does not react emotionally. Instead, she insists on maintaining composure, even as she serves Rex salad with potentially deadly onions (her husband is allergic to them) – a darkly comic moment that captures the contradiction at the heart of her character. Her desire to remain graceful, dignified, and emotionally restrained in a moment of personal crisis highlights what Berlant (2011) describes as “cruel optimism” – the attachment to a fantasy (of perfection, domestic stability, or happiness) that is, in fact, detrimental to one’s well-being.

In this scene, the off-screen narration emphasizes Bree’s inability to voice her pain: “Admitting defeat was not an option.” This is not only a character trait but a gendered affective script. Bree’s carefully controlled performance becomes a shield against vulnerability and a mechanism for preserving social legitimacy. Her insistence on elegance and endurance – even as her marriage collapses – reveals the cruelty of a cultural model in which feminine happiness must be performed at all costs.

In the next seasons of the series, Bree’s character evolved – or perhaps fractured – into a more self-aware but no less performative version of herself. Having built a successful business and seemingly reinvented her life after multiple personal crises, she now enters into an extramarital affair with Karl Mayer. What could be read as a transgressive act of liberation is, in Bree’s case, yet another terrain on which the affective script of perfection is implemented.

In the episode “Nice Is Different Than Good” from season 6, we find Bree and Karl meeting in a drab motel room. The setting is, in her own words, “filthy and hideous.” Clearly uncomfortable, Bree inspects the bedding and remarks with sharp disapproval: “They’re discolored, threadbare, and reek of industrial bleach.” This moment is key. For Bree, the affair cannot happen in an environment that does not meet her aesthetic and hygienic standards. She cannot surrender to desire without first reasserting control over the material environment. Cheating must be done gracefully – in appropriate sheets.

The scene cuts to a brightly lit supermarket. Bree is looking for a bedding set in the home goods aisle. “Ooh, Egyptian cotton! These are pretty, aren’t they?” she asks Karl, who is visibly impatient. For him, the situation is absurd: an affair delayed not by guilt, but by color palettes and thread count. When Karl pushes back, noting she vetoed “this hotel,” “those sheets,” and “tonight,” Bree admits honestly: “I just want this affair to be nice” – which is both comical and telling. Clearly, her desire for happiness is inseparable from aesthetic control and the comforts of luxury consumption. Karl replies: “You’re a good girl who never breaks the rules, no matter how miserable it makes her... There’s not much I can do for someone who would rather be good than happy.” Karl’s blunt diagnosis exposes Bree’s central conflict: she cannot simply be *happy* – her happiness must be “good”: nice, curated, controlled.

Later in the same episode, Bree and Karl talk in his car. Having finally made up her mind, she instructs him firmly to meet her at the motel that evening. “I’ve already changed the sheets and cleaned the bathroom,” she says. After they kiss, she adds with quiet resolve that the good girl inside her “decided guilt’s

a small price to pay for happiness.” It is one of the rare, explicitly verbalized moments in which Bree articulates a desire for genuine happiness. And yet, even here, happiness is framed as a decision to make – it must be pre-arranged, managed, and controlled. Moreover, by referring to herself in the third person (“the good girl”), Bree distances herself from the emotion, performing it only under conditions she can control.

Another interesting scene, this time the staged burglary from episode 22 of season 5 (“Marry Me a Little”), also offers a look into Bree’s multi-dimensional character. The plot device – technically a crime – is less about the legal implications than the emotional and aesthetic labor it reveals. Prompted by Karl, Bree consents to breaking into her own house in order to protect her valuable possessions from her soon-to-be ex-husband Orson. But true to her character, even criminality must be performed with poise and grace.

The episode begins with Karl vividly describing a scenario to Bree, in an attempt to convince her to accept the plan. He describes how Orson might one day give Bree’s beloved possessions to another woman: “Now picture your favorite strand of pearls dangling in the 24-year-old cleavage of said bimbo while she is using your first edition Robert Frost as a coaster... And your 19th-century French crystal vase as an ashtray.” Described items are not just objects – they are things that make Bree happy, they are symbols of her identity, her cultivated aesthetic world, her performance of domestic perfection. To imagine them desecrated is, for her, a violence far greater than the notion of committing a crime. When she concedes, her response is characteristically restrained yet exacting: “We should probably break a window to make it look more real.”

The burglary scene that follows further exposes the contradictions embedded in Bree’s character. As she and Karl prepare to enter her home, Bree scolds: “Wipe your feet first. I just had the carpets cleaned. Just because we’re thieves doesn’t mean we need to be untidy.” This moment, comedic in tone, carries a deeper resonance: it encapsulates how Bree cannot relinquish her internalized regime of cleanliness, order, and aesthetic control – even in the middle of a faux-crime. Her house is not just a space to be lived in, but a stage upon which her identity is performed.

Once inside, the camera lingers on Bree as she rearranges the decorative objects on her mantelpiece. Karl watches with incredulity and asks what she is doing. Bree replies with casual sincerity: “I took some of my silver off the mantle, and it threw off the balance.” Her concern is not for the crime being committed, but for the visual harmony of the room. The scene becomes a moment of meta-aesthetic self-regulation – where even chaos must conform to her internal blueprint of order.

Then, Bree and Karl’s conversation escalates into a brief but profound exchange about selfhood, repression, and emotional exhaustion:

Karl: “Must you always be such a priss? You freak out at the mention of sex. You never want to make a mess. You suppress every spontaneous urge you ever have! Man, it must be exhausting being you!”

Bree: “Yes, being a lady takes effort.”

Karl: "Well, maybe give it a rest once in a while. It might surprise you how good it feels."

Bree (cuttingly): "You wanna be a Neanderthal, Karl? That's your choice. I prefer to behave with class and dignity. Now, may we please finish robbing my home?"

This dialogue reveals the emotional contradiction at the heart of Bree's character. For her, "being a lady" is not a natural disposition but a rigorous practice – a disciplined aesthetic and moral regime requiring constant performance. Karl's remark – that it must be exhausting – serves as a rare acknowledgment of the affective labor she undertakes daily. Yet Bree is unwilling to let go of the mask of composure. The scene crystallizes how her version of feminine happiness is sustained not through joy or spontaneity, but through curated self-control, visual precision, and the avoidance of mess – literal and emotional. As Erving Goffman observed, individuals in social life perform roles through carefully managed impressions, wearing metaphorical "masks" that maintain a coherent self-image before others (Goffman, 1959). Bree's "mask of composure" functions as a performative surface – a façade that enables her to navigate social expectations while concealing the strain of emotional labor beneath.

Later in the episode, another scene returns to the motif of the mask, this time more explicitly. Bree and Orson are in their living room following the staged break-in. As Bree tidies the mess, Orson shows her a hand-drawn sketch of a stolen object: a Venetian mask. He asks if she remembers where they got it. Bree guesses Florence. "Venice," he corrects her gently. He reminds her of what she said at the time: "You told me you'd been wearing a mask all your life, but with me, you felt... like you could finally take it off and be yourself."

The symbolism here is striking. The literal object – the Venetian mask – becomes a stand-in for Bree's emotional repression. Her initial mistake (confusing Florence with Venice) suggests a psychological distance from her own memory, from a moment of vulnerability she once allowed herself in Orson's presence. His recollection that she once felt safe enough to "take off the mask" evokes his fragile hope of restoring emotional authenticity in their marriage. For Bree, however, at this stage of her life, wearing the mask is no longer just part of performing happiness – it has also become a strategy for surviving within a failed marriage.

This strategy was instilled in Bree by her mother, as we learn from the flashback sequence in episode 17 of season 8 ("Women and Death") that offers a rare, intimate glimpse into the origins of Bree's emotional discipline. In a warm-toned kitchen bathed in soft light, her mother – elegantly dressed in pearls, a navy dress, and an apron – teaches young Bree how to make whipped cream for honey pecan pie, her father's favorite dessert. But the real lesson comes when she introduces her daughter to the concept of "mask." "It's the face you wear when you don't want people to know what you're feeling," she explains, while putting cream on the top of the pie. Real emotions, the mother warns, are liabilities, especially for women: "If a man knows what you're thinking, it gives him power over you... He'll hurt you – carelessly, cruelly, constantly." The moment is unsettling in its tenderness: a bonding ritual of shared cooking reframed as

a transmission of knowledge about affective (and effective) self-surveillance. Bree's early training in concealing emotion becomes not just a performance of femininity, but a strategy for managing vulnerability – an inheritance of silence cloaked in elegance.

The emotional legacy of this lesson is echoed in the second flashback, where Bree – now an adult, wearing her own strand of pearls – returns home from a neighborhood party with Rex. Clearly upset, she moves with quiet precision, transferring cookies into a plastic container while avoiding eye contact. Rex, sensing tension, presses her to explain: “You put on this plastic face to keep me in the dark,” he says, frustrated by her refusal to share what she feels. For a moment, Bree lowers the mask: “You told [Gabrielle] she was the most gorgeous woman you’d ever met... I’m feeling hurt and humiliated.” But the vulnerability does not last. When Rex laughs and dismisses her feelings – “I think you’re dumb to feel those things” – she turns toward the window, reclaims composure, and withdraws once more into the practiced elegance of her role. She gives up on being understood and reactivates the lesson her mother once taught her. When she turns back to her husband, she is smiling. The mask is firmly back in place, now perfected into a tool of feminine resilience. Happiness, in this moment, is no longer even the goal. What remains is the ritual: performative, polished, and isolating.

Conclusion: From Mask to Market

Tracing the parallel logics of Goop's commercial discourse and Bree Van de Kamp's fictional persona allows us to see how contemporary ideals of feminine happiness operate not as expressions of interior truth, but as performances governed by cultural scripts of emotional self-regulation, aesthetic mastery, and disciplined consumption. Whether in the sunlit kitchens of *Desperate Housewives* or the soothing pastels of wellness branding, the imperative to appear serene, graceful, and composed reveals itself as both a gendered burden and a social mandate.

What Berlant (2011) called the “cruel optimism” of happiness becomes strikingly legible in both cases: the pursuit of happiness is not merely unattainable, but can be damaging. Bree's mask, inherited from her mother, becomes an intergenerational tool of emotional containment – a strategy for managing pain in private, so that the public image remains intact. Similarly, the Goop aesthetic teaches women to curate not only their homes and diets, but also their emotional responses. Pain, suffering, or exhaustion have no place in this affective regime unless they can be transformed into rituals of recovery that ultimately reaffirm one's commitment to the system.

Ahmed (2010) reminds us that happiness functions both as a “promise” and a “duty” – an obligation and orientation toward what is deemed good or desirable. This promise often fails, especially for those whose experiences fall outside the norms that happiness prescribes. Bree's experience is not one of fulfilled

domestic joy, but of sustaining the appearance of it – often at the cost of genuine connection or self-expression. Goop brand, though couched in the language of choice and empowerment, reproduces the same logic: happiness becomes a chore and a personal responsibility. You must work on your body, your home, your thoughts – and then display the result as if it were effortless.

Together, these narratives expose how femininity continues to be shaped by demands for affective readability and composure. To be intelligible as a “good, happy woman” – as a wife, mother, or empowered self-care subject – requires not simply feeling happy but performing it convincingly. In this performance, the mask and the market become indistinguishable: both promise safety, validation, and control, while quietly extracting labor – emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic.

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S u m m a r y

This article examines how contemporary ideals of feminine happiness are constructed and performed through two culturally significant examples: Bree Van de Kamp, a character from the TV series *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), and Gwyneth Paltrow's wellness brand Goop, as portrayed in the documentary series *The Goop Lab* (2020). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theory of the "happiness duty" and Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," the article analyses how both fictional and commercial representations promote a vision of feminine happiness based on emotional self-regulation, aesthetic mastery, and disciplined consumption. Rather than offering liberation, these affective scripts place pressure on women to perform happiness within a postfeminist and neoliberal framework. Through a close analysis of audiovisual aesthetics, character development, and branded discourse, the article reveals how the fantasy of the "good, happy life" becomes a subtle yet exhausting form of gendered affective labour.

Od Bree do Goop: performowanie afektywnych scenariuszy kobiecego szczęścia

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób współczesne ideały kobiecego szczęścia są konstruowane i performowane na przykładzie dwóch ważnych w kulturze przypadków: Bree Van de Kamp, bohaterki serialu *Gotowe na wszystko* (2004–2012), oraz marki wellness Goop stworzonej przez Gwyneth Paltrow, ukazanej w serialu dokumentalnym *The Goop Lab* (2020). Odwołując się do teorii „obowiązku szczęścia” Sary Ahmed oraz koncepcji „okrutnego optymizmu” Lauren Berlant, autorka bada, w jaki sposób zarówno fikcyjne, jak i komercyjne reprezentacje promują wizję kobiecego szczęścia opartą na emocjonalnej samokontroli, estetycznej dyscyplinie oraz zdyscyplinowanej konsumpcji. Zamiast oferować wyzwolenie, owe afektywne scenariusze wywierają presję na kobiety, by odgrywały szczęście w ramach postfeministycznego i neoliberalnego porządku. Poprzez szczegółową analizę estetyki audiowizualnej, rozwoju postaci i języka marki artykuł pokazuje, jak fantazja o „dobrym, szczęśliwym życiu” staje się subtelną, lecz wyczerpującą formą sfeminizowanej pracy afektywnej.