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Scandalous Romance Down Under: Becoming and Unbecoming a Heroine in *The Bachelor/ette Australia* and *The Bachelorette New Zealand*

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Abstract: This paper examines how scandal functions to determine "appropriate behaviour" for women participating in the *Bachelor/ette* format. Based on Adut's (2005) three key components of a scandal—the *violation*, the *reaction*, and the subsequent *discredit*—we examine how reality TV participants can be positioned as "transgressive". We use two case studies to provide insight into regional variations of a franchise usually explored from an American perspective, examining the narratives of Abbie Chatfield and Lesina Nakhid-Schuster in *The Bachelor/ette* in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. We uncover the assumptions, revealed through scandal, underpinning the idea of a "good" romantic heroine within this format; and explore the ways in which these participants have navigated scandal and reshaped their narratives post-show in order to reclaim the narrative position of heroine. We argue that sincerity is fundamental to being considered a heroine: both our case studies were positioned as disingenuous during the show, but post-show were able to lay claim to a level of authenticity and sincerity that allowed them to reposition themselves.

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Introduction

The *Bachelor/ette* franchise has been the locus of scandal for many years. Notably, recently, the US franchise erupted in a scandal over racism, provoked by the fact that Rachael Kirkconnell, the eventual winner of Season 25 of *The Bachelor,* featuring the first ever Black Bachelor, Matt James, was pictured at an antebellum South-themed party at a plantation a few years before (Ivie; Shaw). This is arguably the franchise's biggest ever scandal—it resulted in the departure of long-time host Chris Harrison—but it is by no means its only one. Over the last twenty years, *The Bachelor/ette* has amassed (and sometimes actively courted) any number of scandals, some emerging from the narrative presented on the show, some from extradiegetic sources, such as social media. These scandals have been flashpoints for all different kinds of social conversations, around issues ranging from slut-shaming to gun control to—in the case of James and Kirkconnell—racism. However, because the franchise revolves around love and romance, scandals tend to hinge on the following question: is this appropriate behaviour for a protagonist in a love story?

This article explores scandal in the *Bachelor* franchise, examining how various figures in the narrative have been positioned as scandalous—that is, as inappropriate romantic protagonists—and the ways in which these figures have sought to subvert this reading and reposition themselves as (potentially romantic) heroic figures. In acknowledgment of both the location of the authors and the fact that the vast majority of scholarship on the franchise focuses on the US iteration, this article takes as its subject *The Bachelor/ette* in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. We focus particularly on two women in the franchise who have been presented as scandalous—both within the narrative of their respective seasons and in media commentary around it—who have recuperated their reputations post-show. By doing so, we hope to both reveal the assumptions underpinning the idea of a "good" romantic heroine, but also the ways in which these assumptions can be undermined, stepped around, and remade.

Methods and Background

To explore scandal and the idea of the "good" romantic heroine in the *Bachelor/ette* franchises in Australia and Aotearoa, we have taken a case study approach, underpinned by "the desire to derive a(n) (up-)close or otherwise in-depth understanding of a single or small number of 'cases' set in their real-world contexts" (Yin 4). Case studies afford an in-depth investigation into a chosen phenomenon and are a method to perform a thorough analysis of a text in line with a related theoretical concept—here, scandal (JC Mitchell).

Our two case studies are Abbie Chatfield (2019 runner-up of *The Bachelor Australia*) and Lesina Nakhid-Schuster (2020 Bachelorette in *The Bachelorette New Zealand*), where we examine both their portrayals in their seasons and media reactions to them, before, during and after airing. We chose these two figures for several reasons. They are temporally proximate, making good points of comparison. They both appeared in every episode of their respective seasons, allowing for extended narrative arcs, but appeared in different narrative positions in different forms of the franchise, allowing for breadth of analysis. Mostly importantly, though, both were positioned as scandalous within their respective shows and the discussions around them because they transgressed unspoken norms around relational behaviour (notably, gendered relational behaviour), and both made a concerted effort to rescript their own narratives afterwards. The former is typical of reality TV: participants are positioned and understood as scandalous all the time. However, it is the latter which makes Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster such excellent foci for analysis. Mills et al. describe scandal as a technique, a "public drama" that "allows a celebrity to orchestrate and manipulate the media coverage they receive". Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster had little agency in their initial positioning as scandalous (and, by extension, as inappropriate romantic heroines). However, in their post-show negotiation of this position, they sought to reclaim not just control over their own stories but a (potentially romantic) heroic position within them.

The *Bachelor/ette* franchise is "glocal" (Trelease, "Schadenfreude"), and *The Bachelor/ette Australia* and *New Zealand* are part of a global franchise; however, both have been adapted to and reveal different things about their local contexts (cf. McAlister, "What We Talk About"; "Bachelor Nation(s)"; "This Isn't It"). The same is true of scandals, which are "shaped by culture, context, claims-making, and even chance" (Weaver). Therefore, we have been attentive to local context in our research design. One researcher is from Australia and one from Aotearoa. While the countries have broadly similar cultural contexts, they are by no means identical, so each researcher has led the case study from their region, undertaking a qualitative content analysis of their season, which "relies on identifying thematic patterns in a text (i.e., message or set of messages)", as well as examining related pre- and post-show media (Neuendorf 10). This then contributes to a shared discussion of scandal in the franchise more broadly, and what makes—or does not make—a "good" romantic heroine.

The Bachelor/ette

The Bachelor/ette is the longest running reality romance format currently on TV. The first season of *The Bachelor* on US network television aired in 2002. The following year in 2003, a second season aired, as well as the first season of *The Bachelorette*. The format has now been on the air for two decades and is an example of what Curnutt labels a "feeder show", with memorable personas having the opportunity to appear across the wider franchise. At the time of writing, there have been twenty-seven seasons of *The Bachelor* and nineteen of *The Bachelorette,* as well as numerous seasons of spinoffs such as *Bachelor Pad* (2010-12) and *Bachelor in Paradise* (2014-)*.* The show has been franchised in multiple countries around the world, including Australia and Aotearoa. There have been ten seasons of *The Bachelor Australia* (2013-) and seven of *The Bachelorette Australia* (2015-); and four of *The Bachelor New Zealand* (2015-) and two of *The Bachelorette New Zealand* (2020-).

The *Bachelor/ette* format has scandalous roots. In 2000, executive producer Mike Fleiss's first attempt at a reality dating show aired. *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?* was a one night special. It was reminiscent of a beauty pageant, with fifty women competing over two hours for the hand of the eponymous multi-millionaire, who was only seen in silhouette. The program culminated in a wedding, with multi-millionaire Rick Rockwell marrying winner Darva Conger on the spot. It was both widely viewed and widely condemned: Kyle Smith described it as both "a stroke of tawdry genius worthy of P.T. Barnum" and "an equal-opportunity offender", drawing condemnation from both sides of the political spectrum. But it was not until afterwards that the real scandal broke, when it was revealed that one of Rockwell's ex-girlfriends had filed a restraining order against him for domestic violence (making him, obviously, a deeply inappropriate romantic protagonist). The network cancelled re-airings of the special and all plans for future versions (Carter; Labi; McAlister, "Bachelor Nation(s)"; Smith).

In Fleiss's words, *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?* "generated huge ratings and then a huge scandal" (O'Regan). The scandal prevented him from repeating the same format, but he felt that "there was great energy in watching multiple women compete for the affections of one guy" (O'Regan). Therefore, he developed *The Bachelor*: a version of the show which was "more romantic and more real" (O'Regan). Instead of being a one-night special, the first season of *The Bachelor* had six episodes. The majority of the episodes were internally structured by dates. There was also a broader series structure, designed to mimic the stages of a typical romantic relationship, albeit in fast forward. After the earlier dating stages, during which most of the contestants were gradually eliminated, the Bachelor went on "hometown" dates with his final four contestants, where he visited their hometowns and met their families. When only three contestants remained, he went on overnight dates with them, where he and each contestant had the opportunity to stay the night together in the "fantasy suite". When only two remained, the contestants met the Bachelor's family. He ultimately broke up with one and then commenced a relationship with the other, with the possibility of proposal clearly on the table. Unlike other reality romance shows of the time, such as *Joe Millionaire* (2003-04) and *For Love or Money* (2003-04), there was no monetary prize for either Bachelor or winner at the show's culmination. Instead, the prize was simply "love itself" (Frank 93). This reliance on love as the sole prize underlines the need for participants to perform their relationship roles "correctly", according to heteronormative and gendered norms around appropriateness, inflected by where they sat in the narrative (that is, as Bachelor/ette—the chooser or contestant—the chosen). Doing this was, quite literally, the only way to win.

The format has developed over the two decades that it has been on air. For instance, US seasons now feature almost twice as many episodes as the first season, and while several of the earlier seasons (including the first one) ended with the Bachelor/ette opting to begin a relationship but not an engagement with their winner, proposals are now *de rigueur*. The format's fandom (dubbed "Bachelor Nation") necessitates updates on intra-format couples, engagements, and weddings, in an example of what DePaulo calls "Matrimania". The celebration of successful coupledom has become an integral part of the show narrative, as seen in the season 15 premiere celebrating the first "Bachelor Baby" (Trelease, "Four Case Studies"). This reinforces the stakes of behaving in "appropriate" ways: it is rewarded both diegetically in the narrative, and extra-diegetically in the form of social media influence.

There are variations in the format between different national franchises. For example, in Australia and Aotearoa, season-ending proposals are rare, and the fantasy suite dates do not occur in the Australian version and only sometimes occur in Aotearoa. However, the broad brushstrokes remain the same. Contestants meet the Bachelor/ette and go on a variety of dates with them over the bulk of the season. Each episode, the numbers of contestants are reduced via the "rose ceremony", where contestants who do not receive one of the ever-decreasing number of roses are ritually eliminated. As the numbers are winnowed down, the dating milestones intensify—hometown dates, for instance, have remained a largely-unchanged fixture at the final four stage—until the last episode, where the Bachelor/ette breaks up with the runner-up and declares their love to the winner (for more on breakups, see McAlister, "This Isn't It"; for more on declarations of love, see McAlister, "What We Talk About").

The structure of *The Bachelor/ette* is clearly meant to mirror the typical (if such a thing can be said to exist) structure of a romantic relationship, where two people date, become ever more serious about each other, meet each other's families, possibly sleep together (depending on the national franchise), and eventually formally commence a relationship. Many other reality dating shows—including spinoffs of this one, and its ancestor *Who Wants To Marry A Multi-Millionaire?*—rely on various gimmicks to provoke couple formation and induce conflict (in *Too Hot To Handle,* for instance, contestants are banned from having sex, while the gimmick inherent in *Married At First Sight* is obvious in the title). *The Bachelor/ette*, on the other hand, is very obviously a distilled masterplot: a story "that we tell over and over in myriad forms and that connect[s] vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears" (Abbott 46). The romance plot is one of the most prevalent examples of a masterplot in Western culture, and one in which people regularly seek to inscribe themselves. It has "clear milestones and events: you meet someone, you fall in love, you marry, you have children, you live happily ever after" (Portolan and McAlister 354). The structure of the *Bachelor/ette* franchise is set up so the path along these steps is accelerated, with the ultimate hope that couples formed through the franchise will find their way to the latter steps (even though the success rate of the franchise, in terms of couples staying together for an extended period of time after the show, is not especially high).

This plot offers a firm structure to the show but can also function in a sort of disciplinary capacity—arguably to a greater degree than other reality dating shows, because it is tied so closely to the masterplot rather than a particular gimmick. Rachel Dubrofsky has discussed the ways in which women in particular can be positioned by the show as unworthy of love, and thus of stepping through the romance plot: for instance, they can be stereotyped as dramatically over-emotional and thus inappropriate partners for the romantic lead. The *Bachelor/ette* format is not necessarily scandalous in and of itself in the way that *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?* was and many other reality dating shows continue to be, because it so closely mirrors the familiar romantic masterplot. However, by transgressing norms inherent within this plot—especially gendered norms around appropriate behaviour for a romantic protagonist—figures within the *Bachelor/ette* universe can engender scandals and/or become scandalous themselves.

The two women who are our case studies for this article were positioned, diegetically in the narrative and extra-diegetically in some media and social media coverage, as transgressing unspoken (hetero-)relational norms. As a result, they were positioned as unworthy to occupy the role of protagonist in the romantic masterplot, and thus scandalous: the locus of disciplinary discourse.

Scandal

In this article, we are using the term "scandal" as defined by Paul Apostolidis and Juliet Williams: it is "the publicization of a transgression of a social norm" (3). This can be further broken down into three key components: the *violation*, the *reaction*, and the subsequent *discredit* on an individual and/or organisation (Adut, "A Theory" 216-17). The violation is couched within a wider understanding of societal norms, and its publicisation facilitates and/or demands a reaction. The implication behind a scandal is that society itself has been transgressed (Adut, "Scandal as Norm" 19)—or, to put it another way, a scandal involves the transgressor, the victim, and the public that has been "scandalised" (Grolleau et al). We do not use the term "scandal" here to imply a particular degree of transgression or reaction: scandals can be major, minor, or anywhere in between. Rather, we use the term to capture the way in which these components, norms, and actors interact.

Scandal involves both a scandalous *action* and the *talk* about the action: as Apostolidis and Williams put it, "[e]very scandal thus involves a double boundary crossing: the violation of the norm involved in the scandalous act itself, and that act's exceptional manifestation before the public" (4). Without the talk, there is no scandal. This means that not all conflict is automatically a scandal: for example, as Anthea Taylor argues, resistance from a participant in a makeover show is not necessarily scandalous. While it might technically be a transgression, this non-compliance is an inherent and expected episodic element of the sub-genre, and thus probably would not provoke talk unless significant other boundaries had been crossed. The perceived transgressions of the two women in our case studies, however, provoked talk—within the narrative, in media, and on social media—which made them scandalous in this framing. In this scandalous talk, then, the audience are positioned as more than casual observers—they are, instead, arbiters (Adut, "Scandal as Norm" 534). Adut contends that publicisation of a violation is an act of popular rather than legal justice, in that audience discussion does not call on any laws or require exact proof ("A Theory" 220).

It is not always easy to pinpoint what elevates a specific violation to a talked-about scandal. This is largely determined by contextual factors, such as the societal norms for that time and place, and whether the transgressor is already seen in a favourable/unfavourable light (Nyhan). For example, the same act but in different communities, or the same act by different individuals, could result in varying degrees of discredit (highly dependent on levels of privilege—people from racialised and/or marginalised backgrounds are regularly disproportionately discredited, and gender certainly plays a major role in the two case studies we will discuss here). The scandalous violation may itself be quite banal, but it often focuses on some kind of moral line which has been transgressed (Cohen). In and of itself, though, the act does not make it a scandal—it is the subsequent publicisation and, in particular, societal reaction which positions it as such.

Broadly speaking, then, because scandals are engendered by societal reaction to an act transgressing norms, they in turn underline what a society considers normal standards.

As Jacobsson and Löfmarck put it, "scandals are reactions to norm violations and therefore can serve as detectors of norms" (204). This provides a clear methodological justification for studying scandals: "in order to find norms, study the transgression of norms" (Jacobsson and Löfmarck 205-06). In this article, however, we aim to both twist and push this approach a step further, in that we are examining how our case studies Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster were perceived to transgress norms, and how they went on to attempt to carve out new norms. Gary Alan Fine argues that "the depiction of the scandal comes to symbolise the problem for the public, and, thus, the response to the scandal shapes the response to the social problem" (297). We are studying both scandal and response: in particular, the response from Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster, which sharply interrogated the social problems that had engendered their respective scandals in the first place.

This brings us to reality television, a form of media which regularly relies heavily on a "shared feeling among viewers and critics … [of] the atmosphere of controversy … or the 'perfume of scandal'" (Biltereyst 7). One of the central affordances of shows like *The Bachelor/ette*, which feature "intimate (love) relations", is to offer glimpses in public of something which generally occurs privately, thus allowing for discussion and negotiation of what is and is not appropriate (Biltereyst). Because, as discussed above, *The Bachelor/ette* format mirrors the romantic masterplot, and this is a masterplot which many people use to narrativise their own lives (Portolan and McAlister), opinions and discussions on it are plentiful and frequently very strong—as will be seen in the discussion of Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster's experiences below.

These opinions and discussions are also, inescapably, highly gendered: they reveal gendered norms around what makes a good romantic protagonists and appetites to both maintain and evolve said norms. While reality television is obviously highly mediated and edited, it is still understood to represent the "real" to an extent, abetted by its internal architectures—confessional interviews, for instance, narratively function as a window into the "true" thoughts and emotions of participants (Aslama and Pantti 168). Judith Butler contends that "gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social convention" (527), than those in theatrical settings. By its very nature, the genre suggests viewing through a lens of reality, with performance of gender tied closer to the "non-theatrical" than the theatrical. As reality television moments are not necessarily seen as deliberate performance, *or* as someone in their natural context, there is an additional layer in these moments where the incongruity of the "real" might provoke harsher reactions against perceived transgressors.

One important thing to keep in mind is that scandals are stories rather than events: "a scandal is a discursive construct, a story that is told and may be retold by a variety of different narrators, including those who are not officially charged with the task of rehearsing the scandalous material in the media" (Apostolidis and Williams 23). They are thus governed by narrative logics, something which is particularly relevant for reality television, where the question of who is telling the story is paramount. The narrative in a show like *The Bachelor/ette* is highly edited and produced, designed in large part to provoke scandal, regularly foregrounding transgression of norms in hopes of engendering the high levels of publicity that scandal creates (noting, of course, that it does not court all types of scandal and not all publicity is good publicity—it is highly unlikely that the US *Bachelor* franchise would have desired the scandal around racism described at the beginning of this article, for instance). However, the emergence of social media has allowed other actors within scandalous stories—including transgressors—greater access to audiences than they have had in the past. As will be seen in the case studies below, the ways in which Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster sought to reclaim their own scandalous stories allowed them not to just to reposition themselves as heroic figures in their own narratives, but also provoked critical audience discussion around the norms they had supposedly transgressed.

Case Study #1: Abbie Chatfield, *The Bachelor Australia*

Abbie Chatfield is one of the most famous media personalities in Australia to have arisen from the *Bachelor/ette* franchise. Since her time on the seventh season of *The Bachelor Australia* in 2019, in which she was the runner up, she has established something of a media empire: she has a successful podcast on a major podcast network (*It's A Lot,* on Nova Entertainment); a radio show (*Hot Nights with Abbie Chatfield,* 7-9pm weeknights on Hit FM), a successful vibrator collaboration (Vush x Abbie), a clothing line (Verbose The Label), a swimwear collaboration (RAQ x Abbie Chatfield), TV hosting gigs for *FBoy Island Australia* and *The Masked Singer*, and recently toured the country with her shows *A Hot Night With Abbie Chatfield* and the Trauma Dump Tour, playing to sold-out crowds at major venues like the Sydney Opera House and Melbourne's Athenaeum Theatre. In addition to becoming an influencer, like many ex-*Bachelor/ette* personalities—she has over 450,000 Instagram followers—Chatfield has become a prominent voice in the Australian media landscape, ultimately far over-shadowing the Bachelor who "dumped [her] on a rock in Africa," astrophysicist Dr Matt Agnew (*Bachelor In Paradise Australia* S3E1).

Given this, you would be forgiven for thinking that Chatfield is one of the franchise's best beloved contestants. This is arguably true, but only in hindsight. Chatfield was, in fact, edited to be the villain of her season, and became the locus of significant scandal. Several things contributed to this portrayal, but the one to which the most scandal inhered was her unabashed and often expressed sexual desire for Bachelor Agnew. If, as we argued above, scandals in the world of *The Bachelor/ette* hinge on whether a figure is behaving in a way appropriate for a protagonist in a love story, Chatfield's "villainy" hinged on an assumption that her frank and frequent articulations of her sexual desire disqualified her from being a romantic heroine, largely underpinned by the notion that she was using the promise of sex to manipulate Agnew. However, after the show, she rewrote her scandal-inducing narrative significantly. As one headline claims, she went from "'the villain' to a hero" (Powers); and as another puts it, she "turned her villain edit into a feminist empire" (T. Mitchell), positioning herself as a new, highly modern, feminist heroine.

We can divide Chatfield's narrative into three clear media phases: pre-show, during the show, and post-show.

Pre-show—the bimbo

Because Chatfield was a contestant, not the lead, there was not a great deal of media coverage around her before the seventh season of *The Bachelor Australia* started airing in mid-2019. However, she did feature heavily in one of the pre-show advertisements, which showed her initial meeting with Bachelor Agnew on the red carpet. Chatfield asks Agnew what he does for a living, to which he replies, "I'm an astrophysicist". She responds back, "okay, I'm a Gemini" (S7E1).

Both Chatfield and Agnew have since clarified that she was joking, and that they were both aware of this at the time (Bucklow; Wahi). However, the way the promo was edited positioned the moment as "cringe-worthy", with Chatfield portrayed as significantly less intelligent than Agnew (Carpineti). As she later described it, she was portrayed as a "dumb girl with curly hair and big tits" (Gillman). The "awkward moment a Bachelor contestant thinks 'astrophysicist' is a STAR SIGN" went viral internationally (Scrimshire, emphasis in original), and Chatfield was "ridiculed around the world" (Bucklow).

During the show—the manipulative temptress

The astrophysicist/Gemini moment, while a locus of a lot of media coverage, was not exactly scandalous. While one might argue that a person who thought astrophysicist was a star sign would not be a fit heroine for a love story where the hero *was* an astrophysicist, there was a tacit understanding that this imagined version of Chatfield would never seriously be in the running of Agnew's heart and would be soon eliminated. However, the version of Chatfield that actually did emerge on the show *was* a serious contender, and the way that she was constructed in the narrative attracted a considerable amount of scandal.

The astrophysicist/Gemini moment aside, Chatfield's narrative properly commenced in the show's fourth episode. She was one of the contestants on a photo shoot group date, taking part in a Cleopatra-themed shoot with Agnew and another contestant, Vakoo Kauapirura. Chatfield made a point of getting close to Agnew in the shoot, and there was immense and intense sexual chemistry evident between them: "Abbie is RUTHLESS. She's the kind of girl if she had eyes for my boyfriend, I'd just hand him over to her and know that I'd lose the fight," Tahlia Pritchard wrote for Punkee (emphasis in original). Chatfield later got time alone with Agnew, and, despite promising the other contestants not to kiss him, kissed him. "You know that awkward feeling you get when you're sitting near a couple who'd 100% be having sex if it weren't for your presence?" Edwina Carr Barraclough wrote for Body + Soul. "THAT is how Australians tuning into watch *Bachie* felt last night" (emphasis in original).

Over the course of the season, the narrative around Abbie positioned her as a distinct rival to several other contestants. The first was Monique Morley, who was eliminated after Chatfield reported back to Agnew that she had called him a "dog cunt" to some other the other women, in response to the fact that Chatfield and Agnew had kissed (S7E5-6). The second was Sogand Mohtat, whose narrative centred largely on the fact that she thought Chatfield was behaving differently when the cameras were on versus when they were off—a feud which was reportedly significantly exaggerated by the edit, (S7E7-11; see Nicholson). The third was Elly Miles, one of the initial frontrunners, who picked up where Mohtat left off and reported back to Agnew that she did not think Chatfield was "there for the right reasons" (S7E13)—an oft-repeated Bachelor phrase which signals that a contestant is disingenuous. Miles and Chatfield had been diegetically positioned as foils throughout the season, with Chatfield sharing a physical connection with Agnew while Miles had an emotional one, and so when Miles was eliminated in the thirteenth episode while Chatfield stayed, it carried considerable narrative weight. The central thread through all these feuds was the idea that Chatfield was dishonest, insincere and manipulative, something which, combined with her oft-expressed sexual attraction to Agnew, solidified her position as the season's villain.

As the season moved towards its close, it was the sexual attraction aspect which became increasingly foregrounded. When, on the penultimate episode, Chatfield told Agnew, "I just really want to have sex with you. I'm really horny," before saying to the camera, "I feel like this is the wrong timeslot for what I want to do to him" (S7E15), some of the audience commentary was so scathing and negative that host Osher Günsberg weighed in on social media to defend Chatfield and her right to "[express] her sexuality" (Leighton-Dore). Even in media outlets sympathetic to her, Chatfield was positioned as a somewhat transgressive outlier—for example, in Punkee, she was called "the horniest Bachy contestant ever" (Watson, "Abbie Might Be"). The narrative implication was that Chatfield was using sex to manipulate Agnew, a phenomenon she identified herself as foundational to her "villain" edit:

> …the only issue that seemed to eventuate was that I was overly sexual, and that I was 'manipulative'. And I think it just came down to the fact that society understands sexuality as a manipulation tactic from women, not as a genuine feeling. (Gillman)

The finale ultimately set up a clear dichotomy between Chatfield and the eventual winner Chelsie McLeod: Chatfield, a manipulative temptress; McLeod, a shy good girl (S7E16). Agnew chose McLeod, but much of the coverage of the finale focused on Chatfield and her reaction when Agnew broke up with her (a mild display of anger, rather than the more traditional emotionally restrained well wishes), which one recapper called a "putrid response" (Weir). Chatfield's position as the narrative's villain, trying to lure the hero away from his true path with sex, was sealed, even though, in her own words, her "biggest crime was being confident and dry-humping Matt on the beach" (Story). She was narratively positioned, and received by a large segment of the audience, as an inappropriate protagonist in a romance plot because of her "scandalous" behaviour.

Post-show—the feminist heroine

When the show aired, Chatfield was on the wrong end of what media outlet Punkee called a "nationwide slut-shaming effort" (Story). She received a barrage of hate and online trolling, including death threats—in her own words, "I have a whole google drive with HUNDREDS of DMs … Threats of violence, name calling, threats to my safety and general snide comments" (Fowler, emphasis in original; see also *New Idea*). It was on a scale unlike what previous contestants experienced: as one regular *Bachelor/ette* recapper wrote, "As someone who writes about *The Bachelor* almost daily and collects tweets about the episodes, I can say that the vitriol levelled at Abbie online has been unprecedented. It's truly ugly stuff" (Watson, "Bachy Runner-Up").

However, Chatfield soon set about recrafting her own narrative. She pushed back firmly against the slut-shaming she had received, firstly via a lengthy Instagram post, and then more broadly, as her media profile began to build (Heading; Watson, "Bachy Runner-Up"). Maintaining visibility post-show allows the commodification of newly acquired celebrity (Wood), and Abbie used these media moments to advance her own narrative, rather than the show's scandalous one. The growth of her narrative is summed up quite neatly in an article pointedly entitled "Why Abbie Chatfield is the Feminist Hero No One Wanted, But Everyone Needs", where the author writes: "She has gone from a 'love-to-hate-her' one-dimensional reality TV show character to a real-life human, standing up for the rights of women and against online bullying" (Forte). The start of her podcast *It's A Lot*, her stint on and eventual victory of *I'm A Celebrity… Get Me Out of Here*, and—perhaps most aptly—an episode of TV program *Reputation Rehab* further cemented the redirection of Chatfield's narrative and her repositioning as an emerging feminist icon, and led to many of the opportunities outlined in the introduction to this section. In her own words, "There was, I think, [an edit] in the house [the *Bachelor* mansion], and then also the edit [I created] outside the house" (Gillman).

It should be noted that when Chatfield entered a public romantic relationship in late 2021 with ex-*Bachelorette Australia* contestant Konrad Bien-Stephen, it was—like her appearance on *The Bachelor Australia*—not without a degree of scandal. However, this time, rather than the scandal arising from any feeling that she was not an appropriate person to be the protagonist in a romance plot, other reasons were at play. Chatfield announced the relationship the day before the finale of the *Bachelorette* season from which Bien-Stephen had been eliminated the week prior, which featured Noongar-Yamatji woman Brooke Blurton as the Bachelorette. This was widely viewed—not least by Blurton—as a display of white privilege, detracting from a romantic narrative of which Blurton was the hero (Vernem). Chatfield went on to publicly acknowledge her privilege and apologise.

The romance itself was not scandalous. Indeed, the idea of Chatfield and Bien-Stephen together was very popular: for example, media outlet Pedestrian described it as "the hottest boyfriend hard-launch ever" and that "they're really bloody cute together" (Iqbal). It was the timing, rather than the romance, which was scandalous—something which signals the way in which Chatfield had moved from villain to heroine in the cultural imagination. This was further reinforced by the widespread disappointment expressed in Chatfield across the media and social media landscapes for the timing of her relationship announcement (eg. Watson, "Exhaustive Explainer"). This was regarded as her "first misstep" (Paine)—or, we might argue, one of the few things she had done post-*Bachelor* that had positioned her as anything other than a modern feminist heroine.

Case Study #2: Lesina Nakhid-Schuster, *The Bachelorette New Zealand*

The first season of *The Bachelorette New Zealand* represented something of a shake-up for the local franchise. It came on the heels of three successive *Bachelor*—that is, male-led—seasons. There were also other format modifications, such as the introduction of a female voiceover narrator (Aotearoa TV personality Jodie Rimmer), the expanded role of the new host (Art Green, the first local Bachelor), the reliance on handheld Go-Pro footage filmed by participants and Green, and wider visibility of the off-screen mechanics of filming, such as crew members. It also featured two leads instead of one: Lily McManus-Semchyshyn, who had been the runner-up on the third season of *The Bachelor New Zealand*, and Dr Lesina Nakhid-Schuster, a newcomer to the franchise.

While other national franchises had had two leads before—such as Season 11 of the American *Bachelorette*, featuring Kaitlyn Bristowe and Britt Nilsson—this was the first with two *concurrent* leads (in Bristowe and Nilsson's case, for instance, the contestants voted on the first night for who they wanted to be the Bachelorette, eliminating Nilsson and making Bristowe the sole lead).[1] This, along with other format changes, both opened up and closed off storytelling possibilities for the show. The capacity for Nakhid-Schuster and McManus-Semchyshyn to discuss their romantic prospects and decisions, with each other and with Green, allowed for some more internal mechanics of the romance plot to become clear. However, having two romantic heroines also created a split narrative investment and a sense of competition, even though there was little actual conflict between the two Bachelorettes. One heroine—McManus-Semchyshyn—was positioned as upholding the position of Bachelorette, in that she stepped through the process and found a partner at the end (Richie Boyens, who she dated for about eighteen months). Nakhid-Schuster, however, ultimately did not choose a partner, a decision which was diegetically foreshadowed for some time before—something which positioned her as transgressive and, arguably, scandalous.

Like Abbie Chatfield, we can divide Nakhid-Schuster's narrative into pre-show, during the show, and post-show media phases; and we can also see a concerted effort from Nakhid-Schuster to rescript her own narrative. However, unlike Chatfield, because she was the Bachelorette rather than a contestant, Nakhid-Schuster started out positioned as an ideal romantic heroine—a position she symbolically lost and then had to fight to reclaim.

Pre-show—the perfect woman

In the previous three seasons of the *Bachelor New Zealand* franchise, the Bachelor was not announced until the first episode aired. In *The Bachelorette New Zealand*, however, Nakhid-Schuster's role as Bachelorette was announced well in advance (unlike McManus-Semchyshyn's—it was a narrative surprise when she joined the show several episodes in), and so she was the locus of a great deal of pre-show media. Instead of relying on format recognition to bring in viewers, Nakhid-Schuster was introduced as a reason to watch the show. She was presented as an exemplar Bachelorette: a woman of colour (on her Instagram profile, she identifies as Samoan, German, Trinidad-and-Tobagonian, and Lebanese), in her thirties (locating her in a demographic one might consider "ready to settle down"), with an aspirational career (she is a doctor). Promotional material highlighted her intelligence, professional success, and the fact that "she knows what she wants" (Barnett). Nakhid-Schuster reinforced this in her own words:

> If that was me as an audience member, I would like to see someone of substance, someone with a brain. I know what I want; I've dated and I've done all of that, and I'm so ready for that next life phase. Being 32 and having lived a full life, having done all of the things that I wanted and being where I'm at now, my outlook is very tailored to what I want out of it, which is something long-term. I'm totally ready for that. (McKenzie)

In short, Nakhid-Schuster was positioned by the promotional material as both ideal and extraordinary. She was an aspirational figure (as opposed to McManus-Semchyshyn, who was positioned as a relational figure, the kind of girl who would gladly have a beer with the boys). “I may not do everything traditionally, and I may not be the typical Bachelorette, but I hope New Zealanders will embrace that,” Nakhid-Schuster remarked in an interview (McKenzie)—unintentionally foreshadowing the fact that her failure to take the “traditional”, “typical” Bachelorette route would engender scandal.

During the show—the failed romance heroine

The beginnings of the shift in Nakhid-Schuster’s narrative occurred very early, with the introduction of McManus-Semchyshyn as the second Bachelorette. While this happened so quickly in the show’s run that it was obviously planned, the introduction of a second lead after the fact came with an implication that the first lead—Nakhid-Schuster—had done something wrong, or was not embodying her role appropriately, necessitating an alternative. In the third episode, the contestants asked each other which of the two women they planned to pursue, with on-screen graphics tallying the men’s faces on either side of a fence; symbolically shifting the show’s structure from one where the woman is the hero to one where women are competing for male approval. Nakhid-Schuster might know what she wants, but here, the contestants have decided whether they want to pursue her, figuratively removing a significant amount of power from her role as Bachelorette.

This disempowerment of Nakhid-Schuster continued throughout the season. Emblematically, for instance, when intruder Richie Boyens was introduced in the seventeenth episode, he chose to go on a date with Nakhid-Schuster, although the narrative clearly showed he was actually interested in McManus-Semchyshyn, inverting the franchise’s usual logics of scarcity. During the date, cutaway interviews of Boyens were shown talking through his thought process, as well as interviews of McManus-Semchyshyn discussing her feelings about him being on a date with Nakhid-Schuster. It was not until the very end of the date that any of Nakhid-Schuster’s thoughts were shown at all, her voice marginalised and sidelined in a story in which she was supposed to be the lead.

From this point onwards, the romance between McManus-Semchyshyn and Boyens became the focal point of the series (which Boyens eventually won), with Nakhid-Schuster relegated to a narrative position that was at best subordinate and at worst transgressive. Shortly after her date with Boyens, Nakhid-Schuster was involved in conflict with another contestant, Mike Bullot. She explicitly reminded him that she, not he, was in the power position, and soon afterwards, Bullot wondered aloud to the other contestants whether Nakhid-Schuster “has given up on everyone” (S1E19). He, as well as another contestant, Michael Frood, both choose to leave the show in quick succession, casting aspersions on Nakhid-Schuster and her intentions: “I don’t know if she’s ever been completely honest with us, or maybe not completely honest with herself, but either one doesn’t feel comfortable” (S1E26). Bullot invoked a phrase which has become *Bachelor/ette* code for transgression when he asked whether Nakhid-Schuster was “here for the right reasons”—following it up with, “my gut says not” (S1E25). He became a kind of audience proxy in the show, with his position taken up by some of the media coverage (eg. “Mike Bullot’s Shock”; “Mike Bullot Questions”; Jones), further inverting the usual power dynamics of the format when he said things like, “I hope from this she will understand that to get everything she wants out of this she’s probably gotta figure a few things out pretty quickly, I think, and I’m really interested to see how this all plays out” (S1E26). Inherent in this is a kind of microcosm of the nature of scandal as outlined by Adut ("A Theory", 216-17): Bullot contended that Nakhid-Schuster has committed a violation against the franchise's norms, which will necessarily be publicised by the nature of the show, and said he was hungry to see "how this all plays out"—the reaction and potential subsequent discredit.

Nakhid-Schuster ultimately did not choose a partner on the show, eliminating her two final contestants: a scandalous talk-provoking choice in a show like this, as it directly transgressed the romance masterplot. This was foreshadowed several episodes in advance: "[T]here's no such thing as a top two, really, like, it's just however many people are left that I feel like there is a genuine connection with, and it could be a top zero," she said in one episode (S1E27), and "I could choose Aaron. I could choose Logan. Or I could choose no one… I actually think choosing no one is the hardest decision," she said in another (S1E29). When she made her final decision, she framed it in terms of empowerment:

> I knew what I wanted from the beginning and it was finding that long-term person, that forever person… I'm really proud that I feel, like, empowered enough at this second that I didn't find the right person for me, and if that's the case, then it's okay I've left this with no one. (S1E31)

However, this framing was not necessarily supported by the narrative as told by the show. Other contestants had picked up on the disciplinary rhetoric of Bullot, questioning whether Nakhid-Schuster had actually made a genuine effort to find love, including finalist Aaron McNabb, with whom Nakhid-Schuster reportedly had a short relationship post-show, who questioned her motivations extensively in the media post-show (Henger, "Aaron Spills"; NZ Herald). This was heightened by the contrast with McManus-Semchyshyn, who did successfully navigate the *Bachelorette* process and leave with a partner. That partner, Boyens, was notably quoted in the media as agreeing with Bullot: "Lesina just sort of seems like she turns up and reads off her scripted cards sometimes" (S1E26; Henger, "Lesina Explains"). The implication here, made doubly impactful because it came from someone who found love on *The Bachelorette,* was that Nakhid-Schuster was going through the motions, with little patience for Nakhid-Schuster's counter-argument that forcing a romance where there was no emotional connection *would* be going through the motions. As one commentator put it, at the conclusion of the season, "there was a lot of murmuring about Lesina having disrespected the spirit of the show" (Brookes).

Post-show—Dr Lesina

When the show ended, the state of play was clear. If a romance narrative is defined by a central love plot and a happy ending, then the protagonists of that plot were McManus-Semchyshyn and Boyens (RWA). Nakhid-Schuster, for all that she had been cast as the ideal heroine pre-show, was positioned as disingenuous, and as a tertiary character in a plot in which she was supposed to be the lead. The two are arguably linked: symbolically, we are led to read her failure to achieve the romance plot's happy ending as a result of insincerity and lack of investment. Lesina choosing no one deliberately transgresses society's "beliefs about the perceived value and accessibility of marriage suggest[ing] that anyone who is not married may be called into question, particularly when beyond the age at which being married is normative" (Morris et al. 458). In other words: instead of a romance heroine, Nakhid-Schuster was a scandalous cautionary tale.[2]

As with Chatfield, however, once Nakhid-Schuster regained more of a voice in and control over her own narrative, things began to shift. While she did not grant many interviews, in those she did, she highlighted the involvement of the production in shaping her narrative, discussing things like the lack of control over who she took on dates, and lack of agency overall: "We didn't have to do anything we didn't want to do… But at the same time we definitely couldn't do everything we wanted to do" ("I Knew It Wasn't"). Notably, she also discussed the ways in which her narrative was set up in comparison to McManus-Semchyshyn, and the way it both marginalised her and put her in a somewhat villainous position, saying that once "producers started talking about my journey as the 'non-love' storyline' […] I knew it wasn't going to look good for me" ("I Knew It Wasn't"). Like Chatfield, she used social media to directly address the audience, and some of their vitriolic reactions:

> …I understand the hard edit I'm going to have to face coming up because my storyline didn't exactly go the way everyone wanted it to. I really wasn't prepared to face what 'going against the grain' looks like. (Instagram, March 17 2020)

She expanded on this in an interview given in connection with the casting call for 2021 contestants, offering a warning about going on the show: "more so a priority than love is just making a really good TV show… It's a tried and tested format. They don't want that format disturbed… they want you to choose someone" (Downes).

The remaking of Nakhid-Schuster's image has not been as dramatic as in the case of Chatfield. This is for a few reasons. Firstly, the timing of her season meant that the final episodes aired just as Aotearoa was entering its first COVID lockdown in March 2020. This not only distracted from her season, but impacted on media coverage, with Bauer Media NZ—the publisher of most of the nation's popular magazines, including at least four which would typically carry *Bachelor/ette* tie-in coverage—deemed non-essential and consequently closed. As a result, while Nakhid-Schuster was certainly a scandalous figure, the talk around her perceived transgressions was not quite as dramatic as it might otherwise have been, given her decision to leave the show alone was broadcast during the beginnings of a global emergency. On top of this, while the narrative itself was not necessarily generous towards her, the fact that she returned to work as a doctor—notably, in COVID wards—softened the impact of what might have been significant disapprobation otherwise.

Nakhid-Schuster's return to medicine, as opposed to a move into media, is another key reason why her image makeover has not been as dramatic as Chatfield's, who leveraged her scandalous celebrity status to build her media career. Reality stars may commodify their celebrity status with further appearances on "celebrity" formats of reality television (Collins). Chatfield did this—she won *I'm A Celebrity… Get Me Out of Here!*—but Nakhid-Schuster did not pursue this route. Rather, after a period of time as a locum, she moved to Taranaki to take up a contract as an ear, nose and throat surgeon, remarking that "[t]he stars aligned… not for a man but for a job" (Shaskey). This is tied to the third reason that her image rehabilitation has not been as dramatic as Chatfield's: she is moving towards a return to her pre-show perception as successful and intelligent, whereas Chatfield's initial perception was anything but. Nakhid-Schuster is now an influential Aotearoa public health professional, fronting *Let's Talanoa* (2021-), a web series discussing the COVID-19 vaccine via the Ministry for Pacific Peoples, and regularly doing Instagram stories in collaboration with government organisation Waka Kotahi (McIlraith). Ultimately, the narrative of "Dr Lesina" has overtaken the narrative of "failed Bachelorette" and the majority of media coverage about her now focuses on her as a medical professional, with perhaps a glancing mention of her time on reality television (eg. Shaskey; MedWorld).

Discussion and Conclusion

Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster occupied different positions in their different *Bachelor/ette* seasons, and these seasons took place in different media landscapes: there is, for instance, far more robust coverage and engagement with the Australian franchise than the one in Aotearoa, purely for reasons of population size (for more on *Bachelor* recap culture, see McAlister, "The TV Recap"). They had different narrative trajectories pre-, during, and post-show: Chatfield went from bimbo to villain to feminist icon, while Nakhid-Schuster went from ideal heroine to failed heroine and back again.

As a result, they provoked different kinds of scandals within their respective seasons. However, the underlying assumption was the same—that is, that neither was behaving in the way one would expect from a protagonist in a love story. In both cases, this was gendered: they were both interpreted specifically as inappropriate romance *heroines*. Chatfield's overt displays of sexuality were read as disqualifying her from this position, as was Nakhid-Schuster's lack of emotional connection with any of her suitors (especially when compared with McManus-Semchyshyn). Both were understood as disingenuous: Nakhid-Schuster as going through the motions, Chatfield as manipulating Bachelor Agnew with sex. Neither, we might argue, was constructed as "there for the right reasons"—that is, as genuinely seeking the long-lasting romantic relationship that is the central promise of the show. As such, this removed them from heroine contention, and relegated them to different textual functions: villain for Chatfield, failed heroine for Nakhid-Schuster (in contrast to successful heroine McManus-Semchyshyn). Additionally, both women failed to perform singledom at a gendered, age-appropriate pace. Lahad posits that "waiting" for the younger woman "can be construed as romantic and a positive tension-builder", for the older, "waiting can become imbued with dread, fear, and uncertainty" (178). Narratively, Chatfield was portrayed as seeking to quicken this process, despite being one of many women in the relationship, while Nakhid-Schuster, having been presented with a suite of eligible bachelors, was portrayed as choosing to prolong the ordeal and wait even longer.

As described above, according to Adut, scandal has three components: the violation, the reaction, and the discredit ("A Theory", 216-17). In both case studies, the violation and the audience reaction during and immediately post-show is clear. However, what both case studies also show is the way in which the discredit can be managed and mitigated, and a reputation recuperated and/or restored, particularly once the transgressor has regained their voice in the narrative. If, as Apostolodis and Williams argue, scandal involves both an action and the talk about it (4), what both Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster were able to do was change the conversation—*once* they regained their voices within it.

On one level, it seems strange to position these women as voiceless, given they exist in a format which relies heavily on talk. When Bachelor/ettes and contestants are on dates, they not only talk with each other, but are filmed talking about the date. The bulk content of any given episode *is* talk, and there was certainly a great deal of talk from Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster depicted in their respective seasons. However, there is no escaping from the fact that reality television is a highly edited and mediated form of narrative, and that just because people are shown talking it does not mean it necessarily reflects what they are *saying*—see, for instance, the frequent use in reality television of a technique called "Frankenbiting", where different parts of sentences will be stitched together to create a new sentence, sometimes with an entirely different meaning (Becker). Moreover, because the aim is to create a narrative—specifically, in the case of *The Bachelor/ette*, a love plot—character complexities are regularly sanded down to make way for easily understandable archetypes, something evident in both case studies. Talk which does not contribute to this characterisation can simply be discarded.

Post-show, though, Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster were able to regain not just a voice, but a measure of control over their own narratives that allowed them to express more complexities. Chatfield successfully pushed back against her villain positioning on feminist grounds, arguing for a reinterpretation of her expressions of sexual desire. Nakhid-Schuster did not engage in as much active talk about her season, but, through returning to work as a medical professional and directing the bulk of her talk towards her career, she has largely reclaimed the position she held pre-show. If scandal is a "discursive construct" (Apostolidis and Williams), both women have made major contributions to the living entities of their narratives, claiming and reclaiming different positions within them. This is not dissimilar to the experience some scandalous female *Bachelor/ette* participants have had in the parent American franchise: for instance, Kaitlyn Bristowe, a Bachelorette made scandalous for sleeping with a contestant before the narrative-mandated appropriate time for sex, was able to reshape her narrative in large part through participation on *Dancing With The Stars.* This format, unlike *The Bachelor/ette*, allows participants to directly appeal to the public. If, as Grolleau et al. suggest, scandal involves the transgressor, the victim, and the scandalised public, then having the opportunity to directly address that public matters greatly when it comes to reshaping a narrative—something Bristowe evidently succeeded in, as she ended up winning the competition.[3]

As Jacobsson and Löfmarck have argued, scandals can be detectors of social norms. In the case of *The Bachelor/ette*, these are specifically norms around behaviour in romantic relationships. There are obvious feminist implications around the ways in which Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster were portrayed—Chatfield's edit encouraging the audience to slut-shame her, Nakhid-Schuster being rhetorically disciplined by male contestants who played the role of audience proxy—but what is perhaps most interesting here is the idea of sincerity. Both case studies were positioned as disingenuous, as insincere, potentially as manipulative: as being there "for the wrong reasons". The norm revealed here is that in romantic relationships, we expect wholehearted sincerity and vulnerability, unguarded investment in its potential. Because Chatfield and Nakhid-Schuster were portrayed as not upholding this, they became scandalous figures.

However, gaining some agency over their own narratives post-show allowed them not just to retell their stories but demonstrate their sincerity. In the case of Nakhid-Schuster, she was able to demonstrate that she really was who she had been portrayed as being at the beginning of the show—a competent professional woman uninterested in settling for an unsatisfactory relationship. Chatfield was able to demonstrate that her expressions of sexual desire were authentic rather than manipulative, which was foundational to the beginnings of her feminist media career. Both thus reshaped conversations about what a "good" romantic protagonist looks like in the *Bachelor/ette* universe, but here, we can see the one core thing that remains the same, highlighted by the way scandal manifests: a good romantic protagonist is always sincere.

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[1] *The Bachelorette Australia* would go on to have a dual lead season later in 2020 (S6, starring Elly and Becky Miles); as did US *Bachelorette* in 2022 (S19, starring Rachel Recchia and Gabby Windey).

[2] As Lahad and Hazan argue, "single women above a certain age are faced with a triple discrimination, based on their age, gender and single status" (127). Nakhid-Schuster, as a woman of colour transgressing the romance masterplot, also faced a fourth level of discrimination.

[3] Although it is a fairly common phenomenon for Bachelor/ettes and popular ex-contestants to go on *Dancing With The Stars* in the US, Bristowe was notably prevented from doing so for some time by *Bachelor/ette* executive producer Mike Fleiss, something which suggests the franchise's investment in maintaining the narrative as told in the show.

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