How Women Are Portrayed In Reality Television

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In the media of today’s society, we are faced with portrayals and stereotypes of just about every type of person in the world. While race and class are often common targets, gender becomes one of the most polarized social groups with their the performance expectations.

Women in the 21st century cling to images of other females that they see and admire in the media, thereby subscribing themselves to the hegemonic ideology of what femininity is for women in society. Of all media outlets, reality television shows are the most effective in establishing the hegemonic norm because reality shows feature real, average women who are similar to them and are not famous. Reality makeover shows can feature the transformation of the average woman instead of a famous celebrity, setting the illusion that anyone can achieve similar results. It also fulfills hegemonic requirements because “dominant ideologies must be reproduced in the activities of our everyday lives,” (p. 34) or in the perceived everyday images seen in reality television (Lull, 1995). The social structure created and perpetuated by mass media influences the audiences to perform perceived social roles that becomes responsible for women’s dissatisfaction with their bodies (Lull, 1995). This remains unchallenged through use of iconography reflecting hyper feminized media through reality makeover shows. The hegemonic feminine ideal is established through makeover shows featuring images and themes of constant self-improvement, thin ideal, fashion expectations, and rejection of the hegemonic ideal.

Women are often the targets of sexual objectification. “Media sexual objectification occurs whenever a person’s body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated from his or her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments” (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011, p. 479). They are placed on an unobtainable pedestal that is nearly impossible to reach. With such high standards of “perfection,” as seen from the perspective of males in today’s society, women are continuously looking to self-improve their physical attributes. The “average woman” today is
perceived as unattractive and unable to meet the standards of society. The physical appearance of women have changed drastically over the years through an increase in plastic surgery and painful surgical procedures to alter body images in order to be qualified as “beautiful.” Take for example the hit television series America's Next Top Model. After eighteen seasons on the CW Network, Tyra Banks, executive producer and lead judge, has provided a platform for “ordinary” girls to fulfill their dreams of becoming a top American fashion model. “As a result, the beauty discourses reified in ANTM function as a hegemonic force in that those of minority and working class status are considered less attractive than those who already hold the monetary, social and political power in society” (Scott, 2007, p.1).

“According to Gramsci’s (1971) influential theory of hegemony, those groups with power in a particular society or culture maintain their dominance not necessarily through violence, but rather ideologically and with the implicit consent of the subordinated” (Mazzarella, 2008).

America’s Next Top Model highlights the contestants in such a way that persuades young women to replicate their behaviors and physical appearances in order to be perceived as “pretty.” The most significant example of this theme of constant self-improvement during the shows is the annual makeover episode. Each contestant is given a “makeover” in hope of becoming more marketable within the fashion industry. As Reaves, et al. (2004) note, “the images of fashion models become familiar and equated with beauty standards; their bodies become the texts to be read and used to evaluate the bodies of the broader society.”

Although society as a whole may not see the deception within this television series, it is evident that the contestants reinforce the hegemonic power over what is perceived to be “beautiful.” This power has created a cultural need for constant self-improvement. In an episode titled ‘The Girl Who Wants Out’ of season 19, one of the contestants named Maria claims, “I’m
so scared, if they cut my hair I’m going to flip a shit.” Worried she would look “unattractive” Maria felt uncomfortable cutting her hair short because she has previous perceptions of which hair length is “most beautiful.” Another contestant named Destiny felt apprehensive towards her makeover when the hair stylist began cutting her hair short and notes, “I just want to have a more feminine look. I don’t feel pretty. I don’t feel confident. I don’t want to look like a lesbian.” Because of society having predispositions of beauty, both Maria and Destiny felt uncomfortable with short hair as they felt short hair was too ‘masculine’ and ‘unattractive’ for females.

Constant self-improvement is evident throughout this television series. The makeover episode emphasizes this theme by introducing the contestants as “young, beautiful women” in search of becoming the next top model yet criticize them for their physical imperfections. These contestants were picked out of thousands of young girls to be a part of this television series as some of the most beautiful women in the world, yet they still require makeovers to make them “more beautiful.” By constantly looking to improve themselves, women are hoping to reach the unattainable pedestal, but it is nearly impossible to achieve.

Along with always looking to improve themselves, women will go through many hardships and challenges in order to embody the thin ideal associated with beauty. Yet, these women do not come without consequences and these consequences can solely derive from the thin-ideal that is created through the media. “There is a mediated norm for body image in present-day culture, and it is characterized by bodies that are extremely thin” (Kinnally, 2012). Furthermore, “thinness often has a very positive connotation, one that denotes success and social desirability” (Kinnally, 2012). This “thin-ideal” is created by media, and constantly placed in front of women as a physical goal that they must strive to reach.
America’s Next Top Model is a prime example of how the thin ideal is admired and praised not only socially and within the modeling industry, but also reinforced through the competition format of the show. Within the show, the judges, past models, successful fashion businessmen and women place these women in little clothing and put their body shapes under scrutiny. A past winner of season 10, Whitney Thompson, is the only plus size model to win this competition. She has been in the media’s eye ever since her win, and has published articles regarding the media and how it portrays models, as well as how women try to emulate them. America’s Next Top Model redeemed itself in the final episode of season 10 with a quote from guest judge, supermodel Paulina Porizkova, when she spoke about Whitney, “This should not be called plus-size model or full-figured, it should just be called beautiful.” This is something that the reality shows such as this do not always emulate through their production.

Through her success, Whitney has been able to combat this view of reality television and she has stated that it is incorrect. Whitney has nailed it by hitting the issue right on the head. Whitney explains that the images portrayed through the media are “so terribly messed up, even [with] just sample sizes being a size two” (Thompson, 2011). She goes on to further explain that “it’s not real, the women we are looking at are not happy and not healthy” (Thompson, 2011). The media, specifically reality television, creates images through technology that are not real. They use airbrushed images to an extreme where the women seem “perfectly thin”, but in reality they are dangerously thin. However, women at home are unable to tell the difference, so they simply watch the programs and strive to emulate the images they see, which are not actually real. Whitney states that the modeling industry is crazy, but what the women viewing the media do not know is that “the majority of the girls are under the age of 16,” and these girls will be “starving to death and they will just airbrush out your ribcage” (Thompson, 2011).
Another reality television show, *The Swan* featured on the Fox Network, emphasizes women becoming steadily reliant upon plastic surgery in order to fit the beauty standards in society. In this show, women compete to see who can become the most beautiful after going through cosmetic surgeries costing up to $250,000, dieting, and exercise (Marwick, 2010). After going through a three month process where they cannot look at themselves in the mirror, they have a final reveal where they see themselves for the first time transformed into the hegemonic ideal created by plastic surgery. The beauty standards suggest that the personalities of these women are not good enough if their physical qualities are not up to par. The show emphasizes beauty is only found on the outside, and physical beauty is solely needed to make people happy and content with themselves. *The Swan* is consistent with this theme as they hope to alter women’s physical appearances in hopes of becoming “beautiful” young women. The hegemonic ideal in society accepts plastic surgery as “normal” behavior, which is untrue.

*The Swan* has skewed the perceptions of beauty to create an ideal women not found in reality. By appropriating images of female-oriented pop culture such as beauty pageants and makeovers, *The Swan* encourages “evaluation by a medical-psychiatric institutional gaze that measures natural female bodies against a hyper-stylized version of femininity”, weighing the natural ones as inadequate (Marwick, 2010, p. 252). *The Swan* also reflects the thin ideal, as many contestants complain about their weight and want liposuction in order to achieve the ideal body shape emphasized in the dominant ideology. The boom of plastic surgery, and the cultural discourse approving of cosmetic surgery, has created a focus on using surgery to create the hegemonic ideal version of beauty.

To summarize the point of how beauty is skewed on reality television, Whitney Thompson states, “the average size women is size 14, the size for a plus size model splits at a
size four, and the sample sizes are a size two.” Furthermore, she explains that “… particularly in our country it is not realistic [to have] exceptions to look like a Victoria Secret magazine when they do not even look like that themselves” (Thompson, 2011). Women and men alike watching these shows at home begin to have a skewed vision of what is beautiful, as reality television makes up 57% of all television (Ribarsky, 2012). Something that is consistently viewed and put on our television screen has a major effect on the perceptions of popular culture, something that should be a top priority of what should be believed as real regarding reality television.

In addition, fashion functions similarly to the thin ideal, acting as a key component for their overall self-image. Clothing styles and wardrobes have become a significant part of the hegemonic feminine role in our society. Many models are not just put on display for their beauty, but given the responsibility of modeling the latest trends. Fashion and beauty experts are given their role in order to tell the rest of us the latest trends and how we should dress and publicly present ourselves (Solomon et al, 1992). With these high expectations, women are constantly looking to better themselves through their clothing, in order to portray themselves in the best hegemonic light to others.

In shows such as What Not To Wear on the TLC Network, unstylish and unglamorous women are given makeovers to recreate their outer appearance. While makeover shows, like the ones previously mentioned, focus on making a woman become beautiful through permanent solutions, What Not To Wear solely focuses on “revamping one’s wardrobe” (p. 2) during their overall makeover (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007). Although this reality makeover show has both female and male participants, it is typically a woman that is featured. Women are thus given the chance to recreate themselves, and portray themselves in a new and better light to the public. Fashion comes as part of the opportunity for a woman to attempt to mimic the hegemonic
female, one that is thin, fashionable, and perfect on the outside, thus the “perfect woman”. The simple task of a woman dressing herself in her everyday life becomes an activity and an opportunity to play into this aspect of the dominant ideology (Lull, 1995).

However, the women shown on *What Not To Wear* are different from many of the women on other makeover shows (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007). They are nominated by their friends and family to be a participant, rather than personally attempting to be on the show. This displays the effect of individuals in their societal environment, and how others play into helping one another perfect themselves. While they may care for the person and what they bring to the table personality-wise, they also care about how that person is portrayed to the public by their outer appearance. Society constructs “ideals of beauty and identity as they are represented in media texts” (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007, p. 1). It is the society that we live in and the one that includes our friends and family that puts such a large emphasis on how we look. While the women may be nominated, they must also give their consent to the show and the network. By giving in to this, they are also giving their consent to playing into the hegemonic female image. This is considered to be much more powerful than if the participants were to be coerced or forced into the situation, and thus into hegemony (Lull, 1995).

As a whole, the standards that are placed on women’s beauty tend to be unattainable. However, with the help of $5,000 that the participants are given on *What Not To Wear*, they can attempt to reach these standards (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007). Once the participants throw away all of their previous clothing, and have completed their makeover, they are presented to their friends and family. The beauty ideal that is portrayed through reality makeover shows forms a level of confidence that women strive to obtain. The participants discuss their need to feel better about themselves, and their longing for self-confidence and self-esteem (Gallagher &
Pecot-Hebert, 2007). Once they see their “new self” at the end of the show, they are able to regain their confidence. According to the media’s image of the perfect woman, a new wardrobe can alter a woman’s outlook completely. This is potentially detrimental to being a woman in the 21st century, and it will only hinder how younger generations view themselves in the future.

In other shows, such as America’s Next Top Model (ANTM), we continue to see the importance of fashion. The models themselves must first embrace a fashionable image before they are able to achieve success in the fashion industry. To truly address this aspect of the hegemonic ideal, the participants are required to perform the dominant standards on and off of the camera. These women are not only altering their outer image, but also reiterating a fashionable persona by changing their identity. After adjusting their diet, make-up, fitness levels, and of course their fashion, they can soon hope for perfection. To be a fashion model, the participants have to work on their own fashion and be judged by top experts in the fashion industry (Scott, 2007).

The media’s representations of women are not only visual, but they also take on a deeper meaning. It is important to look a certain way and dress a certain way, but the hegemonic ideal of a woman reaches a level of perfection. If we continue to play into these makeover shows, such as What Not To Wear, we will always view woman as the objects that the media portrays them as. The aspect of fashion keeps the female image current in our society, and if a woman cannot stay up-to-date, then she loses her beauty.

Reality television shows act not only to reinforce hegemonic norms for feminine beauty, but also reject female images that clash or challenge the dominant ideology. The dominant ideology “sets the limits within which the subordinate classes live and make sense of their subordination” (p. 34) but also still maintain a level of obedience to the hegemonic status quo.
Makeover shows feature, and often exploit, subordinate images of women not conforming to hegemonic femininity and set the limit for the audience to not emulate those images. Reality television works to establish and promote the feminine ideal through makeover shows with the rejection of images that oppose the ideal through both non-permanent makeovers, such as fashion and permanent makeovers through plastic surgeries.

In the show, *What Not to Wear*, the overarching message of the program is based on how their fashion transformation will have a significant impact on their life, specifically their personal and professional lives (Busch, 2008). However, they are still the same person with the same intelligence, business skill, and relationships after the makeover. It implies the dominant ideology of women dressing fashionably must occur in order to achieve success or happiness. If you don’t have the success you want, fashion can help you obtain it. Fashion is then valued over intelligence and character, proving materialism prevails over substance (Busch, 2008). By rejecting intelligence as a marker of what is valuable and placing physical beauty and style above, it subordinates those who dress outside of trends or unprofessionally and emphasizes those who do follow the mainstream fashion and the dominant ideology.

Then, the show’s hosts Stacey and Clinton participate in a ritualized rejection process, forcing the women into a 360-degree mirror to be picked apart by their “jokes and mean-spirited comments”, then “sneer and toss their ugly clothes into the trash” (p. 12) while creating a spectacle out of particularly unfashionable items (McDonald, 2009). The host’s jokes reinforce the hegemonic image of femininity by saying comments such as “the only thing missing from this outfit is the Kleenex up the sleeve” (p. 14) to an unacceptable outfit making the woman look like a grandmother, or a hippie outfit making the woman look like “she should be baking a pie in Vermont” (Busch, 2008, p. 15). By joking about the outfits, it sets the expectation that anything
less than the “perfect” trendy, fashionable image is unacceptable. They perpetuate the 
expectation of women being fashion forward and current, thus fulfilling hegemonic beauty 
standards. They reject the woman's personal style by making harsh comments of evaluation 
beyond the unprofessionalism of the outfit. The makeover only acts to homogenize fashion to 
“what is in” and flattens the identity down to only emphasis outward physical appearance. The 
“rules” the hosts enforce for fashion appeal to the “ideal female body type of lean, curvy, busty, 
and tall” (p. 15), which tells women they must find a way through fashion illusion, or other 
means, to achieve the ideal in order to be accepted (McDonald, 2009).

For those seeking a more permanent solution to becoming the ideal, reality television 
features shows on plastic surgery. One in particular, The Swan, highlights the idea of self-
improvement culture, allowing women to think editing the self is an appropriate way to achieve 
the “authentic self” (Marwick, 2010, p. 252). The social structure that makes up hegemonic 
feminine standards is backed up by empowerment rhetoric, allowing women to believe they are 
choosing perfection, and they are the ones who believe they need to be made over. Cosmetic 
surgery is one of the ways “that women’s bodies are constructed as ugly and inferior” (p. 253) 
and emphasizes the need for perfection, creating a dominant ideology of body image (Marwick, 
2010).

One of the ways they reject the abnormal is through extensive “before” interviews with 
the women, and commentary of their average looks being demeaned and targeted. The Swan 
features testimonials with women exhibiting shamefulness for not having the ideal body, setting 
the dominant view of body culture and allowing the audience to perform similar scrutiny toward 
their own bodies (Marwick, 2010). This view of the women in the “before” testimonials frames 
their issues as individually driven instead of created by the hierarchical media- propelled system
of feminine images. For example, weight gain is reasoned through individual issues, not the culture of the thin ideal causing some to develop eating disorders (Marwick, 2010). Then, the plastic surgeons comment on the “before” women, and tear apart their average looks. The plastic surgeons would say things like “she’s actually a very beautiful girl underneath all of this,” (p. 261) establishing that “this”, or what makes up her average beauty, was not up to ideological code and needed to be fixed to achieve mainstream status and success (Marwick, 2010). Establishing there is beauty underneath the external suggests the external is abnormal and must be transformed to display the true beauty, or the perceived authentic self.

Reality television, and media as a whole, is able to influence the dominant ideology by reproducing content emulating the images needed to manage social institutions (Lull, 1995). The hegemonic feminine ideal becomes the focal point of the underlying message of reality television makeover shows, acting as images for women to mimic and set as the standard. External beauty, altering body image, trendy fashion, and what an “ideal woman” looks like are all factors in this process. By acknowledging the media’s influence of feminine beauty standards, we can begin to understand and challenge our gendered societal norms.
References


