



Reality TV as a Teaching Tool for Psychosocial Constructs of Appearance

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Reality television is a genre of television programming featuring the “real lives” of people in a continuing situation or competition. This genre began in the 1970s, growing over the past decade to include sub-genres of dating/ courtship, survivor challenges, appearance makeovers, celebrities, dream jobs, and talent competitions. Inherent in these reality shows are suggestions of cultural norms of behavior, attractiveness and preferred ways of presenting the self through dress. Given that our students enjoy watching this genre, it seemed like an excellent tool for teaching psychosocial constructs of appearance, specifically regarding stereotypes, norms of appearance, body image, and social physique anxiety. This presentation focuses on using content analysis of various reality television shows in a large course on the psychosocial and cultural aspects of dress at a major Midwestern university.

Studies focusing on cultivation theory (i.e., Koolstra, 2007) have found that extensive TV viewing leads to developing a world view of life that matches that portrayed in fictional TV programs. If viewers see that appearance is modified easily and that television characters are rewarded for their attractive appearance, they are likely to formulate the view that appearance can and should be modified to increase social rewards. Cultivation theory states that television cultivates ideas and attitudes about the social world that are congruent with the “reality” presented in the shows. One focus of study is concerned with definitions of femininity produced through reality shows, such that certain stereotypes of femininity are constructed based on personal transformation, presenting the body in a narrowly defined manner, and consumerism (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006), which may lead viewers to decreased body image and increased social physique anxiety (Eisend & Moller, 2007). Other studies focus on stereotypes perpetuated by reality TV, although no studies have reported dress as a medium to perpetuate stereotypes. We therefore asked students to explore stereotypes, cultural norms, appearance management, and dress in reality television shows.

Students (N=121) formed their own research groups of 3-4, and picked from reality television shows that were pre-selected as showing clear stereotypes through dress: *Duck Dynasty*, *Shahs of Sunset*, *Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, *Dance Moms*, *Jersey Shore*, *Breaking Amish*, *Amish Mafia*, *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and *My Super Sweet 16*. Content analysis was used to answer two research questions, “Is there a stereotype and how is it presented?”, and “How do patterns of culture shape the stereotypes presented in the show?” Each group developed a third question to answer related to their specific show. Groups watched eight episodes of their selected show, either from this current season or a past season. Each episode was coded by two people, with four episodes coded by each person. Groups determined the units of analysis for coding, and were taught how to calculate inter-coder reliability.

A guide sheet was provided to assist groups in organizing their project and keeping them on track. This consisted of listing the research articles to be summarized and by what date, which two people were to analyze which episodes and by when, what their additional research

question was, who was to write the synopsis of the show for that season, who was to calculate the results for the variables (frequencies, means, themes), who was to interpret the results and answer the research questions, who was to prepare the final paper and the final Power Point presentation, and who was to insert the video clips or still images representing the reality show.

Students had many checkpoints throughout the semester – early on to select their shows, at midterm time to review their article summaries and units of analysis, a couple of weeks later to see how the coding answered their research questions, and three in-class work days. Teaching assistants and the instructor met with all groups at these times.

Because the shows were quite different from each other, there was great variability in results. However, all groups found stereotypes that were presented via specific types of characters in the show (for example, the mothers in *Dance Moms* and the dance teacher portrayed stereotypes of being pushy and demanding, respectively; parents in *Toddlers and Tiaras* pushed their children to compete even when they resisted). Dress contributed to stereotypes; for example, in these two shows girls were presented in sexualized costumes, makeup, and hair, and moved in sexualized ways, while in *Real Housewives* the women spent large amounts of time and money on their grooming rituals before going out. Narrow cultural norms of appearance were identified by students as perpetuating stereotypes both within and outside of the communities represented. Body image concerns and social anxiety about their appearance were commonplace in comments offered by characters in many of the shows. Students in this course concluded that reality television confirmed some social stereotypes held about specific subcultures in the larger American culture. They also concluded that the presentation of the characters was strongly affected by their choice of dress, including both body modifications and body supplements. Students evaluated this research project as beneficial to their experience in the course; group grades for the project were high overall, and the quality of papers and Power Point presentations was high. In our meetings with student groups, we were able to tell that students were invested in the project. Some students told us that they would watch their favorite reality TV shows more critically after completing the project.

Some indicated how difficult it could be to agree on the meaning of a particular unit of analysis, while others mentioned how complex a show can be when broken down into units of analysis. However, there were more positive comments about the project than negative. As one student said, “What other college course allows you to watch TV for credit?” We plan to continue student exploration of psychosocial constructs of dress through future reality television analysis.

Banet-Weiser, S. & Portwood-Stacer, L. (2006). ‘I just want to be me again!’: Beauty pageants, reality television and post-feminism. *Feminist Theory*, 7, 255-272.

Eisend, M. & Moller, J. (2007). The influence of TV viewing on consumers’ body images and related consumption behavior. *Market Lett*, 18, 101-116.

Koolstra, C. (2007). Source confusion as an explanation of cultivation: A test of the mechanisms underlying confusion of fiction with reality on television. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 104, 102-110.