

Gender, Class, and Appearance in Reality Television

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ABSTRACT

This article covers general ideas about stereotyping, gender roles, social class, and body image in reality television. The aim of this paper is to explore how these ideas are portrayed in the hit American reality series, *Vanderpump Rules*. In order to uncover the details of this project, thorough research was conducted to uncover all aspects of reality television. These facets included the background, history and casting auditions. The focus was stereotyping, appearance, and social class. Content analysis was the chosen strategy to analyze the show *Vanderpump Rules*. Detailed notes were taken on the show's 7th season. These notes included the race and sex of each cast member, the racial and ethnical stereotypes, and the gender stereotypes. The main plot of each episode was reviewed as well as the main conflicts within the episode, and general observations about the show and cast were recorded. After compiling this information, the findings were framed. *Vanderpump Rules* focuses on males and females that generally conform to the cis-gender mold, fitting into the standard gender patterns, acting out masculine and feminine roles. It was found that the show is specifically geared towards female viewers, castmates conformed to body image norms and employed many gender stereotypes throughout the season. Nevertheless, some gender stereotypes were challenged. Seemingly, the show exploits the cast for their striking looks and perfect figures as it is based in Hollywood, where much of the population is on a mission to make a name for themselves in the acting and modeling industry. The show is particularly attractive to the average viewer because it gives the audience an inside look of how those that are famous and wealthy, or those that work hard and play harder live and thrive.

INTRODUCTION

This study specifically involves an excerpt from the reality television series, *Vanderpump Rules*. *Vanderpump Rules* is a spin-off series of the reality television show, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. The show aired on January 7, 2013 and is filmed in West Hollywood, California. Most of the filming occurs in the casts' homes and Lisa Vanderpump's famous restaurant that goes by the name of SUR. The American reality television show has debuted seven seasons on the Bravo network. In fact, the show has become so popular that this spin-off will soon have a spin-off of its own. *Jax & Brittany take Kentucky* is reported to debut in the summer of 2017. *Vanderpump Rules* has gained incredible popularity over the years due to the intense drama within the cast, the interesting work dynamics inside the restaurant, the beautiful faces and perfect bodies displayed freely, and the powerful competition between the actors to gain popularity, fame, and fortune. Not only does the series display immense amounts of drama, drinking, friendship, and fun, but there is the constant, underlying tone of class, gender roles, stereotyping, and body image. *Vanderpump Rules* cast does however, do an excellent job of using their fame to shed some spotlight on average gender roles and shaking up their heterosexual lifestyle. The group faces everyday challenges that you would see in any other reality television series but this cast keeps an open-mind and open-arms in a surprising and welcomed twist on reality television.

LITERATURE REVIEW/PRIOR RESEARCH

This section presents resources and findings about reality television, and uncovers basic ideas of what gender, appearance, and class means to reality television in general and specifically to *Vanderpump Rules*. The intent is to share what was interpreted about reality television during the research process as well as communicate why *Vanderpump Rules* was chosen as the topic of

focus. Most reality television series share the same themes. These themes usually include copious amounts of drinking, competition and strategy among cast mates, typical gender roles and stereotyping; thus, exposing fear and embarrassment, the struggle to be thin, pretty, and liked, financial gain or hardships, talents, forceful fighting, lavish vacations, and heightened drama (Lauzen & Deiss, 2009, p 382). There are naturally key roles in the shows; for example, the outsider, the instigator, and the leader. Reality television is commonly associated with *The Jersey Shore*, *The Real Housewives*, *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *Fear Factor*, *American Idol*, *The Apprentice*, and many more. In each one of these shows, at least one of the previously mentioned themes is revealed. It is imperative to examine why someone would put themselves through such a stressful, intense chapter in their lives with no privacy and complete exposure to the world, letting the producers of the show possibly manipulate the participant's image to what fits their script. The obvious answer is fame, fortune, and hopefully an additional television series or another lucrative deal that brings the participants more wealth and luxury. Most of the time, those that are selected to appear in a reality television series have a background in the acting business or the hopes to achieve fame and in many scenarios, "they've had more outgoing careers, appeared nude, or even had criminal records" (Huff, 2006, p 32). What other characteristics are the producers looking for? A possible answer seems to lie in the book, *Reality Television* by Richard M. Huff. In the chapter, "Casting: Finding the Freaks, the Geeks, and the Stars" Huff explains that when the producers were seeking a bachelor, they needed someone to "fit within their projected casting goals for the show" (Huff, 2006, p 31). Huff goes on to reveal what is necessary to create a good show-an exciting cast and good storytelling (Huff, 2016). The producers create the show through the means of location, living arrangements, the cast, and the conflicts. Looking back at successful reality television, they all have something in common; the

cast is a mix of “caustic, caring, and daring people” (Huff, 2006, p 32). The casting process is thoroughly thought out, researched, and calculated. Producers are looking for the perfect blend of someone willing to expose themselves to the world, that’s thirsty for fame, and ready to roll with the punches (Huff, 2016).

Reality television gives the viewer a glimpse into a world that they may have never encountered in their own lives. The author of *Reality TV* brings up the fact that the media might be someone’s only way to gain entrance into the lives of others who occupy a social class other than their own (Deery, 2015). It’s truly the viewer’s glimpse into the intimate lives of the most wealthy and famous, or those that live in poverty and hardship. Both extremes are readily accessible just by turning on your television. Typical gender stereotyping and gender roles can be found throughout reality television. Deery also introduces the idea that “producers simply exaggerate gender distinctions if and when this generates eye-catching contrasts and conflicts”, while explaining that this is a “commercial motive that can defamiliarize and denaturalize gender performance in general” (Deery, 2015, p 104-105). Examining gender in any television series is fascinating in itself, but exploring gender in reality television is especially interesting because there are raw, unscripted moments. Different gender roles in society are now, more widely being accepted and that is prominent in current reality television. People’s bodies in reality television now range from “young and fit” (Deery, 2015, p 110) to “overweight or out of shape” (Deery, 2015, p 110). Although both images are introduced in shows “the trend is for the physically attractive to have the most success” (Deery, 2015, p 110).

With these factors combined, that is what made the cast of *Vanderpump Rules* perfect for a primetime spot to catch a viewer’s eye and keep ratings up. Bravo carefully planned how to introduce the series to the public eye. When the show debuted, one moment the viewers were

watching *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, and in the next instant, *Vanderpump Rules* started. Bravo mixed both shows into a two-part viewing production where one show merged into the others' air time. *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* series introduced Scheana, a *Vanderpump Rules* cast member into the series by shining light on the fact that she was in a romantic relationship with Brandi Glanville's husband, Eddie Cibrian, the American actor. Through the drama of Scheana's tumultuous relationship with Eddie, and Brandi finding out what was really going on behind her back, the spin-off series took flight. As mentioned before, the correct formulas were in place to make this a hit series. There were already challenges stirred up between Brandi and Scheana, Scheana worked for Lisa at her renowned restaurant, SUR, and Brandi and Lisa were close friends. Scheana was also an aspiring actress and many of her cast mates that worked at the restaurant moved to Hollywood to achieve their dreams as models, performers, actors, singers, and dancers.

The most recent season of *Vanderpump Rules* was selected, to get a better grasp on what was happening in reality television, today. The themes of this season that were focused on were class, appearance, gender roles, and fitting in. It is hypothesized that these themes will easily be picked up and stereotypes will be demonstrated in this season of the reality television series, *Vanderpump Rules*.

METHODS

Research for the project was conducted using a qualitative content analysis approach. This method was chosen because it allows for an in-depth study of the show and this specific approach allows patterns to naturally emerge. This method is also effective because it gives the researcher the ability to find features in a large amount of content that would normally get overlooked (Neuman 2003). The entire season 7 of *Vanderpump Rules* was viewed, assessed,

and documented. During initial viewing, general thoughts, ideas, and memos were recorded. After the initial viewing, the episodes were examined for a second time and then coded. Each of the codes were grouped and similar codes were combined. After they were combined, themes were developed based on the codes. It was important to utilize the latent content coding method after viewing this series and taking notes. It was vital to search for underlying, implicit meaning in the show (Neuman, 2003). Specifically, through this method, themes were formed. The show consisted of 20 episodes in total. There was a lot that transpired during the entire season and a vast amount of information was recorded, compiled, and separated accordingly.

FINDINGS

Through data collection, based on a content analysis approach, 4 themes emerged. The themes were based on patterns that appeared from viewing the show. The themes that appeared were gender roles, gender stereotypes, body image and appearance, and social class. Each themed appeared throughout the season numerous times. Some themes appeared multiples times in one episode.

Themes

Gender Roles
Gender Stereotyping
Body Image & Appearance

Social Class

Gender Roles

Gender roles and gender programming in reality television were observed in all four categories.

Deery (2015) explains that when it comes to masculine and feminine programming, some networks are specifically branded to appeal to one gender. The author believes that networks manipulate the material by focusing on things like “appearance, interpersonal relations, social standing, consumption, parenting, cooking, romance, and milestone personal events like births and weddings” (Deery, 2015, p 105) when they are targeting female viewers, because historically, mostly women watch reality television. Recently however, “there has been a recent surge in masculine programming often with all-male casts directed at all-male viewers” (Deery, 2015, p 105). Deery also speculates that this taps into the nostalgia of the “macho-man” (Deery, 2015, p 105) in response to recent social changes in television and in society of the recently trending “metrosexual man” (Deery, 2015, p 105). There are specific gender patterns in reality television on display in many the shows. Women are commonly depicted as “interior and biological in the sense of being focused on self-image and personal appearance” (Deery, 2015, p 108). *Vanderpump Rules* is no exception to that rule. Males portrayed in the shows often go through a series of “self-initiated rituals (hunting, negotiating, aggressive competition)” (Deery, 2015, p 109). Males require “quick and decisive action, as well as courage, skill, and a somewhat combative attitude” (Deery, 2015, p 109). Furthermore, “masculinities must relate to and whose characteristics consist of an athletic body, whiteness, heterosexuality, virility, careerism, independence and self-confidence (Ganetz, 2009, p 406)” which are characteristics that these

males seems to exert quite frequently. Again, the male figures in this specific series display aggressive rivalry, argumentative attitudes, and fast action in a variety of scenes.

Gender Stereotyping

The next natural step would be to look further into gender stereotyping, gender routine, and gender performance. *Vanderpump Rules* displays a variety of gender roles. Entertainingly, they are not always the “norm”. It’s important to point out that this specific series does not follow the general, societal norms. Although there are instances where misguided cast members speak up, on behalf of gender norms, that is not the actual standard in this show. We learn gender roles from the media. Ganetz clarifies that “gender routines are not the result of a conspiracy; they are maintained by both women and men in media production” (Ganetz, 2011, p 406). The text goes on, saying that, gender routines are structured acts that produce stereotypes (Ganetz, 2011).

When we see typical gender roles acted out in television, we are programmed to think that that is how we should be acting in our everyday lives. This is what creates stereotypes correlated with what is masculine and what is feminine. The male and female members of the cast reverse their gender roles in a few situations. This is mostly shown throughout the process of Tom and Katie’s wedding. Tom asks Arianna to be his groomsman and challenges her to some masculine rituals to gain approval and secure her spot in the wedding party. The ladies of the group call in a female stripper for Katie’s bachelorette party. As if this doesn’t shake things up enough, Tom’s groomsmen also dress up in drag for his bachelor party. Although this isn’t something that you typically see at an American bachelor or bachelorette party, it gives the series a fun, unexpected approach that redefines gender stereotypes.

Body Image & Appearance

Body image and appearance is highlighted throughout reality television. Whether it be how thin or how fat you are, how much you do or do not eat, what you weigh, how your clothes fit, what color your hair is, how you apply your makeup, and where your clothes are from, body image is a glaring fragment in these episodes. Starting off with the fact that as seen in other parts of television, many reality TV stars are viewed as considerably attractive (Deery, 2015). It's no secret that *Vanderpump Rules* stars are gorgeous and handsome with the perfect body and fit figures. Egbert and Belcher point out that "it is hard to deny that both beauty and youth are highly emphasized in mainstream media" (Egbert and Belcher, 2012, p 411). They go on to say that "in the context of U.S. culture, the media often portray the ideal woman as thinner than her real-life counterparts, and conversely, the media often paint the ideal man as muscular with a square jaw" (Egbert and Belcher, 2012, p 411). *Vanderpump Rules* celebrities, both men and women, are often displayed in scantily dressed attire and represented as sexual creatures. Beverly Skeggs explains that "The very public act of estimating a person's national economic cost is made visible metonymically, so that singular practices, such as eating take-aways, stand in for the total value of the person, and cellulite is the somatic inscription of the self's numerous failings" (Skeggs, 2009. P 638). Not only is the perfect body sought after but it directly correlates to the value of the human. This idea absolutely relates to *Vanderpump Rules*, seeing that the members must stay fit to lock in a contract deal with a modeling agency or secure an acting role. Not one member on the show is overweight or unattractive, and some have even received multiple rounds of plastic surgery. Their success seems to directly relate to their looks.

Social Class

The inspection of social class in reality television revealed that even though these restaurant servers weren't necessarily wealthy, they appeared with that image because of their daily consumption and extreme spending habits. It is proposed that "viewers are taught that social success equates not to production but to consumption" (Meloy, 2009). The author of *Ethno-Class Distinctions in Reality (TV)*, clarifies that "the expression "everyday people" serves as a euphemism for individuals from the working class" (Shoshana, 2016, p 56). The cast of *Vanderpump Rules* would normally be viewed as "working class" citizens in modern day America. However, they are now reality television stars, buying lavish items, expensive cars, and nice jewelry and clothing. They are now viewed to be wealthier by the observing public, maintaining an advanced class status.

CONCLUSIONS

After vigorously researching and observing reality television and *Vanderpump Rules* at different angles and to great lengths, many thoughts, findings, and conclusions were generated. It appears that, as in most reality television, *Vanderpump Rules* lures viewers in to watch the show through the casts' arresting attributes; be it their flawless features or their obscure personalities. Those on the show seem specifically designed to fit the mold for good reality television. Viewers can identify with the cast on *Vanderpump Rules* more so than other reality television stars. The audience can relate to their seemingly normal challenges and daily drama as well as sympathize with their untimely trials throughout the season. After research was conducted, it was found that although the *Vanderpump Rules* cast often exhibited typical gender roles and displayed conformity to body images, these members of the show also challenged them. Many of these themes can be picked up in general reality television but *Vanderpump Rules* gave some of these

trends a refreshing and captivating spin. Their fast lifestyle, vacations, drama, and sex appeal draws spectators in, and ratings skyrocket. What keeps viewers interested is their kind hearts, close bonds, and open-minded outlooks on life.

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