

The Reality of Reality Television: Students' Perceptions of Gender on Reality Television

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Abstract and Literature

Contemporary media can have a formidable influence on the perceptions of its consumers. This study looks at the way reality television shows impact viewer perceptions of gender. Because it is a newer genre of television programming, the effects of reality television on perceptions of gender have not been studied. Previous studies have looked at the way gender is perceived in film and television and the influence it can have on viewers. Research found that the way some women were portrayed in television programs influenced what viewers perceived the actual profession and gender to be like in real life (Dagaz & Harger, 2011; Jette, Wilson, & Sparks, 2007). A qualitative survey was used to determine if viewer perceptions of gender adhere to socially constructed norms. We saw the majority of participants placing reality television show characters into socially constructed classifications of gender. Participants saw emotionality as well as masculine and feminine traits as both strengths and weaknesses of the reality television characters.

Research Question

How do male and female college-age students perceive male and female gender roles in characters on reality television programs?

The Bachelor's Juan Pablo Galavis



Methods

- ◆ Participants were college students who completed a survey after viewing one of two possible video clips of *The Bachelor*.
- ◆ Surveys were customized based on participants' gender identifications.
- ◆ Responses were coded for themes individually, and as a research team.

Findings

Male viewer perceptions of Jake Pavelka

Unexpressive, Masculine Character: "He seems tough, does not cry even though he is in an emotionally stressful situation."

Absence of emotion: male perception of masculinity

Female viewer perceptions of Jake Pavelka

Viewed Jake as an individual who displayed a mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics: "He is very reserved in a heart-hurting situation" contrasted with "He is very sensitive, emotional and open with his feelings." Females were more accepting of a male who possesses feminine characteristics than males.

Male viewer perceptions of Ali Fedotowsky

The emotional, feminine characteristics of Ali are described as "clingy," "clueless," and "weak." The term *emotional* occurs with great frequency across the male responses.

Female viewer perceptions of Ali Fedotowsky

Frequent descriptions: emotional, indecisive and confused behavior. "A confused little girl that needs to be led by the hand everywhere." Terms such as *attractive*, *beautiful*, and *pretty* appear frequently. Described as feminine.

Male viewer perceptions of Juan Pablo Galavis

Viewed with both masculine and feminine qualities. Masculine based on clothes, facial features, and body language. However, "Trying to be feminine...to appear to have a sensitive side."

Female viewer perceptions of Juan Pablo Galavis

Unfavorable view, derogatory terms used in descriptions. Masculine and feminine views: "Didn't like to talk about his feelings," "A bit more aggressive" contrasted with "He stated his feelings and was receptive to Andi's as well."

Male viewer perceptions of Andi Dorfman

Perceived as feminine. Beautiful and confused: "sexy," "fine," "confused," and "the emotional type," "likes to whine."

Female viewer perceptions of Andi Dorfman

Masculine and feminine characteristics: "Independent and opinionated," "Strong and empowered," and "Strong minded and educated."

Conclusions

- ◆ Emotionality was the predominant theme found in the responses obtained.
- ◆ Male respondents valued masculine traits and generally disapproved of feminine traits, regardless of whether the character was male or female.
- ◆ Female respondents generally were more receptive and accepting of both masculine and feminine traits, regardless of whether the character was male or female.



The Bachelor's Andi Dorfman

Implications

- ◆ Researchers should continue to study how reality television may influence viewer perceptions on a variety of issues.
- ◆ Researchers should study this topic by using focus groups of same gender and opposite gender members to better analyze the patterns of gender perceptions.
- ◆ On a practical level, parents can use findings of studies on stereotyping to generate discussion with children about the influence of both stereotyping and television viewing.

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