

The Effects of Reality Television on Adolescent Body Perceptions and Acceptance of

Stereotypes

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Abstract

Adolescence is a time of rapid change, both physically and mentally. Popular television influences adolescent identity formation by stressing certain gender roles and body ideals. Reality television shows like *The Bachelor*, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, and *Teen Mom* portray certain stereotypes that can influence how young people view themselves and others. Though these shows are different, they each display certain stereotypes that can influence adolescent perceptions. By researching gender stereotypes, body ideals, and sexuality in reality television, I hope to discuss how the consumption of stereotypes can affect the self-perceptions of adolescents. Both genders are affected by the portrayals of femininity/masculinity, sexuality, and attractiveness that are represented in popular reality television. This research project will explore the negative effects of stereotype consumption on the formation of perceptions in adolescents and will stress the need for higher rates of media literacy in youth.

Keywords: reality television, body ideals, gender roles, sexuality, adolescent

Most people would recoil at the idea of watching a two-year-old do a strip tease, yet on the reality television show, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, this behavior is fun and entertaining. To be successful the girls know that they have to be sexy. In these cases, the ideal feminine beauty becomes sexualized and dependent on physical appearance. Other reality shows also exploit gender, sexual, and physical stereotypes because it is more entertaining and will increase audience involvement (Denham & Jones, 2008, p. 81). Adults can understand how this “reality” is meant for entertainment and should not be taken seriously; however, when adolescents take interest in these shows, they oftentimes assume that what they are watching are accurate representations of reality. The prevalence of stereotypes in shows like *The Bachelor*, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, and *Teen Mom* can alter identity development and self-perceptions. In the process of adolescent development, many children may model their actions after characters in reality television, and may not realize that the “reality” is almost always staged. Shows with increased prevalence of stereotypes can influence how many adolescents perceive themselves and their peers. As the presence of television and other media increases, these perception issues will become increasingly problematic without intervention from parents or other authority figures. The increased production of media reaches both adults and children alike, but can have more lasting effects on many adolescents who are not taught how to see through messages portrayed in reality TV. The effects of television consumption are in part influenced by the decrease in parental television monitoring (Braun, p. 18, 2009). Because they are not taught how to interpret the stereotypes found in reality television, many adolescents may perceive the stereotypes as appropriate in their own lives. Depictions of gender, body ideals, and sexuality found in certain reality television shows affect self-perceptions and identity formation. Parents can work to increase media literacy in order to mitigate stereotypes and self-deprecation.

Adolescent role models include parents and other family members, but are also influenced by popular culture. These reality television celebrities portray unrealistic, extreme characters in the effort to increase audience engagement. Both physical and cognitive development takes place throughout adolescence, and while the body is changing – potentially causing stress and confusion in itself – the mind is still unable to fully work through subliminal messages in reality television (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013, p. 130). Perceptions of gender, sexuality, and attractiveness are molded by depictions of the stereotypical male and female found in reality television. These issues could be improved by consciously choosing contestants who defy stereotypes and better exemplify American heterogeneity. As it stands now, when diverse characters are portrayed they are generally less successful compared to the more “normal” stereotypical participants (Palmer, 2013, p. 126). Stereotypical roles can be found in almost all reality television shows, where ideal masculinity is aggressive, competitive, and objectifying, and femininity is passive, sexualized, and youthful (Jacobsen, 2005, p. 20 & 25). Sexually, men are portrayed as instigators and women as passive sexual objects. Attractive men are tall, wealthy, and muscular, and attractive women should be thin but curvy. Since these shows are oftentimes perceived as true representations of reality, these stereotypes can influence adolescent perceptions which can harm not only themselves, but their relationships with others as well.

While reality television influences perceptions in adolescents, it also influences identity formation. The overabundance of reality television reinforces norms that adolescents can either accept or reject (Huntemann & Morgan, 2002, p. 309). Regardless, the media adolescents consume shape their identities and can alter how they view appropriate behavior. Identity is the “sense of self” that develops throughout life and is oftentimes malleable and fluid (p. 310). Comprised of many different factors, identity constantly changes throughout life and

development. In adolescence, identity is largely influenced by the need to form relationships and be a part of a group. Adolescent television consumption often involves strong emotional investments for the viewer, and the shows can help children socialize as the importance of peer relationships increase (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013, p. 131). The adolescent's parasocial relationship with the reality show contestant increases the likelihood that he or she will act in similar ways, because the adolescent sees the contestant as a symbol of success (p. 131). Since the depictions of reality are skewed, the adolescent's reliance on the celebrity can harm the child's identity formation and may reinforce the idea that the representations portrayed in the shows are normal and appropriate.

Gender

In her book *Young People and Gendered Media Messages*, Maria Jacobsen explains that "visibility" is a key factor in shaping gender-identities in adolescents (Jacobsen, p.14, 2005). What adolescents see in popular culture and day-to-day life affects how they perceive gender roles. When women are portrayed as ditzy, vain, and disingenuous, these portrayals affect both the girls – who begin to believe that these portrayals are "correct" – and boys – who begin to judge girls based on what they see on television. Similarly, the portrayals of men as active, powerful leaders can alter perceptions of masculinity; to boys, these depictions are guidelines that must be adhered to to be considered a "man's man." Stereotypes of femininity and masculinity can alter how many teens perceive themselves, and gender identity development can be skewed by consuming the stereotypical gender roles in reality television. Feminine and masculine stereotypes are portrayed consistently in reality television as a means to expand the audience platform (Denham & Jones, 2008, p. 80). Oftentimes, producers select stereotypical contestants because they are more likely to seem humorous or interesting to the viewers, whereas

contestants who defy gender stereotypes are ridiculed. Many kids may find themselves conforming to gender stereotypes to avoid judgment from peers. Developmentally, peers become integrally important in adolescence to develop a strong identity. The social conflict associated with rejecting gender stereotypes may influence some adolescents to conform to stereotypical roles and can harm their perceptions of gender.

The ideal femininity portrayed in reality television shows like *The Bachelor* can negatively impact girls' self perceptions, while the masculine stereotype reinforces the role of the "man's man" to younger male viewers. Since reality television is meant to depict reality, the "dumb blonde" or "sexist man" found in *The Bachelor* can manipulate gender perceptions. In addition to physical representations of femininity as thin and attractive, *The Bachelor* exemplifies traditional gender roles in relationships. The women must impress the Bachelor to gain his favor, and relationship issues that arise are inherently the fault of the female. In these cases, a woman's role in a relationship is to please the male in an effort to stay in the show as long as possible. *The Bachelor* also supports the idea that men are the active choosers of women, while the women are passive participants. The Bachelor gets to decide who is worthy and who is not, and a woman's success is proportional to that worth. For younger audiences watching *The Bachelor*, the gender portrayals of men, as instigators who decide who stays and leaves, and women, as passive participants in relationships, can perpetuate certain stereotypes and effect how they view both genders throughout life.

Similarly, shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras* can influence how adolescents view feminine and masculine roles. Oftentimes, the worth and success of young girls are dependent on objectification. Success is based on which girl can impress the judges most, through a combination of appearance and talent skills. Boys are rarely portrayed as contestants on *Toddlers*

and Tiaras, because pageants are “sports” for girls, whereas athletics are generally male-dominated (Palmer, 2013, p. 131). The absence of male contestants on *Toddlers and Tiaras* makes its own statement about gender because their bodies are not objectified like young girls’. Boys simply do not belong on a pageant stage, and they rarely if ever can hold their own against the girls. To the young girl, successful femininity is based largely on appearance and how others perceive her rather than how she perceives herself. Approximately 98% of American women are bigger than the average female depicted in popular media. These images of femininity influence many girls’ perceptions of what and who a woman is, and nearly 70% of young girls believe that ideal femininity is based on physical looks (Peek & Beresin, 2016, p.178). This objectification can harm adolescent girls’ perceptions of gender, and the absence of pageant boys can reinforce the masculine “man’s man” stereotype in adolescent males.

Teen Mom underscores traditional gender roles for women. The show, which primarily focuses on the lives of young mothers, depict women as the primary care-takers, while the fathers – when and if they are present – are often less involved in the children’s lives (Nostrand, 2010, p. 9). Almost always, the mothers are single with a low socioeconomic status and are forced to rely on others to help them raise the children they were never prepared to have (Kiesewetter, 2011). These girls, who are still adolescents themselves, are not prepared for the responsibilities of motherhood and therefore act in childish ways when they encounter parenting or relationship issues. The purpose of *Teen Mom* is to spread awareness of the difficulties associated with teen pregnancy; however, nearly all the weight of parenthood falls on the mothers while the fathers’ roles are diminished. *Teen Mom* is structured around drama and conflict (Palmer, 2013, p. 137). As such, the mothers on *Teen Mom* are often stereotyped as immature parents who cannot take responsibility for their actions, which undermines the true

strength it takes to raise a child. Interestingly enough, males are often portrayed in general reality television as powerful and active, but that is often not the case in *Teen Mom* (Nostrand, 2010, p. 1-2). The stereotypical “absent father” depicted in *Teen Mom* can influence how young men view their role as father figures later in life, and supports traditional maternal roles such as that of the stay-at-home mother while the responsibilities for the father are less important.

Media literacy is the “critical evaluation” of media messages to help consumers better understand the stereotypes portrayed in television (Braun, 2009, p. 21). Parents can implement media literacy in the home by thoroughly discussing the motivations behind reality television programming. By questioning the purposes of the messages and discussing what stereotypes say about how men and women should act, parents could help reduce the influence that reality television stereotypes have on their children. Media literacy can help adolescents understand that the stereotypical male and female portrayed in reality television is not indicative of normal gender roles and should not be looked to as a guide for appropriate behavior. Reality television shows like *The Bachelor*, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, and *Teen Mom* can influence how adolescents view gender roles in their own lives. The shows exploit the stereotypes of men and women to attract more viewers. Unlike adolescents, adults can understand that these reality television shows depict radical versions of gender to seem humorous or ridiculous in an effort to increase audience engagement. Depictions of gender in these shows will not affect all adolescents the same, but increasing media literacy in the home could diminish their consequences (Huntemann & Morgan, 2002, p. 315). Gender stereotypes reinforce the idea that women and men must act specific ways. Children who do not fall perfectly into these stereotypes may grow up to believe that they are outsiders and may even try to change their own behavior to fit into more traditional views of femininity or masculinity. By discussing why reality television depicts such stark

gender stereotypes, parents can help their children understand that the gender portrayals in reality television are meant to elicit a reaction and should not influence how children view their own gender development.

Sexuality

Stereotypical sexual roles can be found in almost every reality television show. Sex sells, and many reality television shows exploit that to increase ratings and attract more viewers. In more obvious cases, like that of *The Bachelor*, sex is used as a means to form artificial relationships. Shows like *Teen Mom* focus on sex, but ignore the opportunity to talk about contraception. Even shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras* sexualize young girls by encouraging early sexual maturity. Today, more and more adolescents are becoming sexually active (Braun, 2009, p. 19). Sexual curiosity is a normal part of adolescence; however, children who do not receive adequate sexual education from a parent or guardian will often be at a greater risk for teenage pregnancy or disease. An increase in media literacy education would help adolescents understand that sexuality in reality television is meant to increase audience involvement and does not accurately convey mature sexual decisions. The depictions of sexuality found in reality television portray sexual behavior as a means to form relationships or have fun, while educated sexual decisions are rarely discussed. These shows suggest that sexual behaviors are the only way for men and women to relate to one another, which can harm young viewers' perceptions of relationships and encourage premature sexuality.

Sexuality runs rampant in shows like *The Bachelor*. Many women compete for the Bachelor's attention by making sexually explicit advances. It is not unusual for the Bachelor to kiss many girls in one night, all the while telling each woman how much she means to him. Though the show never outright portrays sex, there are allusions to sexual intercourse at the end

of every season when the last girls are invited to the “fantasy suite” (Paskin, 2014). Each of the three finalists are given one night to spend with the Bachelor without the presence of the cameras. These women get one chance to impress the Bachelor sexually and shortly thereafter, a winner is chosen. The very nature of shows like *The Bachelor* set up sexual precedents for young viewers. Though it is advertised as a genuine way to find love, sex determines the Bachelor’s decision rather than a substantive relationship. The Bachelor is the one who instigates the sexual acts, be it anything from kissing to intercourse, while the women are passive and are often considered lucky to be chosen by the Bachelor. Women on *The Bachelor* are more successful and stay on the show longer when the Bachelor feels sexually attracted to them. The implications for young girls watching *The Bachelor* is that their worth is defined by how sexually attractive they are to men, while young boys may believe that they are the ones who always hold the control in the relationships. Sex in these cases are fun pastimes – and even necessary in forming relationships – instead of serious decisions that should be made between two partners. These relationships are built on sexual attraction instead of trust and common interests, and the ideals portrayed can skew how young viewers respond in their own relationships.

MTV’s *Teen Mom* contains allusions to sex and highlights the difficulties of teen pregnancy. Unfortunately, none of the young parents on the show mention the importance of contraception. The show depicts the difficulties of having children when the parents are not even fully mature and responsible, yet these young parents become famous and quite wealthy throughout the show (Lynne, 2015). In fact, becoming pregnant at 16 has become an asset to many of the teen moms as they publish books and become successful. One of the original teen moms, Farrah Abraham, has even expanded her network to include horror movies and pornography. To younger viewers, the difficulties of teenage pregnancy may seem advantageous

in light of potential wealth and fame. In one study examining the influence of reality television on adolescents, girls were asked if they would be willing to compromise their values for fame, and many girls noted that they would “wear sexy or revealing clothing” or “get pregnant on purpose” to achieve success (Ferguson, Salmond, & Modi, 2013, p. 1176). This study found that watching more reality television increased the likelihood that young girls would be willing to give up their personal values and engage in risky sexual behaviors for fame. The irregularity of fathers in *Teen Mom* can negatively impact adolescent perceptions of fatherhood. The fathers are obviously sexually active, yet they rarely shoulder the burden of teenage pregnancy. This can enforce the idea that boys will not have to deal with the consequences of teenage pregnancy, which is entirely false and misrepresented in the show. *Teen Mom* can unintentionally influence young girls to believe that teenage sexuality and even pregnancy can be beneficial for success. *Teen Mom* could help younger viewers understand the real consequences of teenage pregnancy by explaining that very few teen mothers graduate high school or get a college degree, and the majority end up relying on government assistance to support their families (Palmer, 2013, p. 135).

Even shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras* sexualize young girls. In many cases, girls are instructed from parents or pageant coaches to act provocatively. These girls objectify themselves from a young age and the producers write it off as funny and cute (Palmer, 2013, p. 132). Ava, Faith, and Meadow – ages two, five, and seven, respectively – are just three of the many girls who have been sexualized in the show. In season one, Ava was encouraged by her father to “shaky, shaky” for the judges, Faith stripped to reveal her two-piece bathing suit, and Meadow danced provocatively (p. 133). These three examples are only a few of many instances of inappropriate sexualization throughout the show’s seven seasons. These girls are certainly not old

enough to realize the implications of their actions, and the parent and judges condone it by rewarding them with prizes and trophies. Though they are too young to fully understand, these girls are portraying themselves as mature, sexual women long before they are physically or mentally prepared to act as such (Braun, 2009, p. 18). For adolescents watching these events take place, the implications are generally negative. It appears that even from a young age, a girl's success is contingent on her sexualization. For boys and girls watching the show, these depictions reinforce the idea that girls are sexual objects. These depictions occur frequently on *Toddlers and Tiaras* and the frequency of these depictions help normalize these inappropriate behaviors. Throughout development – and specifically in the teenage years – the desire to mature and become independent increases. The girls in *Toddlers and Tiaras* are acting like grown women and seem to be successful; however, the viewer cannot see the possible long term consequences associated with the sexualization like depression and premature sex (p. 18). The sexualized content in *Toddlers and Tiaras* would be considered inappropriate for younger audiences if the contestants were adult women; however, many adolescents may watch the show because the contestants are younger as well. This makes the provocative nature of *Toddlers and Tiaras* all the more concerning. By normalizing the sexualization of girls, *Toddlers and Tiaras* influences how female sexuality is perceived to both male and female adolescents, and can increase the acceptance of sexual stereotypes.

Exaggerated depictions of sexuality in reality TV can skew adolescent perceptions of sex and can encourage sexual risk behaviors. In combination with the overly sexualized content in other forms of media, reality television supports the notion that girls are merely sexual objects, while boys are the active choosers in sexual relationships. Sexual portrayals in *The Bachelor*, *Teen Mom*, and *Toddlers and Tiaras* are almost always exaggerated and portrayed as an artificial

way to form relationships. Because the portrayals of sex are so frequent and exaggerated, many adolescents may not fully understand the importance of safe sex, which can lead to sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy. Parents who want to negate these issues may forbid reality television in the home, but children are still likely to encounter issues about sexuality from their peers. Instead, a combination of media literacy and sex education in the home can teach children how to reject these stereotypes and better understand the consequences of sexual risk behaviors.

Attractiveness

Perhaps one of the more obvious effects of reality television stereotyping is on perceptions of attractiveness and body ideals. Attractiveness is crucial for both gender and sexuality in many reality television shows. The ideal man or woman is always attractive. For men, this generally means tall, muscular, and ruggedly handsome, while women are youthful, thin, and curvy. The Girl Scouts of America conducted a survey of over a thousand adolescent girls, and found that girls who regularly consumed reality television programs were more likely to be critical of their physical appearance (Peek & Beresin, 2016, p. 178). Many of these same girls responded that they believed that a girl's worth was dependent on her looks and that they would rather people recognize them for their outer instead of inner beauty (p.178). Today, both men and women are frequently stereotyped by physical appearance. Ideal men and women must be attractive to be successful, and these stereotypes are readily prevalent in reality television (Jacobsen, 2005, p. 19).

All men and women who have ever been on *The Bachelor* have been beautiful. Homely bachelors and bachelorettes simply would not encourage audience engagement, so only attractive people are chosen to participate. The bachelors have behind-the-scenes trainers to ensure that

they stay fit throughout the show, and the bachelorettes are fit and always camera-ready. In the first season of *The Bachelor*, 84% of the bachelorettes were thin, whereas 8% were average and none were heavy (Klewin, 2007, p. 34). Young girls may believe that they should conform to these ideals to be pretty, which can cause both physical and mental harm. Body dissatisfaction is common in many girls and is only compounded by the consumption of reality television. This dissatisfaction can lead to psychological issues like depression or suicidal urges (Peek & Beresin, 2013, p. 179). In shows like *The Bachelor*, attractiveness is crucial in both femininity and sexuality. Numerous times throughout the seasons, the Bachelors have made surprise visits to the Bachelorettes' house, causing quite a commotion by arriving unannounced. The girls run around the house in a panic because they aren't wearing makeup or sexy clothes. While adults can recognize this as a show for the audience and somewhat humorous, some adolescents may understand this frantic importance of physical appearance as instrumental in forming loving relationships.

In 2011, *Teen Mom* was one of the most watched reality television shows by girls age 12-17 (Parents Television Council, n.d., p. 5), while *Toddlers and Tiaras* appealed to an even younger audience. Both of these shows stressed the importance, especially for girls, to be attractive in order to be successful. In *Toddlers and Tiaras*, girls dress up with big hair, false eyelashes, and acrylic nails to make themselves seem older and more alluring. Though it is portrayed as a fun dress-up game, this show teaches young girls that they need to act and look a specific way to be pretty. A study done by *Eating Disorders Today* found that nearly 80% of the ten-year-olds surveyed had been on a diet, and girls 11-17 overwhelmingly responded that their main wish was to be thinner (Morgan, 2012). Shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras* "rob girls of girlhood" by promoting unhealthy beauty standards, which can influence girls throughout their

development (2012). In fact, *Teen Mom* often portrays the influence that these unhealthy standards have on older adolescents. In *Teen Mom*, all the relationships between the mothers and fathers are based on superficial attraction, and when relationships do last any length of time, it is often for the child's sake. The parents are attracted to each other for physical reasons, which easily deteriorate when the stress of teen pregnancy is introduced. Because the connections between the parents are physical instead of emotional, the relationships often fail. Messages about attractiveness in *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *Teen Mom* can influence young girls about how they should behave. From a young age, girls learn to act proactively which can potentially lead to superficial relationships throughout life.

Viewers are often propelled by the desire to watch attractive people in everyday situations, yet attractiveness in reality television is often homogenous and stereotypical, rarely leaving room for unique traits. Attractiveness is an important part of adolescent lifestyles as they begin to place more importance on how they portray themselves to their peers. Adolescence is also the beginning of many people's dating relationships, and the ideals found in reality television emphasize that the most attractive people have the easiest time forming these relationships. Frequently, however, the shows fail to depict the complexity of relationships, which can mislead adolescent viewers. By explaining the motivations behind portrayals of attractiveness in reality television, parents can help their children better understand their own worth, regardless of physical appearance. Media literacy has been associated with improved body image and can decrease the effects of social comparison between peers (Peek & Beresin, p. 179, 2015). Adolescents who better understand media literacy will understand that attractiveness is subjective, and the homogenous portrayals of attractiveness in reality television are not true representations of average men and women.

Throughout development, adolescents place more importance on individualism and independence. This often causes many children to look for role models on television, which are not always reliable and can potentially harm their perceptions of gender, sexuality, and attractiveness. Some have suggested censoring television to negate the effects of overconsumption; however, that is not entirely practical (Peek & Beresin, 2016, p. 179). Instead, parents could increase media literacy in the home by teaching children how to understand the stereotypes presented in reality television. Adolescents depend on popular culture for ideas about who they should be and how they should act. From a young age, girls learn that they should be attractive to gain success in life and that grown-ups utilize their sexuality to seem mature. The presence of media is continually growing, increasing the necessity of media literacy in the home. Many parents may not realize the potential negative effects of reality television consumption because they never had to sort it out themselves in their own childhood (Huntemann & Morgan, 2002, p. 309). By increasing awareness of the issues like depression, body negativity, and stereotyping that can be caused by watching reality TV, parents can help their young children navigate the messages portrayed in the shows. Though not every child will be influenced directly by the consumption of reality television, the ideals portrayed will affect their peer relationships and popular ideas about appropriate social behavior. Too often reality television normalizes stereotypes instead of questioning them. The acceptance of these stereotypes in *The Bachelor*, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, and *Teen Mom*, influence how adolescents view themselves and their peers, and can support social intolerance. The stereotypes found in these shows are not abnormal or unique; they are echoed in the majority of reality television and can subconsciously alter how adolescents think. By increasing media literacy in the home, more children will be educated

about the skewed representations in reality television which can help them deflect the stereotypes they encounter throughout development.

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