

Emerging Adults' Responses to a Media Presentation of Idealized Female Beauty: An Examination of Cosmetic Surgery in Reality Television

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This study examined emerging adults' qualitative responses to a TV depiction of idealized female beauty. Ninety-one participants (M age = 19.5) viewed a reality TV show featuring a woman's cosmetic surgery transformation and were asked to write a response to what they viewed; researchers coded these responses for emotional tone and thematic content. Further, participants' own appearance satisfaction and interest in changing their appearance via cosmetic surgery was assessed. Results indicated that both young men and women viewed the media message positively and endorsed the importance of females' pursuit of beauty ideals. The content of men's and women's responses were similar with an emphasis on the importance of physical attractiveness, the psychological benefits of beauty, and the entertainment value of the reality TV show. Finally, young women who responded relatively positively to the show reported a greater likelihood of interest in obtaining cosmetic surgery than were women who responded relatively negatively to the show. Implications for body image development and emerging adults' expectations and values regarding physical beauty are discussed in the context of relevant theories.

Keywords: physical appearance, body image, media, reality TV, cosmetic surgery

The media are a source of developmental information for adolescents and young adults, providing daily, omnipresent messages about gender, attractiveness, and ideal body shapes and sizes (Bordo, 1993; Levine & Murnen, 2009). The reach of the media has been of concern to scholars and laypersons alike when it comes to its presentation of images of idealized female beauty—ideals that are often both unhealthy and unattainable, yet culturally valued (Markey & Markey, 2010). The sort of female beauty that is typically presented in the media is flawless and essential, leaving both male and female viewers to easily infer that girls and women should actively strive to perfect their own appearances (i.e., not settle for their current appearance; Brumberg, 1997; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999). It is no

wonder that girls and women find themselves dissatisfied with their appearance; approximately 50% of girls and women are dissatisfied with their bodies (e.g., Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006; Monteath & McCabe, 1997).

The extent to which the media plays a direct, causal role in shaping girls' and women's perceptions of their own and others' appearance has been debated (Levine & Murnen, 2009). However, it appears that, at the very least, the media is a significant risk factor in girls' and women's development of maladaptive beauty ideals (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Very little research is available to elucidate how boys' and men's viewing of idealized images of women might affect their perceptions of women (for an exception, see Hatoum & Belle, 2004). The current study extends past research by examining both emerging adult men's and women's responses to idealized images of female beauty. Further, the current study extends past research that has focused largely on stagnant media images (e.g., photographs) by investigating the potential impact of dynamic media messages depicting female beauty (i.e., a cosmetic surgery transformation during a reality TV show)

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and by examining emerging adult men's and women's qualitative responses to this form of the media.

Media influences on girls' and women's perceptions of their own appearance have been explored extensively with data suggesting that ideal images of beauty negatively affect their perceptions of attractiveness and are associated with body dissatisfaction (see meta-analyses by Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Markey & Markey, 2009; Markey, Markey, & Goins, 2010). Media images of idealized female beauty have further been found to be associated with diverse psychological consequences ranging from depression to anger to eating disorders (Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2004; Johnson, McCreary, & Mills, 2007; Monro & Huon, 2005; Nabi, 2009; Sarwer & Crerand, 2004; Stice & Shaw, 2002; Ward & Harrison, 2005). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorelli, & Shanahan, 2002) present complementary explanations for the consequential effects of the media on girls' and women's perceptions of their appearance.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that comparing oneself to others provides individuals with a means to evaluate their own qualities when objective or unambiguous criteria for evaluation are not available. It has been argued (by us and others; see Markey & Markey, 2010) that it is difficult to evaluate one's own physical beauty without comparison to models available via the media. However, experimental data suggest that when individuals compare themselves to images of idealized female beauty, girls and women feel bad about themselves and maladaptive behaviors may ensue (Stice & Shaw, 2002; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). Related, cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002; Harrison & Hefner, 2008) suggests that repeated exposure to the media (i.e., cultivation of information presented in the media) leads viewers to accept media information as indicative of reality. Thus, the disparate nature of female beauty presented in the media and the beauty that the average female is likely to achieve becomes diminished as media contact increases. What these theories have in common, in part, is the general suggestion that girls and women learn what is physically attractive from

the media and internalize these ideals, often with negative personal consequences.

In contrast to the growing body of research examining the media's affects on females' perceptions of beauty, very few studies have examined how males respond to idealized images of female beauty (e.g., Aubrey & Taylor, 2009; Daniels & Wartena, 2010; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002, 2003; Hatoum & Belle, 2004). Although, these images are unlikely to contribute to boys' own self-concept or understanding of standards of attractiveness for boys and men, they are likely to cultivate a broader understanding of beauty and what constitutes beauty for girls and women. Indeed, correlational studies demonstrate that the quantity of adult men's media consumption is positively associated with attitudes stressing the importance of thinness in women (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Hatoum & Belle, 2004) and the belief that women are sex objects (Daniels & Wartena, 2010; Johnson et al., 2007; Ward, 2002). As Daniels and Wartena (2010, p. 5) suggest, "It appears that as media objectifies women, so do male viewers."

Given the omnipresent presentation of beauty as central to females' worth in the media (Bordo, 2003; Brumberg, 1997; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002), it is likely that both men and women who are heavy TV viewers are apt to internalize this value. Research by Harrison (2000) supports this notion. In her research, boys and girls who were heavy TV viewers were more likely to value thinness and stigmatize fatness than those who were relatively light viewers. The present study extends this research by evaluating the manner in which both emerging adult men and women respond to a presentation of idealized female beauty, which includes the unambiguous message that beauty is central to females' identity and worth active pursuit.

In addition to potentially affecting adolescents' and young adults' development of attitudes regarding attractiveness, research suggests that the media may affect behaviors aimed at modifying or "improving" one's physical appearance. Dieting, disordered eating, steroid use, and exercise behaviors have all been linked with media consumption (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Stice & Shaw, 2002; Tiggemann, 2005), suggesting that young people in particular are likely to internalize media messages about attractiveness and strive to alter their physical

selves accordingly. Recently, the pursuit of cosmetic surgery has also been linked with TV viewing (Markey & Markey, 2009, 2010; Menzel et al., 2011; Nabi, 2009). Although no one is suggesting that TV in and of itself directly causes individuals to pursue cosmetic surgery, it seems more than a coincidence that the 77% increase in the rate of cosmetic surgery procedures performed since 2000 (albeit, this increase is largely accounted for by minimally invasive procedures; American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2011a) parallels an increase in media focused on appearance enhancement, including “reality” TV depictions of appearance enhancement (Nabi, 2009).

Reality TV has become entrenched in the western media, replacing many so-called “unrealistic” comedic or dramatic forms of TV entertainment (Reiss & Wiltz, 2001). One element of “reality” presented in reality TV shows is cosmetic surgery (Shute, 2004). These shows invariably depict physical transformations of “regular” individuals via multiple cosmetic surgical procedures into dramatically different looking (i.e., “improved”) individuals. These programs suggest that cosmetic surgery is low risk, normative, and an appropriate approach to improving not only appearance but life satisfaction (Nabi, 2009). In our correlational and experimental research, we have accrued evidence suggesting that viewing this particular form of the media may encourage youths to develop an interest in obtaining cosmetic surgery (Markey & Markey, 2009, 2010). However, additional research is needed to understand the processes involved in taking youths from viewing a TV show to possibly internalizing the message presented in the show and deciding to respond to that message behaviorally.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this study to examine emerging adult men’s and women’s responses to idealized female beauty presented in a reality TV show featuring cosmetic surgical procedures to alter a woman’s appearance. First, we sought to determine whether viewers’ responses to the reality TV cosmetic surgery show were positive or negative. Second, we were interested in determining whether or not emerging adult men versus women responded differently in the extent to which they viewed the show positively or negatively. We expected that men would be less likely to respond to the idealized message

of female beauty positively than women would. This expectation was based on the abundance of research suggesting that girls and women are affected by media presentations of women. Third, we examined the thematic content of viewers’ responses to the reality TV cosmetic surgery show. Fourth, we examine whether or not emerging adult men versus women responded differently in terms of the thematic content they discussed. Finally, we examined associations between participants’ responses to the reality TV show featuring cosmetic surgery and their own interest in pursuing cosmetic surgery (controlling for participants’ own appearance satisfaction); we expected that participants who regarded the TV show more favorably would also be more likely to be interested in pursuing cosmetic surgery than those that did not view the show favorably. Because the TV show participants watched portrayed a woman’s surgical make-over, we expected that this effect would be significantly stronger for women than men.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Ninety-one emerging adult men (49%) and women (51%; M age = 19.5, SD = 4.24) participated in this study. Participants were all students from a university in the Philadelphia metropolitan area and they represent a diverse group in regards to ethnicity and other demographic traits. Over half (61%) of the sample self-identified as Euro American, 12% of the sample was African American, 11% Asian American, 14% Hispanic/Latina, and 2% indicated that they were of an “other” ethnic background. The majority of the participants (88%) reported personal incomes of less than \$20,000 a year. However, given the age of the participants, most did not reside alone and/or support themselves. Thirteen percent reported residing in homes (i.e., with parents) where the household income was \$20,000 per year or less, 17% reported residing in homes where the household income was \$20,000–\$49,000 per year, 25% reported residing in homes where the household income was \$50,000–\$75,000, and 40% reported household incomes greater than \$75,000 per year (5% of the sample was unable to respond to this item). Approximately half of the

participants (49%) reported having already completed some college (i.e., they were not college freshman in their first semester).

Participants were recruited for a study investigating "Reality TV" and participation took place in small groups of two to six participants. Participants were first seated approximately 4 feet from a 32 in. TV and the lights were turned off to eliminate any potential distractions in the room. Participants were instructed to pay close attention to what they were about to view as they would be asked questions pertaining to the show later and they were told to refrain from making any comments while viewing the show. Participants were exposed to a media message lauding the efficacy of surgical self-improvement for improving a woman's physical appearance (i.e., a reality TV show featuring a cosmetic surgery make-over). After watching the TV program, participants completed the measures described below along with other unrelated questionnaires in order to disguise the explicit aims of this study. All procedures were designed in accordance with the American Psychological Association's guidelines for the ethical treatment of human subjects, which included completion of a consent form. Participants were compensated with research credit toward their introductory psychology course.

Measures

Reality TV show. The cosmetic surgery show viewed by participants was "Extreme Makeover," which featured a woman's make-over involving multiple ($n = 12$) cosmetic and surgical procedures. Commercials and some of the tangential (i.e., personal) information about the individual was deleted from the show so that the clip was only 20 minutes long. The message of the show was explicit: The woman's physical transformation made her look more attractive and made her happier.

Qualitative response to reality TV show. Immediately after viewing the TV show, participants were provided with questionnaires to complete. The first page of the survey packet contained the instruction, "In the space below, please write a brief reaction to the TV show that you just watched. In your own words, what did you think of what you just saw?" Participants

were free to write as much or as little as they liked in response to this question. However, if a participant left this page blank, they were prompted to write something.

Each comment provided by participants was coded by four trained researchers using an empirically derived coding scheme developed for this study. Comments were first coded to determine whether they were positive or negative in tone. Each comment was coded on a Likert scale ranging from $-5 = \textit{completely negative}$ to $5 = \textit{completely positive}$ with a score of zero indicating it was neither negative nor positive. The four coders were very reliable in their rating of comments ($\alpha = .92$), thus these codes were averaged across judges. An example of a relatively positive comment provided was, "*I was amazed at how quickly and easily they turned her into a gorgeous young lady.*" An example of a relatively negative comment provided was, "*Shows like this encourage shallowness.*"

Responses to the reality TV show were then coded to determine the thematic content of the codes. Evaluating the entire set of comments made it clear that the majority of comments focused on issues of the featured woman's appearance ("appearance"), the psychology of the physical transformation ("psychology"), the entertainment value of the show ("entertainment"), or sociocultural values concerning beauty ("culture"). Raters determined the extent to which each comment provided by participants was representative of one of these categories by rating them on a Likert scale ranging from $0 = \textit{not at all}$ to $5 = \textit{completely}$. This coding scheme seemed to capture the majority of responses provided by the participants as only two responses received zeros for all the content categories and 81% of responses received a code of "3" or greater in at least one content category. Again, the four coders were very reliable in their rating of comments (alphas range from .84-.90), thus these codes were averaged. An example of a comment that was rated high for "appearance" was, "*It seemed like the story of an ugly duckling turning into a swan.*" An example of a comment that was rated high for "psychology" was, "*I felt good for the girl who was helped; now maybe she can enjoy her life.*" An example of a comment that was rated high for "entertainment" was, "*I really enjoyed the program.*" An example of a comment that was

rated high for “culture” was, “TV shows like this make one believe that because one don’t fit the Hollywood image they are ugly.” Table 1 provides examples of additional comments provided by participants and the way these comments were rated.

Interest in cosmetic surgery. Participants’ interest in obtaining cosmetic surgery to alter their appearance was also assessed using the Interest in Cosmetic Surgery Questionnaire (ICSQ; Markey & Markey, 2009, 2010; Cronbach’s alpha for this sample = .91). This measure consists of a list of 17 cosmetic surgery procedures and participants were asked to rate, using a 5-point Likert scale, the extent to which they were interested in obtaining the procedures (1 = *I would never consider this procedure* to 5 = *I would definitely consider this procedure*). Participants’ overall interest in cosmetic surgery to alter their physical appearance was determined by summing their responses to all the items. This list of procedures was derived from information provided by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons’ web page (ASPS, 2011a), Sarwer and colleagues’ (Sarwer, 2001; 2009) discussion of the cosmetic surgery procedures youths obtain (i.e., procedures associated with aging are not likely to be relevant to late adolescents/early adults), and procedures that can be performed on both males and females (e.g., nose reshaping, eyelid surgery, cheek implants, ear surgery, tummy tuck, liposuction, buttock lift, thigh lift, upper arm lift).

Appearance satisfaction. In order to control for participants’ appearance satisfaction in some analyses, participants indicated their general satisfaction with their physical appearance using a single, Likert scale item: “How satisfied would you say you are overall with the way you currently look?” Instructions indicated that participants should circle the most appropriate response ranging from 1 = *not satisfied at all* to 9 = *completely satisfied*. Although more lengthy measures are desirable for psychometric reasons, this item was chosen because it is simple, direct and comparable for men and women. Other available measures of physical appearance satisfaction (e.g., Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety Scale; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) typically focus on specific body parts and males’ and females’ desires regarding these different parts are not the same (e.g., girls and women prefer large breasts; boys and men prefer large/muscular arms), which can lead to confusion when interpreting these measures across gender (see Markey & Markey, 2010).

Results

In order to examine the first aim of this study, a one-sample *t* test was conducted to examine whether or not the participants’ mean overall opinion of reality TV shows was significantly different than zero (the value expected if participants viewed these programs as “neither pos-

Table 1
Sample Comments Made by Participants About Reality Television Show Viewed

Comment	Rated high in category/ Rated highly positive or negative
I felt it was ridiculous how they show that going through extreme surgery you become beautiful.	Appearance/Negative
A TV show that thinks women need to fit a certain “mold” to be beautiful.	Appearance/Negative
Our society is very judgmental as far as looks go.	Culture/Negative
The whole show just demonstrates how obsessive people are about their looks and how they think plastic surgery can solve all of their problems.	Culture/Negative
Another show for America to waste their time on.	Entertainment/Negative
What happened to going to a therapist and talking about self-confidence?	Psychology/Negative
She’s beautiful.	Appearance/Positive
I really enjoyed the program.	Entertainment/Positive
It was an inspirational show.	Entertainment/Positive
I think the reality TV show was an honor to watch.	Entertainment/Positive
If it makes people feel good, I guess it’s cool.	Psychology/Positive
I liked watching the show because they made someone happy.	Psychology/Positive
I think I saw an unhappy girl get her dreams accomplished.	Psychology/Positive

itive nor negative”). Results indicated that participants tended to view the reality TV programs featuring cosmetic surgery as fairly positive, $t(90) = 6.10, p < .001; r = .53; M = 1.69; SD = 2.63$. Comments such as, “*It was amazing how great she looked!*” exemplify this finding (see also Table 1). An independent t test was conducted to examine the second aim of this study. In contrast to our expectation, this analysis revealed that emerging adult men ($M = 1.56; SD = 2.81$) and women ($M = 1.78; SD = 2.50$) did not significantly differ in their perception of the media presentation of idealized female beauty, $t(89) = .41, p = .69; r = .04$.

To examine aims 3 and 4, a 2 (gender) \times 4 (category) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted. In this analysis there was no main effect of gender ($F(1, 89) = .02, p = .91; \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$); indicating that emerging adult men and women did not differ in their tendency to focus on particular themes in responding to the media message. However, there was a significant main effect of category ($F(3, 267) = 62.73, p < .01; \text{partial } \eta^2 = .41$). As seen in Figure 1, it appears that participants’ comments tended to focus on issues related to entertainment, appearance, and psychology more than issues related to culture. Comments such as, “*I think the media and*

society are very superficial for making this series,” pertaining to the cultural significance of the media message were often strongly worded, but relatively rare. Finally, there was no significant interaction effect ($F(3, 267) = .19, p = .71, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .002$) suggesting the main effect of category is similar for emerging adult men and women.

Finally, hierarchical multiple regression was used to examine aim 5. In this analysis, the outcome variable was participants’ interest in obtaining cosmetic surgery. In the first step, appearance satisfaction, gender, and overall opinion of reality TV shows were entered. Next, to examine the potential moderating effect of gender, the interaction between gender and opinion of reality TV shows was entered. To reduce issues associated with multicollinearity, opinion of reality TV shows was centered and gender was dummy coded (0 = women; 1 = men) before computing the interaction term (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). As shown in Table 2, individuals who were unsatisfied with their appearance and women tended to desire having cosmetic surgery more than men. More central to aim 5, gender significantly moderated the effect of opinion of reality TV shows.

In order to examine exactly how gender moderated the effect of response to the media mes-

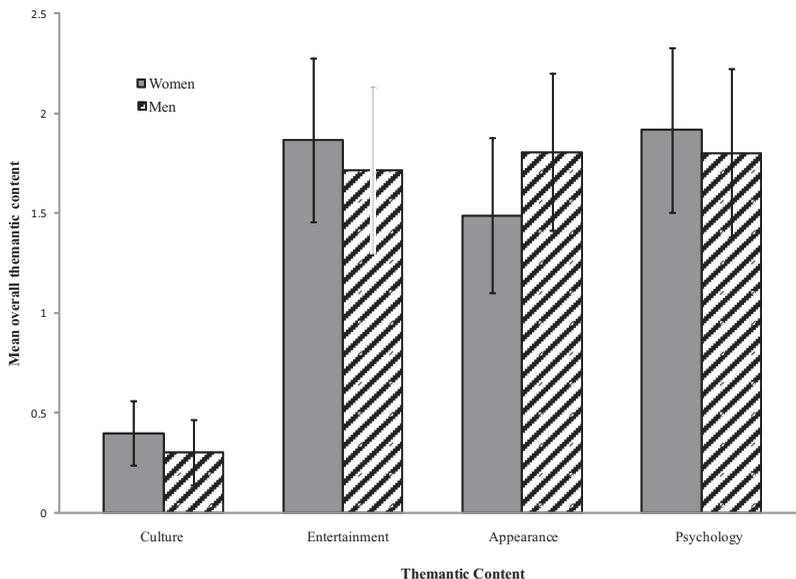


Figure 1. The thematic content of participants’ responses to the reality television show.

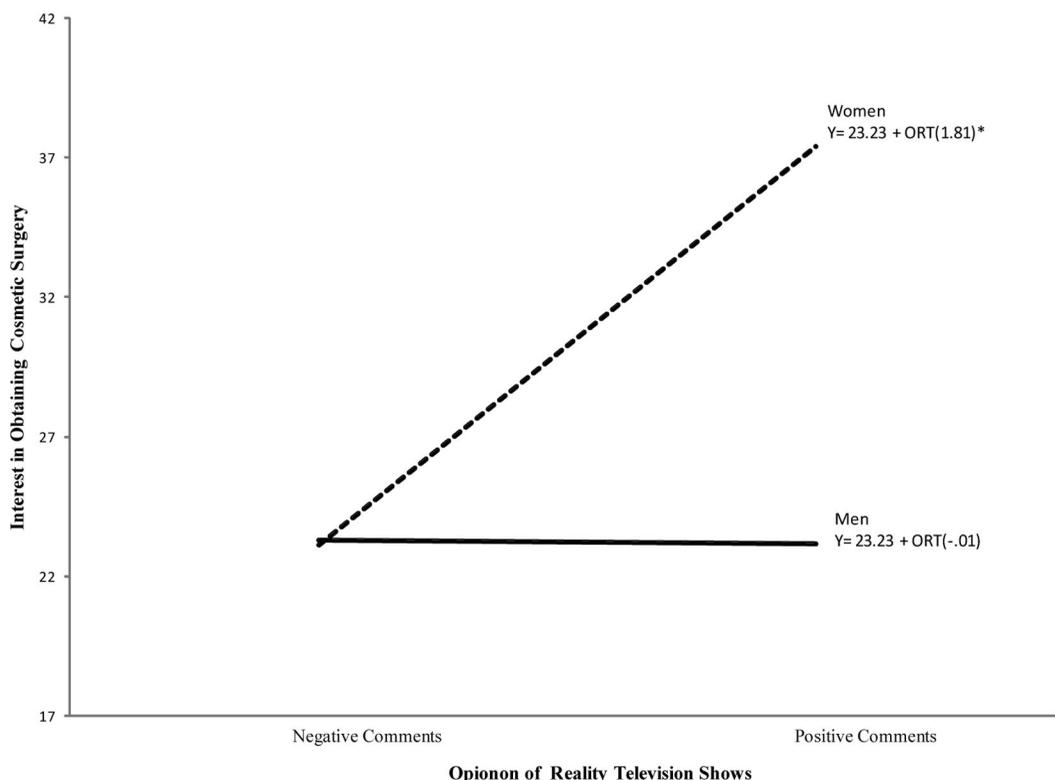


Figure 2. Interaction between opinion of the reality television show and gender when predicting interest in cosmetic surgery.

sage, a graphical representation of the interaction was created (see Figure 2), which was derived by calculating simple regression equations for men and women (Aiken & West, 1991). This graph displays the predicted interest in cosmetic surgery for emerging adult men and women scoring between 1.5 standard deviations below the mean in opinion of reality TV shows (i.e., participants with negative comments)

and 1.5 standard deviations above the mean (i.e., participants with positive comments). The simple slopes derived from this equation indicate that men's opinion of reality TV shows was unrelated to their desire to have cosmetic surgery ($t(86) = -.01, p > .05; r = .00$). However, women who reported fairly positive comments about reality TV shows tended to desire to have cosmetic surgery more than women who

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Interest in Obtaining Cosmetic Surgery

	B	SE B	β	Partial r
Step 1: $R^2 = .17^{**}$				
Appearance satisfaction	-1.26	.62	-.19	-.21*
Gender (G)	-7.10	2.51	-.28	-.30**
Opinion of reality television shows (O)	.81	.46	.17	.18
Step 2: $\Delta R^2 = .04^*$				
G \times O	-1.82	.91	-.29	-.21*

Note. $n = 91$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

had negative comments about such programs, $t(86) = 2.00, p < .05; r = .21$. An example of a comment provided by a young woman scoring among the highest on the measure of interest in cosmetic surgery is, "*I just saw every woman's fantasy—to be transformed into the beauty she desires.*" An example of a comment provided by a young woman scoring among the lowest on the measure of interest in cosmetic surgery is, "*I felt it was ridiculous how they show that going through extreme surgery you become beautiful.*"

Discussion

The present study contributes to our understanding of the potential influence of the media's representations of women on both emerging adult men and women. Both men and women responded generally positively to the media suggestion that women should pursue drastic measures to conform to cultural ideals of beauty. The focus of their responses was foremost on the apparent physical and psychological benefits of cosmetic surgery as a tool to enhance appearance. However, comments also contained content about the entertainment value of the show and a minority of comments addressed the cultural relevance of this form of the media (e.g., "*I do feel that it is horrible that today's society is based on looks*"). Finally, female participants who indicated an interest in pursuing cosmetic surgery were more likely to view the reality TV show more favorably than were participants who were relatively uninterested in pursuing cosmetic surgery.

In contrast to our hypothesis, we did not find a gender difference in emerging adult men and women's responses to the media presentation of idealized female beauty. It was expected that men would be less enthusiastic about this form of the media given some past research suggesting that women tend to be more critical about their own appearance than men are of women's appearance (Bergstrom, Neighbors, & Lewis, 2004; Markey & Markey, 2006; Rozin & Furnham, 1988). However, the men who participated in this study seemed to be as impressed by the potential benefits of physical appearance enhancement touted by the media message as were women. Although one participant suggested that, "*it's more of a show directed toward women,*" men repeatedly made comments such as, "*it was amazing how great she looked afterward*" (i.e., after the makeover). As Dan-

iels and Wartena (2010) have suggested and cultivation theory indicates, it is possible that men are internalizing female beauty ideals just as women do. This seems unfortunate, given that most girls and women men interact with in the real world (i.e., not on "reality" TV) will not resemble the idealized version of female beauty depicted in the media. This may lead to disappointment among men and increased pressure among women to succumb to drastic efforts to alter their physical appearance.

In terms of the content of participants' responses to viewing the reality TV show, although gender differences were not significant, we did find that men focused slightly more on appearance issues and women focused slightly more on psychological issues. It seems likely that women are somewhat more thoughtful about the meaning of physical appearance enhancement and the perceived benefits of embodying idealized female beauty. In contrast, men may be more likely to view the show at "face value" and focus on the basic premise espoused: It is important for women to look attractive. There were significantly fewer comments about the role of this sort of media message in the larger cultural context. These comments were largely critical and oftentimes thoughtful (e.g., "*I thought it was vain; pointless*"), but clearly not the typical emerging adult's response to the media's presentation of idealized female beauty. When these findings are interpreted within the context of social comparison and cultivation theories, the potentially negative effects of such shows is concerning. Many youths view this type of reality show programs not for just 20 minutes in a research lab, but as a daily form of entertainment. It is likely that such viewing habits have contributed to both emerging adult men's and women's belief systems regarding the sociocultural importance of women's physical beauty since childhood. Research is needed to determine whether or not these value systems and the related objectification (of the self and others) can be "unlearned" through media literacy education and the nurturance of healthy, realistic physical appearance goals.

The correlation between female participants' own interest in pursuing cosmetic surgery and their positive responses to the media message they viewed is consistent with past research indicating a link between cosmetic surgery themed reality TV and adolescents' and adults' own interest in cosmetic surgery (Markey & Markey, 2009, 2010;

Nabi, 2009). Of course, this correlation cannot substantiate causality; it is impossible to determine whether or not viewing the reality TV show *caused* young women to desire surgery. However, experimental research including our own (Markey & Markey, 2010) provides some evidence for a causal link between media presentation of cosmetic surgery and individuals' desire to pursue surgery. Interestingly, this effect was not found for young men; men's interest in cosmetic surgery was seemingly unrelated to their perception of the reality TV show featuring surgery. It is possible that emerging adult men do not feel comfortable admitting their interest in cosmetic surgery as they view this as a feminine pursuit (see Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006), in spite of the significant increase in men's pursuit of cosmetic surgery in the past few years (ASPS, 2011b). However, this finding may be due to the focus on a woman's physical transformation in the show. As suggested earlier, it is unlikely that media presentations of idealized female beauty impact emerging adult men's own sense of self and desire to change their own physical appearances. Instead, it is likely that men's views of women are cultivated by these media presentations (Daniels & Wartena, 2010; Harrison, 2000).

Although this study is novel in its qualitative approach to understanding emerging adults' perceptions of the media's presentation of idealized (i.e., surgically enhanced) female beauty, it has limitations worth noting. First, the cross-sectional nature of this study makes it impossible to determine whether or not attitudinal or behavioral patterns seemingly influenced by the media presentation are long-term or lasting in nature. Second, the sample of participants was somewhat ethnically diverse, but was not very diverse in terms of age. Additional research is needed to determine children's, younger adolescents', and older adults' of varying socioeconomic backgrounds responses to this particular form of the media. Third, a more thorough understanding of the role of gender could be achieved by an examination of emerging adult men's and women's responses to media presentations of both idealized female and male beauty. Finally, the design of our study may not have ecological validity as participants viewed a media message and were asked to respond to it thoughtfully. Outside of the lab, it is questionable as to whether or not emerging adults would engage in anything resembling critical thinking in response to a media message about cosmetic sur-

gery. Somewhat related, data collection for this study about "reality TV" took place in small (4–6 participants) mixed-gender groupings, which may have led to the recruitment of participants interested in reality TV and heightened participants' sensitivity to respond to the media message in a "gender appropriate manner."

In spite of the aforementioned limitations, we believe the qualitative methodology employed in this study allows this research to contribute to an understanding of emerging adults' varied responses to messages of idealized female beauty. Although reality TV makeover shows are less popular in 2012 than they were a decade ago when they began to emerge in the U.S., TV shows continue to depict cosmetic surgery and other forms of physical transformation (e.g., "The Biggest Loser" TV show) regularly. Further, cosmetic surgery appears in other media venues (e.g., advertisements; Hennink-Kaminski & Reichert, 2011) and cosmetic surgery rates have increased 5% since 2009 (ASPS, 2011c). This research should inform media literacy efforts aimed at improving adolescents' and young adults' critical viewing of the media. Empirical data and theory suggest that youths are learning and cultivating the value of women's physical appearance and that this may have serious, detrimental effects on their developing sense of self (especially women; Erikson & Goering, 2011) and potentially their expectations for others' appearance. Perhaps, it is merely idealistic to hope that youths might view physical appearance as only one element of an individual's worth. But, given data indicating that happiness and beauty are not strongly related (Brumberg, 1997; Lyubomirsky, 2007), it seems worthwhile to teach young adults that although striving to achieve physical beauty may have some rewards, it is unlikely to result in the lasting happiness the media so often suggests.

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