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‘Real’ love on television: a thematic analysis of how gender is performed and constructed in *The Bachelor New Zealand*

ABSTRACT

Trier-Bieniek and Leavy (2014) suggest that the representation and construction of gender norms through the popular media are internalized to a degree by audiences regardless of the fictionality or ‘realness’ of the content being displayed. ‘Real love’ shows such as The Bachelor New Zealand (Wild 2015) display gender norms in a particularly rigid way and certain narratives of the right way to behave as a female or male are reinforced through these shows (Brophy-Baermann 2005, Pozner 2010, Weber 2014). This paper will analyse two episodes from The Bachelor New Zealand, looking at how gender is performed and constructed. Using Braun and Clarke’s method of thematic analysis (2006), the episodes will be deconstructed according to three dominant themes: (1) ‘inherent’ gender characteristics, (2) the ‘cool girl’ myth and (3) realness and ‘being yourself’. The identification and analysis of these themes will suggest ways in which gender stereotypes are displayed and reinforced in the show and indicate that it is crucial for viewers to approach such shows with a critical eye.

KEYWORDS

reality TV
The Bachelor NZ
gender theory
performativity
real love TV

INTRODUCTION

Trier-Bieniek and Leavy suggest that the representation and construction of gender norms through the popular media are internalized to a degree by audiences, regardless of the fictionality or ‘realness’ of the content being displayed (2014). ‘Real love’ shows such as *The Bachelor New Zealand* (Wild 2015) display gender norms in a particularly rigid way and certain narratives are reinforced as the ‘right’ way to behave as a female or male. This paper

examines the ways in which gender is displayed in *The Bachelor New Zealand*. Two episodes are examined; the first episode that aired on 17 March 2015 which introduced the bachelor Arthur and the 21 bachelorettes to the audience for the first time and the thirteenth episode that aired on 28 April 2015 and focused on Arthur's visits to the final four bachelorettes' hometowns (Wild 2015a; Wild 2015b). These two episodes are deconstructed using thematic analysis and are split into three dominant themes (Braun and Clarke 2006): (1) 'inherent' gender characteristics, (2) the 'cool girl' myth, (3) realness and 'being yourself'.

Before these themes are discussed it is first pertinent to define what is meant by the 'display' of gender. This research interprets display as meaning the way in which gender is performed and constructed in *The Bachelor New Zealand*. This draws upon Butler's assertion that gender is a performance and "is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (1998: 519, italics in original). My research considers both the way in which the cast of *The Bachelor New Zealand* performs and constructs these acts of gender themselves, as well as and the way in which the editors of the show manipulate the content to intensify these performative acts of gender. Furthermore, due to the limitations of this research, this paper will focus on the performance and construction of the female gender primarily. However, in order for this analysis to be strengthened, at times this will also be compared and contrasted with the way the male gender is displayed.

INHERENT GENDER CHARACTERISTICS

A major theme present in *The Bachelor New Zealand* is the existence of 'inherent' gender characteristics of women and men. These characteristics are displayed throughout the show as being simply 'natural' characteristics that come with being a woman or a man and are reinforced by being repetitively performed and constructed. One such characteristic is the inherent cattiness women are framed to naturally possess.

Right from the first episode, the bachelorettes are frequently shown talking about each other behind each others' backs and making judgemental comments, such as the multiple comments made in the first episode about Crystal's intimidating and competitive qualities (Wild 2015a). Both the bachelorettes and the bachelor are aware of this cattiness and make repeated reference to this characteristic throughout the show, particularly in the opening

episode when the bachelorettes meet the bachelor for the first time (Wild 2015a). For example, one bachelorette notes that she can 'sense some underlying cattiness' in the group and that she knows that the women will 'go after the bachelor with their claws out'. Another bachelorette asserts that this behaviour is to be expected, because 'girls are naturally predatory and very territorial'.

The bachelor Arthur feels similarly, stating that he felt like he had 'been thrown into the lion's den' when he walked into a room full of the bachelorettes for the first time. The show's editors arguably have a hand in encouraging and constructing these displays of cattiness. Indeed, such conflicts are what dating reality shows 'trade' in and Kavka suggests that such sensationalism is 'both [...] a condition of [the cast] being on camera and [...] a result of the competitive marketplace in television production' (Touhy 2003, as quoted in Weber 2014: 9; Kavka 2014: 54).

Another allegedly inherent female characteristic that is presented in *The Bachelor New Zealand* is that of intensity of emotion. From the first episode the bachelorettes express a high level of emotion, mostly in their asides to the camera. There is a lot of discussion about being 'nervous' amongst the bachelorettes. One bachelorette mentions that she is 'ecstatic' and 'so happy' about not being sent home and another bachelorette even starts to cry (Wild 2015a). One bachelorette attributes this emotional environment to the fact that 'there is a lot of estrogen flying around'.

The bachelorettes express intense emotions regarding their feelings towards Arthur from the beginning with one woman commenting that she thinks there is '100 per cent a connection' between herself and Arthur and in later episodes the remaining bachelorettes express their deep emotional commitment to Arthur with phrases such as 'I'm in this now... I'm in it deep', 'I feel like I have invested quite a lot in this now' and 'I'm in it for the long haul' (Wild 2015b). Kavka describes such emotional performances as 'affective flaunting' and asserts that such displays of emotion are part of a 'gendered performance of (hyper)femininity' (2014: 63). She suggests that power is given to women in reality television shows only through the visibility of their performance of femininity: 'Femininity is accepted as socially normative only when it is heightened by the condition of *being seen*' (Kavka 2014: 59, italics in original). Therefore in *The Bachelor New Zealand* the more intensely emotions are expressed the more power the bachelorettes achieve as a character; in other words, the more screen time they get.

What is interesting is that this expression of intense emotions from the female bachelorettes heavily contrasts with Arthur. He does not seem to express the same level of emotion as the bachelorettes either in his asides or in person. Although he reiterates a number

of times that he wants to find ‘love’ through the show and that he could see himself with some of the women in the future (Wild 2015a, 2015b), he does not express the same high level of emotion as the bachelorettes.

A third inherent gender characteristic that is displayed in *The Bachelor New Zealand* is that of sport being a masculine activity. When Arthur is first introduced to the viewer, he is seen running along a beach with his muscular chest peeking out of his singlet. As we learn more about Arthur, we see shots of him hitting a tennis ball and lifting weights in the gym and we hear him comment in a voice-over that he is ‘really into fitness and food’ and his ‘philosophy is healthy body, healthy mind’ (Wild 2015a). This sportiness is not questioned or reflected on by the bachelor as being a particularly masculine thing to do; it is just accepted as part of his normal life as a male.

This can be contrasted with how the bachelorette Kristie is introduced. She prefaces her description of herself with the word ‘tomboy’; she is hyper-aware that being interested in sport in the way that she is, is typically considered a masculine characteristic: ‘I guess I’m a bit of a tomboy. I like watching rugby but I also enjoy playing the game as well. I definitely like dishing out a bit of pain if I can’ (Wild 2015a). She then clarifies this by telling the viewer that although she tries to ‘give off a tough persona’, she promises that ‘on the inside it’s all soft and gooey stuff’.

Sportiness as an inherently masculine characteristic goes links to notions of the display of competitiveness being masculine and therefore an unattractive trait for females. Although Arthur describes himself as being a ‘very competitive and independent person’ and receives no repercussions for this, the bachelorettes are not as lucky (Wild 2015a). Bachelorette Chrystal is criticized by both Arthur and other bachelorettes for her ‘game’ tactics in the first episode (Wild 2015a).

Another bachelorette, Dani, is criticized by the other bachelorettes for being boastful about her date with Arthur (Wild, 2015b). Kristie is similarly criticized for her ‘competitive’ nature: ‘she’s got eyes in the back of her head’ (Wild 2015a). Butler (1988) asserts that “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (1988: 522). Indeed, in *The Bachelor New Zealand*, these competitive bachelorettes are punished for their sins, as none of them become the winning bachelorette at the end of the season (Wild 2015c).

THE 'COOL GIRL' MYTH

A second theme present in the gender performance of *The Bachelor New Zealand* is the 'cool girl' myth. This theme is inspired by Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* (2012) and Flynn's description of the ideal, perfect 'Cool Girl' -

The Cool Girl... drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot...Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want... Men actually think this girl exists. (210).

This myth is promoted repeatedly throughout *The Bachelor New Zealand* in a number of ways. Firstly, Arthur frequently asserts his desire for this mythical woman throughout both shows. He expects the ideal bachelorette to be attractive and 'good to look at' but at the same time she needs to be family-oriented and a 'dork' (2015b, 35:14) (Wild 2015b; Wild 2015a).

She needs to be 'confident' and 'share the same values' as him but being competitive is not permissible. She needs to be able to 'laugh at [herself]' and have a sense of humour but she also needs to be open about her feelings and show him emotional commitment. What is also apparent about Arthur's ideal 'Cool Girl' is that she fits into a very rigid set of criteria regarding the way she looks. Although there was a small variety in the appearances of the 21 bachelorettes in the first episode, by Episode Thirteen, the four remaining bachelorettes were all white and blonde; all of the women that fell outside of this image had been eliminated throughout the course of the show (Wild 2015c).

The unachievable contradictions of the ideal 'Cool Girl' are also demonstrated by some of the comments the girls make. For example, the bachelorette Matilda discusses the way that she loves food, and that even though she knows 'a lot of girls... who don't like to eat on their first date', she's 'all about it' and 'often orders the ribs' when she is on a first date with a man (Wild 2015a). However, regardless of this love of food that she possesses, she still has a considerably slim physique, which seems to help her fit the rigid criteria that *The Bachelor* franchise has in regards to choosing women for the series. As Rocker-Gladen explains, there "are basically two women on this show: the skinny blonde with long straight hair and the skinny brunette with long straight hair" (2013). This illustrates how women can also be complicit in the construction of patriarchal gender norms. The 'Cool Girl' isn't just something imposed on

women by men; it is very much internalized and perpetuated through women's behaviour and discourse as well.

Furthermore, this theme of the 'Cool Girl' is exemplified by the repetitive female acceptance of male dominance and authority in *The Bachelor New Zealand*. This acceptance of authority is ingrained in the narrative of *The Bachelor* franchise in general as the bachelor is the one who makes the decisions about what happens in the show, and gets to decide who goes home each week (Yep and Camacho 2004: 339). In *The Bachelor* franchise, power is conflated with masculinity and the only chance women get to assert autonomy is by choosing to leave the show on their own terms (Yep and Camacho 2004: 339).

This happens in the first episode of *The Bachelor New Zealand* when the bachelorette Rosie chooses to leave the show during the elimination ceremony (Wild 2015a). She says that 'this whole experience doesn't feel right' for her, a statement which is met with disapproval by Arthur, who tells her he is 'a little bit disappointed'. She is not the 'Cool Girl' he hoped she would be.

Although Rosie makes this decision on her own and hence undermines Arthur's choosing power, ultimately she loses out on the 'prize' of winning the show and immediately is sent home and the audience never hear from her again (Wild 2015a). In this respect Rosie is a loser of the show as she did not play within the show's rules and behave as the women were expected to behave. She loses her power by being made invisible (Weber 2009: 255).

On the other hand, the girls who succeed in the show by progressing from week to week are those who accept the choosing power of Arthur. They are those who are waiting on 'the edge of their seats' for Arthur to pick who he wants to spend time with, and who really want to be made safe' by receiving a rose from Arthur and not being sent home (2015a). But not all of the girls who go home do so on their own terms like Rosie as those who are 'deemed less desirable are [still] sent packing with little to no choice in the matter' (Croner, 2014, p. 17). Even if they do all they can to be a 'Cool Girl', Arthur still has the final word about who performs the 'Cool Girl' myth the best. He decides in the end who is the most appropriate 'extension' of himself; who has no wants or needs that may come into conflict with his own (Haglund 2014).

REALNESS AND 'BEING YOURSELF'

The final theme evident in *The Bachelor New Zealand* is that of 'realness' and 'being yourself'. This theme appears to reinforce the messages of the two themes above regarding the way gender norms are performed and constructed on the show as it suggests to the viewer that the way the bachelor and the bachelorettes are behaving is a reflection of the 'real', natural version of themselves.

Butler suggests that this is an insidious aspect of gender performativity (1988: 526). Gender performance is not a self-aware act that people put on and changing this behaviour is not as easy as voluntarily choosing to behave differently. Gender performances instead are coerced and naturalized to such a point that they constitute what are believed to be essential characteristics of men and women.

Thus, in *The Bachelor New Zealand* the belief that one is simply being 'real' or being their natural self is mentioned both by Arthur and the bachelorettes on several occasions. Arthur describes his ideal woman as 'someone that is just completely themselves' (Wild 2015a), and he says that '[t]here's nothing that these girls can do to win except for just be themselves' (Wild 2015b). Similarly, a number of the bachelorettes stress how important they think it is to show Arthur their 'real' selves and that their strategy on the show is just to be themselves (Wild 2015a, 2015b).

Cultural critics dismiss the idea that audiences are duped into believing reality television is in fact 'real'. Weber argues that viewers of such programmes are aware of the mediated reality they are witnessing and that it would be 'naïve' for these viewers to think otherwise (2014: 20). In specific reference to *The Bachelor New Zealand*, critic Duncan Grieve asserts that audiences watch the show for its 'unintentional comedy' and do not take it seriously (quoted in Hunkin 2015). However, the theme of 'realness' is nevertheless pervasive in *The Bachelor New Zealand* and appears to reinforce the idea that the way that gender is performed on the show is a real, natural depiction of who the bachelor and bachelorettes are in 'real life'.

Furthermore, the constant reference to realness by the show's characters conveniently serves what Kavka describes as 'constructed unmediation' (2005: 94). She suggests that this constructed unmediation is the producers' desire to construct 'a sense of reality as an effect of seemingly *direct* transmission' and that all post-production editing or technological manipulation is done with the intention to present the viewer with an intimate depiction of the seemingly 'real' (Kavka 2005: 94, italics in original). This creates a sense of intimacy between the cast and the audience, because Kavka suggests that we as the audience are not simply 'voyeurs of hot-tub scenes. We are voyeurs of emotion... [and are] equally participants in it, drawn in by... the affect of intimacy' (2005: 96). Croner proposes that it is this sensation of

intimacy that is what makes franchises like *The Bachelor* so popular with audiences and pleasurable to watch (2014: 46). Indeed, both Episodes One and Thirteen of *The Bachelor New Zealand* had a considerably large audience, the first episode pulling approximately 232,000 viewers and the thirteenth at approximately 306,500 viewers (Nielsen 2015a; Nielsen 2015b).

CONCLUSION

The Bachelor New Zealand is a reality television programme that is loaded with displays of gender norms. Acts of gender are repeatedly performed and constructed throughout both episodes one and thirteen and all collectively work together to ‘produce, and sustain discrete polar genders’ (Butler 1988: 522). Themes such as the existence of essential male and female characteristics, the myth of the ‘Cool Girl’ image, and ‘realness’ all recur throughout the two episodes and work to reify rigid, ‘natural’ gender relations. Although some theorists and cultural critics dismiss the idea that audiences watch programmes like *The Bachelor New Zealand* for a true depiction of reality, it is also suggested that the popular media nevertheless has a part in defining the ‘boundaries of gender’ and that these boundaries can be internalized to a degree by audiences (McRobbie 2015: 71; Trier-Bieniek and Leavy 2014: 18). It is therefore important that we watch programmes such as *The Bachelor New Zealand* with a critical eye and a heavy dose of scepticism otherwise we might unintentionally ‘leave ourselves open to serious manipulation’ by the way concepts such as gender are rigidly portrayed (Pozner 2010: 32).

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