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Bunny Talk: Teenagers Discuss The Girls Next Door

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ABSTRACT

The sexualisation of the mainstream media is hardly cause for surprise nowadays, even when shows are targeting a teenage audience. The popularity among teens of *The Girls Next Door* (a television series that follows the day-to-day lives of Playboy's Hugh Hefner and his three girlfriends), which broadcasts adult content in a PG manner, provided the basis for this research. I explore the pleasures associated with watching the programme, how teenagers speak about gendered representations in reality TV and how gender roles are constructed on the show through 6 cm BT 0.0011 Tc23.38about(-99191 (h) -1183 0 -21 (for)abogem] TJ E1 () c6 cm

1. INTRODUCTION

'We call it a fantasy. They call it home.'

- Tagline for The Girls Next Door, uk.eonline.com

The prevalence of reality television programmes, particularly those centring on 'inside looks' into celebrity lifestyles, with a focus on the domestic and day-to-day rituals of the elite, is a worldwide phenomenon. One particular show that has attained enormous success since it f

teen viewers. Ultimately, reality TV shows like *GND* repackage the American Dream using sexual tropes and easily recognisable gender stereotypes to make the process – going from rags to riches, from anonymity to celebrity – seem accessible to anyone.

2. BEHIND THE BUNNY EARS: A BRIEF HISTORICAL GLANCE

'When you look this good, who cares if you're plastic?' - Barbie

Playboy magazine was founded by Hugh Hefner and launched in 1953, organized around the ideas of fun, pleasure and consumption for the middle classes (Gill, 2007). As Ehrenreich (1983) has argued, 'the breasts and bottoms were necessary not just to sell the magazine, but also to protect it' – male effete consumption needed to be reinforced with machismo, because male consumption on its own was threatened with the shadow of homosexuality (Gill, 2007). *Playboy* celebrated its version of a 'natural' male sex drive complemented by innocent 'girls next door' that were happy and willing to please men (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa, 2007: 74). As Gill (2007:206) indicates:

...its individualistic, hedonistic, consumption-oriented ethic of personal gratification represented a rebellion against the "old" figure of male as breadwinner and family provider and opened up a space of libidinous fun and las6166 0 0 Te 92 (1 T(1 T(i) h Qk) 2 (on) .]TJ ET Q 0.06 0

which was ranked on a scale ranging from a flawless beauty to loss of image through ageing or an irreversible appearance issue (Wolf, 1991: 19). Thus, while the magazine may have embraced a new kind of sexuality for its time and for women, it was and still is concerned with only certain types of women: the unattractive, ageing or heavy-set need not apply.

The Playboy Clubs have since gone (although one recently reopened in Las Vegas), and our image of Playboy in the noughties is removed from what it perhaps once was thanks to the introduction of a wide array of merchandise (ranging from bed sheets to clothing to pencil

3. THEORETICAL CHAPTER

'If you remove the human factor from sex and make it about stuff: big fake boobs, bleached blonde hair, long nails, poles, thongs, then you can sell it. Suddenly sex requires shopping: you need plastic surgery, peroxide, a manicure, a mall.'

– Ariel Levy, Female Chauvinist Pigs

Soap Opera Audiences and Pleasure

Audiences were not always thought of as critical, active and engaged. An entire body of literature ranging from the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972) to effects researchers such as Bandura *et al.* (1963) and Anderson (2001) have all argued for the passivity of audiences and for the commoditization of the masses who sit zombie-like in front of the big screen, hypodermically

Placing emphasis on the pleasure that people experience from Dallas is not a harmless theoretical (and political) choice. By so doing we are acknowledging that people can have a positive relationship with Dallas – a hedonistic attitude which is at odds with the doctrine that mass culture primarily manipulates the masses.

Ang asked Dutch fans of the soap opera *Dallas* to write in what they enjoyed about the show, and she found that pleasure came from a variety of reasons, and was often a contradictory and unexpected emotion. Some fans experienced an enjoyment that went beyond any feelings of resistance or derision towards the genre. This dual mentality of simultaneously liking something one would be expected to disparage, and of wanting to engage with this 'collusion of dominant representations' is particularly relevant in the context of *GND* and illustrates how a show of this type produces pleasure in teen audiences, confirming Ang's assertion that, 'Pleasure is therefore obviously something uncertain and precarious' (Ang, 1996: 85).

When studying audiences, it is critical to remember that different viewers, based on their own life experiences, social strata and sex, engage with texts in completely dissimilar ways. As Ang notes, the discourse of the real' (Murray and Ouellette, 2004: 2). It is designed to sell products, to entertain and also to provide viewers with the feeling that they are seeing what occurs behind closed doors:

What ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their professed abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, yet often playful look into what may be called the "entertaining real". This fixation with "authentic" personalities, situations, and

While people would perhaps prefer not to like a show of *GND*'s ilk, an ironic viewing position permits viewers to critique the characters' tastes, intellects and pursuits, while simultaneously allowing them to keep on watching the programme.

In the field of reality television, empirical studies conducted thus far have explored issues of class and gender and how they are re-produced on TV, the postfeminist sensibility of many reality television programmes, particularly of the makeover variety, notions of authenticity, the introduction of the domestic private sphere into the public sphere (and its prevalence as a reality TV environment), the role of surveillance in many of these shows (which theoretically links to Foucault's (1979) notions of governmentality and the internalisation of self-policing and self-disciplining tendencies), the emphasis and celebration of the individual and, ultimately, the aspirational undertones many of these programmes carry. All of this has served to unravel yet another layer of information about audiences:

Representation and Othering

Stuart Hall's work on the politics of representation, where he traces the mimetic and constructivist approaches of how images and characters are depicted, also informs this research, particularly because both the male and females on the show are distinctly characterised by stereotypical gender roles (Hall, 1997). As Hall points out, stereotyping fixes meanings that are given to groups and those images are subsequently reproduced. For example, we mentally link a blonde with pneumatic breasts with the term 'bimbo' and it is difficult for us to shed that image, even when presented with an alternate truth (Hall, 1997). *GND* gives voice to those who were previously silenced, the 2-D Playmate images from the

throwing Bridget's dog a party and painting Easter eggs, or dressing up and getting her makeup done. While the other girls are prompt and disciplined, Kendra is more rebellious: she is often late, unkempt and generally unruly. In most episodes (and in every episode that I showed the teenagers), there was a subtle (or sometimes more overt) indication that Holly did not approve of this, a sentiment Angela McRobbie terms 'postfeminist symbolic violence' (McRobbie, 2004). Through performing the 'right' kind of femininity (looking a certain way, acting 'their place' in relation to the powerful man in their lives), these women have improved their lots in life. Butler's theory of gender performativity is relevant in framing not only how people on the show are characterized, but how teens discuss gender roles and construct their sense of when gender is being 'correctly' acted out (Butler, 1999).

The idea of gender as a construction and performing 'feminine' behaviour is a central factor in the programme, which distinguishes the three girls (who are physically virtually indistinguishable) from one another and establishes Holly and Bridget as 'feminine' and Kendra as 'other'.

The Postfeminist Physique

Postfeminism is a contentious term because it is an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist concerns, and many critics are dubious about its validity. It has been used to conceptualise theoretical frameworks in studies of certain reality television programmes (especially the makeover genre and shows like *Wife Swap*) and I am using it in this context because its conflation of subjugation and sexuality, and its emphasis on the domestic and on women's bodies, is relevant both to an analysis of *GND* and to teenagers' responses to the show (Wood and Skeggs, 2004). As Gill explains, it can be understood as an epistemological break within feminism, influenced by poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism; a historical shift that has moved into a new period of feminism with new issues and concerns; and it is also thought of as a position antithetical to feminism, a reaction against it (Gill, 2007: 249).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1979) argues that certain practices associated with modern institutions are accompanied by a more insidious power focused on the body. Through disciplinary techniques such as constant surveillance modelled in the Panoptican and carried over into other modern institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, military), 'docile' or subjugated bodies are produced in support of the dominant order (Foucault, 1979). Using Foucaultian notions of disciplinary power and self-governing behaviour, Sandra Lee Bartky

Porn Goes Mainstream

Finally, it is usefu

also beneficial. I understand the contentious character of the term postfeminism, but it is precisely the all-encompassing nature of this theory, managing at once to deny and embrace feminism, which is at work in *GND*, where freedom and fun are equated with liberal attitudes towards sex. Using theorists such as Gill and Bartky, I will explore how (female) teenagers are internalising pressures regarding bodies and appearance in their discussions about this media text and others, while Butler and McRobbie will help to contextualise the importance of the "right" kind of femininity.

Objectives of Research

The theoretical approaches discussed above have been selected to explore the following questions: What are the pleasures associated with watching *GND*? How do teenagers talk about gendered representations in reality TV? How does the

After this initial visual analysis of the programme, I focused on finding my interview group. My initial impetus in interviewing teenagers came when I casually remarked that I'd watched the *GND* to my fiancé's 16-year-old cousin and she shrieked, 'Oh my god, I love that show!' and then started discussing her favourite characters and episodes. This had happened with my friend's sister previously, and I became intrigued: what did they enjoy about it, were other kids their age enjoying it too, were their reasons for liking it similar to mine? This is a programme that markets adult content in a PG manner, which is another motive that I had in discussing the show with teenagers.

In choosing my interviewees, I wanted them to all be from the UK, because I was interested in what their reactions were towards this archetypal American programme, especially because I know that other US-based reality shows (*The Hills, Laguna Beach, My Super Sweet 16*) are popular with this demographic. I was fortunate in that my base of interviewees included teenagers whom I mostly knew prior to the interviews, because they were siblings or relatives of friends of mine. I think this was advantageous in that the kids (aged from 13-19) were comfortable with me and felt at ease expressing thei

note of primary responses (second-person pronouns, response tokens such as 'yeah', completion of a turn taken by a speaker in the studio), formulations, argumentative interrogations and responses evoking personal experiences and stories (Wood, 2005). Thus, with 'text-in-action', the interviewer can see for themselves how the audience constructs and establishes their role in relation to the programme, a process I found especially interesting within the teenage demographic.

In constructing my interview guide, I looked to Kvale (1996: 133-34) and used a combination of introducing, follow-up, direct, indirect structuring and probing questions. I felt it was important to ask a series of general questions ranging from: Do you like reality TV? Which shows? Why?, to asking teens to sum up what happened in the episode, just to see the range of interpretations and the characters they most engaged with. I also asked probing questions when I felt they were relevant. I recorded some interviews and took notes with others, and I transcribed the interviews (and text-in-action where relevant) immediately after the interview took place. Once I had completed all of the interviews, I manually went through them in a thematic manner, searching for common motifs, repeated phrases or words and derogatory and positive remarks. I then grouped the answers by sex and went through them again, to see if any obvious differences or similarities would emerge. It should be noted that interviews either took place in my home or in the LSE library. Due to the nature of interviewing some under-18-year-olds, I prepared parental consent forms as well as individual consent forms for the participants and emailed them to parents prior to the interview for them to sign or ask me any relevant questions. I gave participants over the age of 18 consent forms upon their arrival. In addition, all of the names of my interviewees have been changed for them to remain anonymous.

5. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

While teenagers are critical and engaged viewers, a first important point that my research showed is that they are not always entirely sure what it is they are watching, at least in the context of this programme. Lisa, a 13-year-old girl from London,

the messages attached to it; in fact, it now stands as a symbol of liberated sexuality. Julia (17, London) was perturbed by the idea that '12-year-old girls are wearing it' but concluded, 'the Bunny symbol is very detached from the brand'. If there had been the opportunity for further research, it would have been interesting to look into other aspects of the brand and how teenagers relate to it.

Aside from the three London university students, who expressed their dislike of reality TV programmes (although they admitted to watching them nonetheless), all of my interviewees

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badmouthing each other because they view cattiness as another characteristic of typical female behaviour (several made reference to this during the interviews).

Pleasure deriving from derision, from feeling superior to the on-screen characters and from ironic distancing was a key finding. Will took great pleasure in the 'stupidity' of the characters and relished insulting them: 'The dog one (Bridget) is an idiot. The other one is naggy and clingy (Holly). And the third one (Kendra) is boring'; it's 'guaranteed they don't know what happened on Easter'; and in reference to Hef's former girlfriend Crystal, 'What, did she turn 30 so they had to boot her?' (Will, 14, London). He admitted to enjoying the show (which I suspect in part relates to his age and how he expects a 14-year-old boy should feel in reference to Playboy) but also made some very astute comments suggesting a psychological understanding of these women, remarking that the dogs played such an important role to them 'because they're in polygamous relationships, they can't have proper kids so they use their animals' (Will, 14, London). Barry was also emotionally charged when watching the programme and at one point started yelling at the TV:

What are you doing living in this house? All these girls are fundamentally immature, that's why they live with this old guy and let him buy them stuff – they haven't realised they're adults. (Barry, 18, London)

In reference to Holly's desire to have a child to host the Easter party next year, Barry muttered, 'Kids take time to grow, you moron' (Barry, 18, London). These teenagers became most engaged with the programme when they were critical of it and I would argue that at these moments of ironic commentary or aggressive derision, they were enjoying it the most because they were identifying strongly with the characters and ultimately feeling superior to these women whom they view as stupid and immature. There is also an element of empathising with them (especially with Barry) and wanting them to take charge of their lives.

The importance of youth for women in a postfeminist society (as Wolf, Gill, etc. have all pointed out) cannot be understated and acting 'girlish' (by dressing up pets and painting Easter eggs) is a crucial determinant of attractiveness. Once again gender roles are reified by the construction of these women as young, 'innocent' girls paired with the old rakish character, and the girlfriends – by wearing their hair in pigtails and having pink rooms lined

'Bridget's like a baby' (Julia, 17, London) and to their lives as 'Barbie worlds', 'like a sorority but with sex' (Ellie, 17, London) and like a 'Disney movie' (Lisa, 13, London). This identification with younger women by the characters coincides with their appeal to a teenage demographic because they are instantly relatable.

In terms of characters, the teenagers were drawn to some more than others. Bridget was frequently dismissed as an 'idiot' but as 'sweet', while Holly was called 'nice' and 'pathetic' several times (because of her attachment to Hef). Many of the girls thought Kendra was the

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case, resulting in large part from the marked dissociation between what Playboy means for their generation, where they associate the brand with pink bedding and rhinestone bunnies.

This research also elaborated on the multitude of pleasures that exist in the relationship between viewer and programme: the search for the authentic, the glimpse of fantasy, the ironic detachment, the derisory critiques and the feelings of superiority to the characters which the show inspired and which contribute to a sensory experience that the teenagers were actively, critically and emotionally involved with. Instead of being a text to dismiss as trash, like the soaps and re(as)]c1 y d programmes f (e) -222]c1,

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