

Lights, Action, Naughty Bits: A Thematic Analysis of New Zealanders' Attitudes to *Naked Attraction*

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Abstract

The sexualisation of culture has generated much debate in western discourse around its effect on the normalisation of nudity and sexual activity. The reality television show *Naked Attraction* has increased the dialogue around this debate after its airing, originally in the UK, and then in international territories. The show has been applauded for profiling diverse people, whether that be concerning sexual orientation, body image, gender or ethnicity. However, it has also been accused of showcasing pornography. To explore where New Zealanders' attitudes were positioned on the show, we thematically analysed online comments from two local media entities and found that New Zealanders were positive on its nudity and approach to sexual discourse.

Keywords: body positivity, physical appearance, reality television, sexualisation, *Naked Attraction*

Introduction

Scholars have argued that the proliferation of media texts that applaud and condemn ‘sexual revelation and exhibitionism’ (McNair, 2002, p. ix) have contributed to a growing sexualisation of culture in the West (Gill, 2009). Such sexual content has been received positively as it has democratized sexual discourse (Attwood, 2006; Plummer, 2003), normalized nudity and sexual activity (McNair, 2002), and empowered women, in particular, to engage more in sexual fulfilment and self-revelation (Attwood, 2006, 2009; Cato & Carpentier, 2010; McNair, 2002). At the very least, it has broken down barriers around attitudes to sex and the body. However, not everyone in society has embraced or supported the sexualisation of culture, with the sexual content of media being condemned for breaching good taste and decency (Gill, 2009) and developing permissive sexual attitudes amongst predominantly impressionable youth (Coy, 2009; Morgan, 2011; Strasburger, 2005; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). This debate between advocating sexual understandings versus public morals manifested itself in online discussions after the airing of the reality television programme *Naked Attraction* (2016-present) in New Zealand.

Naked Attraction is a United Kingdom produced show by Channel 4 and is sold as a reality television dating show with a twist. As the tagline for the show attests, the “daring dating series...starts where some good dates might end- naked” (Channel4.com, 2016). Essentially, six singles stand in coloured boxes, while their naked bodies are revealed from the bottom up for the judging pleasure of a “chooser”. When two contestants remain, the chooser also strips naked and makes a final decision on whom they would like to go on a clothed date with. When the couple is brought back weeks later to discuss the date, more often than not, the audience learns that they had engaged in sexual intercourse (sometimes the same night as the date took place). In discussing the dates after the show, presenter Anna Richardson admitted to asking whether contestants had sex and hoped the show would evolve to eventually include an “extra slice” to explore the after show in more detail (Cain, 2018). The show has been referred to as a “meat market” (Viner, 2016, para 29) for emphasising casual sex.

The show has been applauded for profiling diverse people, whether that be in relation to sexual orientation, body image, gender or ethnicity (McConnell, 2018a; Taylor, 2017; Westbrook, 2017). In New Zealand, the first season was screened in 2017 and averaged 174,700 viewers weekly (stuff.co.nz, 2018). It rated highly among the 18-49 year old demographic (the target audience for the show), but as of July 2018, upwards of 536 complaints had been received by the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) (The New Zealand Herald, 2018b). Many levelled accusations at the show and Television New Zealand (TVNZ) for showcasing pornography (The New Zealand Herald, 2018a). Those objecting to the broadcast of *Naked Attraction* were unhappy with the time slot of the show (9:30 pm on Friday), while others believed the show was distasteful and undermined traditional values around sex, nudity and relationships (The New Zealand Herald, 2018a, 2018b).

The controversy around the show, including an upwards of 500 complaints to the BSA, suggested that initial reactions to its broadcast were prone to condemnation, which was somewhat unexpected given that research into the sexual behaviours of New Zealander’s has revealed a perchance towards multiple sexual partners (Pstuka, Connor, Cousins & Kypri, 2012), sexual experiences in adolescence (de Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Woertman & Meeus, 2011) and practices of casual sex for the sake of it (Farvid & Braun, 2016). Additionally, New Zealand has typified progressive sexual attitudes decriminalising sex work in 2003 despite countries around the world continuing to penalise such behaviour (Armstrong, 2017), and in

2013 New Zealand was amongst the early adopters by legalising same-sex marriage (Nguyen, 2015). Because generally, New Zealanders have appeared to embrace sexual constructs, the complaints about the show suggested that more research was needed to explore the attitudes of New Zealanders towards *Naked Attraction*. Particular attention was given to online, and specifically, social media platforms because of their potential to encapsulate public opinion and typify some of the elements conducive to a public sphere (Chaffe & Metzger, 2001).

We chose to analyse the social media responses of New Zealanders to *Naked Attraction* (2016-present), because in many ways, as a young country, New Zealand's national identity, culture and values are still very much under development (King, 2003). New Zealand has been commended for its egalitarianism (Crothers, 2008) and liberal democratic values (Sibley, Hoverd & Liu, 2011), but more research is needed into how New Zealanders perceive certain issues, such as sexually explicit media content. With its intensely deregulated media market, much of the media content broadcast to New Zealand audiences originates overseas (Bell, 1995; Horrocks, 2004), and therefore, understanding how locals respond to such content may offer insights into how such content contributes to the formation of New Zealanders' ideals and ways of being. Understanding how New Zealanders might be responding to the sexualisation of culture is also advantageous given much of the scholarship in the field has centred on British, European or American contexts (Attwood, 2006, 2009; Cato & Carpentier, 2010; Gill, 2009; McNair, 2002; Plummer, 1995). Accordingly, attention needs to be given to the impact of the sexualisation of culture on Australasian countries that may share cultural contexts with other Western societies, but which, nevertheless, possess their own distinctive identities.

Naked Attraction screened in New Zealand on the channel TVNZ 2. According to research conducted by New Zealand on Air (NZoA), linear television continues to remain popular amongst those in the 45+ age range, yet TVNZ 2 tends to appeal to audiences comprised of homemakers, young singles and solo parents. That is, 25% of the target audience for programming on TVNZ 2 will be aged between 15-24, while the channel features in the top ten media consumption platforms for both Māori and Pacific Island people (NZoA, 2018). More specifically, *Naked Attraction* was being watched by over 5550,000 people aged between 18-49 when it began screening again in 2018 (TVNZ, 2018). Furthermore, the show rated highly amongst men, coming in at the third-highest rating streaming show on TVNZ Demand (Brooks, 2019). As of January 2018, FaceBook usage in New Zealand was highest amongst 25-34 year olds at 850,000 users, followed by 18-24 year olds (670,000 users) and 35-44 year olds (600,000) (Hughes, 2019). Therefore the same groups of television viewers likely to be exposed to the show *Naked Attraction*, are amongst those accessing FaceBook. Such statistics suggest that the New Zealanders watching the show, and later commenting online about their views of the show, are diverse and variously representative of the wider New Zealand population. It is against such a backdrop that we feel comfortable suggesting that these views on the show reflect what could be considered a snapshot of the perceptions of a range of New Zealanders.

Sex and Reality Television

The sexualisation of culture

According to Attwood (2006, p. 77), the sexualisation of culture entails a:

...preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experiences; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay...fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex.

In essence, the latter part of the 20th Century has seen a growing interest and concern with the number of texts and the depictions of sex found in the mainstream media, particularly as the messages disseminated have normalized and democratized the ways in which gender, sex and sexual behaviour are discussed (Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002). In fact, McNair (1996, p. 23, 2002) has argued that the increasing prevalence of media texts that promote revelation, exhibitionism and voyeurism have produced what he terms “pornographication.” That is, sexually explicit content previously exclusive to the realm of pornography, has become commonplace in mainstream television programmes, movies and magazines to name a few (Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002; Plummer, 2003). Therefore, the sexualisation of culture has continued to support the adage “sex sells,” with the commodification of sex and relatedly, the naked body, used as part of a broader commercial agenda (Attwood, 2006).

Of particular concern are the effects of the sexualisation on wider society. Not unexpectedly, the accessibility of the previously restricted explicit and private sexual content has generated concern and shock (Attwood, 2006), with factions of society considering the content a ‘breach of public morals’ (Gill, 2009, p. 140). Accordingly, those opposed to the sexualisation of culture have become increasingly concerned about the impacts to children and adolescents of exposure to nudity and sex, especially as the media has become what Coy (2009, p. 374) and Levin and Kilbourne (2008) refer to as a “super peer.” This term refers to the scenario whereby parents and educational institutions are reluctant to impart information pertaining to sexual activity, leading young people to gain much of their understanding about relationships, dating, appearance and sex from the media content they consume (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Coy, 2009; Zurbiggen & Morgan, 2006). Therefore, detractors believe that the impressionable youth may adopt negative sexual attitudes and behaviours that can impact the frequency, timing and safety in which sexual activity is engaged (Zurbiggen & Morgan, 2006). Those concerned with the sexualisation of culture, then, object to the messages of the media texts on the grounds that they undermine traditional values by advocating looser relationship ties and promoting sex as a means of personal fulfilment instead of its reproductive capacity (Bauman, 1991).

Although the sexualisation of culture can be construed as “profane and debased” (Gill, 2009: 140), the media content has contributed to the democratising of sex and nudity, and in some cases, has celebrated sex as a means of liberation and autonomy (Gill, 2009). New meanings are developed around sex that advocate individual need and self-revelation that considers all genders (Attwood, 2006, 2009; Cato & Carpentier, 2010; Gill, 2009; McNair, 2002; Plummer, 1995). However, as liberating as the sexualisation of culture may appear, it is not entirely progressive (Coy & Garner, 2012; Levy, 2005). According to Papadopoulos (2010), the media content that encourages personal agency in pursuit of sexual desires inevitably perpetuates and maintains the heteronormative standards of beauty and sexual need that have for years dictated what males and females should conform to in order to fit societal expectations. For example, Coy (2009, p. 373) argues that the sexualized culture still requires that women are projected as ‘available and objectified,’ while Gill (2009, p. 143) found that women were still expected to be “young, white, heterosexual and conventionally attractive” and “men had to appear as toned and young to embody the ‘idealized and eroticized aesthetic.’” In other words, the apparent liberation that was considered a marker of the sexualisation of culture continues to limit the range of sexual identities that genders can occupy (Coy, 2009) and has recommodified the body as knowingly objectified (Gill, 2009).

Reality television, sex and the naked body

Despite the conjecture around the effects of the sexualisation of culture, media texts that explore sex and nudity continue to proliferate. One such media genre that centres on issues of sexuality

is the reality television dating program (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Generally speaking, reality television is considered “real” and “authentic” (Trottier, 2006, p. 259). It incorporates regular people, interacting in unscripted situations primarily for the entertainment of viewers (Anderson & Ferris, 2016; Nabi, Biely, Morgan & Stitt, 2003). Although reality television has been accused of being contrived (Nabi, et al. 2003), its elements of apparent realness can make the content more persuasive and influential than that found in fiction drama and comedy, and can therefore potentially distort viewers perspectives on nudity and sexual activity (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). For example, Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006, p. 2) argue that reality television dating programmes ‘are often derived from gender stereotypical concepts of sexuality and dating, which suggests not only that the programs are sexually oriented, but that they provide constricting and often negative messages about dating and relationships.’ Thus, analysing the views of New Zealanders to the show *Naked Attraction* (2016-present) might offer some insight into the media effects of the show, especially as motivations for viewing and higher rates of exposure to reality television have been found to endorse gender stereotypes, maintain permissive sexual attitudes (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Giaccardi, Ward, Seabrook, Manago & Lippman, 2016; Press, 2013; Seabrook, Ward, Cortina, Giaccardi & Lippman, 2016) and reinforce ‘traditional and adversarial attitudes’ to relationships (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006, p. 11).

The potential for viewers to be affected by the content of reality television is heightened because not only is the genre considered one of the more realistic offerings on television (Giaccardi, et al., 2016; Press, 2013; Seabrook, Ward, Cortina, Giaccardi & Lippman, 2016; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), but it satisfies audiences voyeuristic tendencies (Baruh, 2010; Lundy, Ruth & Park, 2008). According to Rodosthenous (2012), voyeurism allows individuals to watch the bodies of others engaged in private activities for their own pleasure. In the case of a show such as *Naked Attraction*, the viewers are afforded the opportunity to gaze upon the unknowing subject, inevitably constructing asymmetrical power relationships where the naked person is objectified to meet the needs of the clothed and observing audience (Baruh, 2010; Cover, 2003). These naked participants then become spectacles that can be degraded and humiliated for audience pleasure because the audience bestows value by judging participants as deficient or worthy (Frith, Raisborough & Klein, 2014). In essence, the watching of reality television programmes such as *Naked Attraction*, which are “privacy invasive” (Baruh, 2010: 204), gives audiences the opportunity to live through the experiences of others vicariously, for their own entertainment but also to draw comparisons to themselves. Such comparisons can produce feelings of self-esteem and self-worth, at the expense of others (Baruh, 2010; Frith, et al. 2014; Lundy, et al. 2008), but can also reinforce socially ascribed standards of how to look naked. Therefore, we were keen to consider how audiences watching *Naked Attraction* (2016-present) and its naked bodies, reacted to the types of bodies on display.

Methodology

To address our research purpose, we applied thematic analysis to five online articles (from July 2016 to November 2018) from *Stuff.co.nz* (Awarau, 2018; McConnell, 2018a, McConnell, 2018b; Nixon, 2017; Stuff.co.nz, 2018) and the accompanying public comments. Articles from *The New Zealand Herald* were chosen because both the online and offline iterations of this print media have seen increased readership statistics with the Herald attracting over 459,000 readers per day (The New Zealand Herald, 2018c), and the company’s FaceBook Page records an average of 1.82million visitors monthly. Accordingly, *The New Zealand Herald* continues to be a dominate media source. Similarly, *Stuff.co.nz* logs 2.1million website page views per month, making its website presence stronger than *The New Zealand Herald’s* (Murphy, 2018). These

two “print” media are owned and operated by the two biggest media owners in New Zealand, NZME (The New Zealand Herald) and Fairfax Media (Stuff.co.nz) suggesting that their influence is potent within the New Zealand media landscape (Myllylahti, 2017), and as competitors, NZME and Fairfax Media continue to challenge one another through content and coverage of news. Given the positioning of these media entities we also thematically analysed the comments on the FaceBook Pages of both *The New Zealand Herald* (nzherald.co.nz, 2016, 2018a, 2018b) and *Stuff.co.nz* (Stuff, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) where the articles were also displayed (eight FaceBook articles were analysed in total). In total, we analysed 2413 comments on the articles and FaceBook Pages.

We chose to use thematic analysis because of its flexibility and utility when analysing copious amounts of data (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In uncovering patterns in the data, thematic analysis assists researchers in determining the meaning and relationships of themes to one another and to the wider project objectives (Alhojailan, 2012; Boyatzis, 1998). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis can be completed by following a six-step process. The first step is for the researchers to familiarize themselves with the data. To this end, working separately, both researchers initially read the articles and comments repeatedly to get a feel for the general understanding of the attitudes that presented. The second step requires the generating of particular codes. Boyatzis (1998, p. 63) describes codes as ‘the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon.’ To establish our codes, we entered the raw data into the software programme NiVivo and read and categorized the data according to attitudes that were expressed repeatedly and with passion. The third step involves searching for themes and entails collating and combining the data to establish themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fourth step entails refining the themes, and it is at this point, that both researchers came together to consider the themes we had developed and whether they could be sufficiently supported by the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth step requires the naming of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and led to the formation of our four key themes: *Body Positivity*, *Let’s talk about sex*, *Don’t judge a book by its cover*, and *Freedom of choice*¹ The final step is the development of the written report (Braun & Clarke, 2006)².

Results

Early observations of the data signalled that the majority of people commenting on the show held favourable views towards its content and reinstatement (76% were in favour of the show, and 24% were against). That is, the majority of social media commenters tended to support the continuation of the show and were not opposed to it being broadcast on free-to-air public television channel TVNZ 2. What was interesting, however, was how social media commenters (referred to as commenters from now on) justified their support or opposition to the show. These

¹ In total, we found six themes including *Sextainment* and *Trash Television*. These additional themes are discussed in Matthews (2021, forthcoming).

² In writing up our data analysis, we opted to italicize comments to identify the views of the audience easily. We also chose to exclude emojis and the names of commenters. Where emojis were used, we were able to gain further insight into how strongly commenters felt about their views, but while they were coded, they have been excluded from the write-up of the data so as to avoid disrupting the flow and clarity of the discussion. Although our analysis is of a public forum, names have been removed so as not to focus on who is commenting, but on what is being said.

justifications form the basis of our four themes: *Body Positivity*, *Let's talk about sex*, *Don't judge a book by its cover*, and *Freedom of choice*.

Theme 1: Body Positivity

The first of these themes, *Body Positivity*, was comprised of comments that applauded the show for celebrating the human body and particularly its differences. For supporters, *Naked Attraction* (2016-present) was unlike other media offerings that tend to objectify the human form and emphasize particular “ideal features” (Flynn, Park, Morin & Stana, 2015; Gill, 2009; Hatoum & Belle, 2004). That is, for many of those commenting the show was considered refreshing because it attempted to challenge prevailing stereotypes about what people should look like, and whether intentionally or unintentionally, promoted a “body positive” message that was relatable and unique. For example, it was not uncommon to read that the show was “*a great program for empowering bodies of all types*” or that it was “*good to have a show that portrays everyday bodies instead of constant Hollywood types.*” Generally speaking, these responses are atypical when considering media representations of the body (Flynn, et al., 2015; Gill, 2009; Hatoum & Belle, 2004).

More often than not, images of unrealistic, unobtainable, and at times, unhealthy bodies are proliferated through mass media channels, constructing beauty standards that can generate negative consequences for members of society regardless of gender or sex (Flynn, et al., 2015; Gill, 2009; Hatoum & Belle, 2004). Constructions of men as toned, young, lean and muscular, and women as sexualized, young, attractive, thin or low in fat with large breasts (Flynn, et al., 2015; Gill, 2009; Hatoum & Belle, 2004) can be internalized by consumers. In comparing themselves to the media representations, these consumers ultimately experience a shortfall or normative discontent (Coy, 2009) that can produce feelings of dissatisfaction and demoralisation (Hatoum & Belle, 2004). In some circumstances, the unrealistic media representations of the body can lead men and women to obsessively engage in practices that induce “ideal” bodies such as dieting, plastic surgery, intense gym workouts (Featherstone, 2010; Nabi & Kablusek, 2014) and steroid use (Melki, Hitti, Oghia & Mufarrij, 2014; Nabi & Kablusek, 2014), and in extreme cases, can lead to depression and eating disorders (Morry & Staska, 2001; van den Berg, Paxton, Keery, Wall, Guo & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Thus, the approach in *Naked* to offer a range of “*shapes and sizes*” and to address people’s “*imperfections*” made the show appealing given the prevalence of Hollywood bodies generally on offer.

At the very least, *Naked Attraction* was able to facilitate body positivity discussions that promoted inclusivity and prosocial attitudes amongst those commenting (Sastre, 2014; Pearl, Puhl & Brownell, 2012). In essence, those inclined to see the bodies present in *Naked Attraction* as positive came to appreciate their own unique characteristics, feel beautiful and confident, overlook potential flaws and interpret media information in a self-protective manner (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). For example, one commenter spoke of how the show “*makes it easier for some people to feel a bit more at ease in their bodies,*” while another referred to her own personal reaction to the show stating “*as a woman with body confidence issues, this program makes me feel more comfortable with myself*” and yet another related that “*It's nice to see normal, human bodies. Def made me feel better about myself.*” Such responses to the content suggest that for some, *Naked Attraction* (2016-present) could correct or mediate the influence of other media representations on offer by broadening understandings of beauty (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015) and, in some situations, can contribute positively to audience members’ self-esteem and satisfaction with their appearance (Wood-Barcalow, et al., 2010).

Admittedly, not all of those privy to the content of the show “brought into” the body positivity message. In fact, accusations were levelled at the show by commenters who felt the show continued to project ideal standards with slight deviations from the usual media representations of the body. For example, one man claimed that “*The only message I get from this is give up now*” because his body did not match any of those he observed on the show. Another commenter remarked, “*I bet an overweight person is never on the show and we all know why. The only thing shown are slim bodies with no hair as if it’s 2005.*” Yet another felt that the show did not celebrate diverse bodies but rather “*pits diverse bodies against each other, and generally, the ones that are closer to our perceptions of what is attractive win and the others lose. If anything, it perpetuates our stereotyping of body image.*”

These observations are in keeping with scholarship in the field which argues that those people chosen to participate in reality television programmes veer more towards the “ideal” instead of ‘real’ bodies regularly observed within society (Flynn, et al. 2015). Sastre (2014) has argued that even media content that appears to challenge convention inevitably creates new expectations around what constitutes a ‘normal body’ therefore true change is not completely forthcoming or wholly beneficial to everyone. At a cursory glance, *Naked Attraction* offers some differences in body standards, but the bodies of contestants on the show generally only slightly diverge from the official mainstream ideals. Contestants still tend to have thin or slim physiques, perky breasts, lean and muscular bodies, well-groomed body hair and an overall tidy appearance, suggesting that producers are still choosing people to appear on the show that fit a certain established aesthetic.

Theme 2: Let’s talk about sex

The second theme included references to genitalia, porn and sex talk (both positive and negative). Accordingly, this theme has been referred to as *Let’s talk about sex*, and while it includes jokes about sex and nudity, it also captures one of the reasons commenters opposed the content of the show. For these people, the depiction of genitalia and sex talk throughout the show presented *Naked Attraction* as being akin to pornography. Such a finding was not entirely unexpected given that the original complaints to the Broadcasting Standards Authority branded the show as explicit and in breach of good taste and decency (The New Zealand Herald, 2018a, 2018b). Our objective was not to determine whether the commenters on the FaceBook pages or the online newspaper websites were right in their perception that the show was soft-core porn, because as Justice Potter Stewart indicated when he tried to explain what porn was back in 1964 ‘I know it when I see it’ (as cited in Grue, 2016 p. 841). In essence, definitions of porn are subjective and contested (Attwood, 2002; Peckham, 1969) and although porn is loosely perceived as ‘the presentation in verbal or visual signs of human sexual organs in a condition of stimulation’ (Peckham, 1969, pp. 46–47), a consistent agreement is not forthcoming. Rather, what was of interest to us was what the discussion of the show revealed about New Zealanders’ attitudes towards the show and its perceived sexual content.

What was emphasized on the social media pages and article comment sections was the concern that exposure to such content, specifically by the youth of New Zealand, would have far-reaching implications. This being that the show would adversely impact on young people’s sexual identity development and expectations about sexual behaviour. For example, one commenter signalled that a show such as *Naked Attraction* might account for “*why they’re [youth] sending naked pics of themselves*”. Another spoke of how the show advocated casual sex because the pairings of contestants ‘*most likely leads to one off flings.*’ Such a perception of *Naked Attraction* (2016-present) is in line with Bauman’s (2003, p. xi) assessment of how sexual relationships are depicted in the media claiming that they are constructed as easy to enter and

leave or “*light and loose.*” Essentially, the recurring theme of commenters was that “*the show could negatively effect [sic] young people that watch it.*”

These, and other commenters like them, were perhaps right to be perturbed by the sexual nature of the show and its impacts on young audiences. Sexual socialisation or ‘the process by which knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired’ (Ward, 2003, p. 348) is increasingly falling to the purview of the mainstream media (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Coy, 2009; Zurbiggen & Morgan, 2006) because parents and schools are reluctant to engage adolescents in discussions of dating, intimacy, and sex (Ward, 2003). Additionally, the mass media has embraced what McNair (2002) refers to as a striptease culture, commodifying and inadvertently endorsing the obscene and nude typical of porn culture. In other words, the act of having a show such as *Naked Attraction* (2016-present) on New Zealand television contributes to an overwhelmingly positive portrayal of sex. Commenters pointed out that much of what is depicted on the show sells sex to audiences as opposed to offering a realistic and holistic account of sexual relationships that diverge from the recurring trope of ‘men are seen as sex driven, women are seen as sex objects and dating is perceived as a game’ (Zurbiggen & Morgan, 2006, p. 3). *Naked Attraction* (2016-present), much like other shows discussing matters of a sexual nature then, provided guides or instructions for ideal gender roles and how to gain sexual gratification (Zurbiggen & Morgan, 2006; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011), that members of New Zealand society were sternly and vocally against. For example, a commenter stated that “*values that diminish by the second when we allow such programs to screen*” or were worried about “*What has become of the human race? What a sad mess we are in when it comes to this,*” were perhaps unaware that youth were found to consider sexually explicit content on reality television as extreme and unrealistic (van Oosten, Peter & Vandenbosch, 2017).

Theme 3: Don’t judge a book by its cover

The third of our themes, we referred to as “*Don’t judge a book by its cover.*” Some commenters perceived the show advocated an unhealthy message: judging people on their physical appearance. Those commenting were oftentimes appalled and indignant that physical attraction was being advocated in preference to personality and intellectual compatibility. For example, the message was deemed offensive and problematic because it suggested: “*Human beings are only worth getting to know based on what they look like naked.*” In fact, the premise of the show, selecting a date based upon naked attraction alone, was considered “*very shallow*” and could prove problematic because people were “*shamed because they aren’t hot.*” Others remarked that they disliked the show because it was, “*shallow people choosing possible mates based on body image. It’s what’s on the inside that counts*” and it supported “*gawking at the various body parts of the body in order to decide if they want to go on a date with them...as if that is the most important quality of a person, is not sending out a positive message.*”

As the above commenters suggest, for some, physical attraction is but one of a number of qualities that produces attachment and chemistry between prospective couples (Lewandowski Jr., Aron & Gee, 2007; Poulsen, Holman, Busby & Carroll 2012). According to Luo and Zhang (2009), attraction is a product of shared characteristics and those in other dating situations, such as people on speed dates, actually were far less focussed on physical attributes and more on determining whether the person on the date held similar beliefs, perspectives on life, and thoughts on relationships. Those objecting to the message of *Naked Attraction* seemed to see the show as problematic for establishing inappropriate and unrealistic dating standards and expectations because the show fixated on one part of the potential dates rather than seeing the suitors as whole people.

Although some commenters were strongly opposed to the message of the show, finding a mate based on physical attraction, others were supportive of *judging a book by its cover*, and in some instances, engaged in their own judging of the bodies on the show. For example, one commenter referred to how human beings are “*constantly deciding whether or not we find people attractive anyway, what’s wrong with people choosing to get a bit of publicity and get judged on purpose?*” Another commenter echoed these same sentiments indicating that “*You judge people no matter what they’re doing. Who cares?*” while yet another asserted that “*There has to be a physical attraction first I say otherwise moving on!!!! That’s not shallow that’s honest!!!! At least u [sic] know what your [sic] getting.*” The belief that people judge potential partners, particularly on physical attraction, has been scientifically proven (Lewandowski, et al., 2007). The evolutionary perspective has posited that human beings assess one another on physical attractiveness in response to biological imperatives. Men specifically, place a premium on the looks of their potential mates (Jonason, 2009; Poulsen, et al., 2012), although research has also suggested women value physical attraction (Luo & Zhang, 2009; Pines, 1998). Essentially, those commenting on the show acknowledge it is permissible and human nature to judge a person on their appearance, suggesting that the message may not be as detrimental or inappropriate in contemporary society.

Theme 4: Freedom of choice

The final theme we identified was *Freedom of choice*. Under this theme, we grouped comments that asserted either a social responsibility or consumer sovereignty agenda. We observed what was akin to a clash of ideologies. On the one hand, there were commenters who felt the Broadcasting Standards Authority was wrong to allow *Naked Attraction* on television and that the show was a breach of public interests. On the other hand, there were commenters that felt that as consumers, they should be permitted access to content that met their individual wants and needs, regardless of whether that content was sexual in nature. According to McGregor (2003), these positions regularly dictate the content of television programming, so it is unsurprising that they were observed in response to the controversial show.

Those acting as what Hill and Zwaga (2001, p. 159) refer to as “moral custodians” are less tolerant of “bad language, the portrayal of sex and nudity, privacy and fairness, discrimination and violence.” These people believe they are acting altruistically by putting the needs of society ahead of their own preferences (Sunstein, 2006), and in the case of *Naked Attraction*, they appeared concerned primarily for the types of messages young people were exposed to if watching the show. Across the sample, commenters remarked on how it was “*broadcast at a time when children may be watching,*” and that people should not let their children watch it because the show was “*porn- nothing more obvious*” and advocated casual sex. The reactions of these commenters seem to embody the third-person effect, where people believe the content of media programmes is worse for others than it is for them, so opt to complain to protect and prevent potential ill effects (Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996). As captured in the quotes from these commenters, “*it’s about morals and values that diminish by the second when we allow such programs to screen*” and “*ignoring the sickness in society doesn’t make it go away. So changing the channel won’t help here.*” To this way of thinking, *Naked Attraction* could have far-reaching impacts justifying audience rejection of the show.

Of the comments found across the FaceBook Pages and websites for the articles, the most popular position held was “*If you don’t like it, change the channel.*” This was followed closely by “*turn it off if you don’t like it,*” and people have “*nothing better to do so complain.*” These frequent and often passionately expressed views seemed to embody the consumer sovereignty argument. According to Sunstein (2006, p. 203), the objective is that people should be permitted

“unrestricted consumer choices,” with intervention considered authoritarian and opposed to democratic ideals. As Pauwels and Bauwens (2007) assert, people, want to be able to have power over the content they choose to consume even if they are looking to fulfil personal rather than societal needs.

Discussion: Stripping it Back

The purpose of this research was to thematically analyse New Zealanders’ attitudes towards the television show *Naked Attraction* (2016-present). In exploring the online comments of social media commenters to the *Stuff.co.nz website*, and the *Stuff.co.nz* and *The New Zealand Herald Facebook Pages*, we determined that a greater proportion wanted to see the show retained on New Zealand broadcast television than those supporting moves to ban the content outright. The justifications offered by those supporting and condemning the show were conceptualized as four themes: *Body Positivity*, *Let’s talk about sex*, *Don’t judge a book by its cover*, and *Freedom of choice*. Outlines and explanations for the themes have been offered above, so we turn now to what these themes might reveal about New Zealand audiences and why the show invoked such stringent public support.

In essence, the themes and responses of the participants were not entirely unexpected. Research has documented that the New Zealand people have a liberal and open view of sex, sexuality and relationships as a part of their national identity. As Braun (2008, p. 1819) found, New Zealanders have poor sexual health statistics because they hold firm to the “she’ll be right” adage or take a “laid back” approach to sexual attitudes, behaviours and issues. In other words, they are unconcerned and unworried about nudity and sexual encounters. Additionally, Beres and Farvid (2010) found that women negotiated the often-gendered discourses around sex, by pursuing personal desires, indicating a move towards women taking control of their sexual understandings and experiences. In fact, New Zealand women were found to perceive casual sex as ‘something good, fun, and enjoyable’ (Farvid, Braun & Rowney, 2016, p. 549) provided it was limited and did not develop into a ‘negative sexual reputation’ (Farvid, et al., 2016, p. 556). Although our study is not about sex per se, these liberal, and proactive attitudes, particularly by those who appear to be cisgender women, may account for the predominantly positive responses to the show *Naked Attraction*, which itself is a dating show that produces sexual relationships.

The majority of the comments supported the continuation of the show and objected to it being banned because it was part of their consumer right to be able to view the show, it was entertaining, and, generally speaking, it had a body positive message. The increasing sexualisation of content (Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002), particularly on broadcast television, could account for the ready acceptance and support of the show. From a cultivation analysis perspective, heavy exposure to media depictions, in this case, sex, nudity and intimacy, cannot only normalize such content but over time, can desensitize audiences to its prevalence (Gerbner, 1970; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, et al., 1980). Writing on *Naked Attraction*, Smith (2019) refers to how UK television has offered nudity and implicit sex on television, and to this end, *Naked Attraction* is a show that treats contestants as social subjects and their nakedness as a part of redefining the broadcast space. The views of cultivation analysis scholars and Smith (2019) would account for why some audience members were less perturbed by the explicit nudity and sexual innuendos typical of *Naked Attraction* (2016-present). However, cultivation analysis writers would contend that such media content leads to the degradation of society, as opposed to its liberation (Gerbner, 1970; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, et al., 1980).

Scholars writing on reality television argue that audiences are ideologically manipulated into holding positive views towards voyeurism and surveillance of others (Andrejevic, 2006; Troitter, 2006). The proliferation of reality television shows that engage with dating, intimacy and sexual relationships have paved the way for a show such as *Naked Attraction* (2016-present), by making spectacles and the covert observation of others a validated and appropriate form of entertainment (Calvert, 2004; Hill, 2007; Mast, 2016; Mendible, 2004). Such conditioning might explain why the majority of audiences were pro *Naked Attraction*. There are those that take pleasure from the misfortunes of others and ultimately contribute to a reduction in contestants self-respect, and there are those who object to watching the shows out of empathy and concern for those participating. That is, reality television shows practice the humiliation of participants for audience pleasure and in so doing, polarizes audiences (Calvert, 2004; Hill, 2007; Mast, 2016; Mendible, 2004). Nevertheless, those watching and enjoying the show could be doing so for ironic reasons, because they are cultural omnivores (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014, p. 43) or out of a genuine enjoyment of the show (Hall, 2006). Viewers can ‘enjoy getting a peek into others’ lives, and the ‘self-awareness they acquire through viewing’ (Nabi, et al., 2003, p. 322), which may also feedback into the body positivity responses commenters had in relation to *Naked Attraction*.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, those New Zealanders’ commenting enjoyed, supported and were positive about the show *Naked Attraction* (2016-present). The majority of those commenting on the show were not perturbed by the nakedness. Instead, they found it to be refreshing, especially because the show offered real people that were relatable and validated the self-concepts of many commenters. At the very least, those advocating for the continuation of the show were entertained and not offended by the nudity, sexual messages and diversity on offer. Admittedly, there were those concerned about how the nakedness and sexual innuendo might impact on young audiences, and there were those appalled by the show, but for the most part, they were in the minority. Therefore, we conclude that some New Zealanders are open to a show such as *Naked Attraction*, and favour independent choice and liberal ideas, over censorship and conservatism.

Although our research offers an exploration of how New Zealanders’ viewed the show *Naked Attraction* (2016-present), the findings are not without their limitations. We chose to analyse the comments that accompanied media articles exploring the controversy around the show. In some cases, those articles read more as opinion pieces and could have undermined the impartiality of those choosing to comment on the show. Furthermore, the responses of commenters may have been biased or a product of the “bandwagon effect,” which could skew and undermine the findings of this research. Finally, although statistics indicate that those exposed to the content and interacting online generally fit a demographic profile, New Zealanders are not homogenous. Therefore, the findings of this research are a snapshot, rather than indicative of the views of all New Zealanders. In response to the limitations of this research, future research might look to interview and survey New Zealanders about their attitudes to *Naked Attraction*, or could be broadened to consider their attitudes to media representations of dating shows and sex. Finally, with a shift to a body positivity movement, it might also be worthwhile to explore how other television shows and media offerings might be assisting in changing attitudes to the body in Western society.

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