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*Queer Eye's* Subversion and Reinforcement of Gender and Sexuality Standards

Feminist theory cannot exist without discussing how feminism intersects with sexuality and performative gender. Depictions of gender and sexuality in popular media have been the subject of debate for many LGBTQ and feminist scholars throughout recent decades as the volume of queer representation grows. One can notice changes in queer representation in mediums such as reality television, a genre that some have criticized for perpetuating harmful ideas and standards surrounding gender. Reality television can arguably be described as “an industry that infantilizes women, takes away any form of agency, preys on naïveté, and restricts feminine identity to a heterosexual, cisgender body” (Brown, 21). Though this is an accurate statement when looking at the history of reality television as a whole, one can argue that representation in shows such as Netflix’s *Queer Eye* challenges societal standards for gender and sexuality performance. *Queer Eye* provides viewers with a new point of view by following a queer cast collectively referred to as the Fab Five. While *Queer Eye* introduces new ideas for the perception of gender and sexuality in American culture, one can still argue that the influences of a heteronormative and cisnormative world are reflected in the Fab Five. Despite not being perfect, *Queer Eye* still manages to break traditional roles in many ways and ultimately shows viewers the power to be their authentic selves, regardless of what that means. *Queer Eye* is an essential piece of feminist theory because of its frank portrayal of queer life; through this

portrayal, *Queer Eye* provides viewers with an analysis of how the discourse surrounding gender and sexuality in American culture can be challenged or, in some cases, reinforced.

To understand how *Queer Eye* both subverts and reinforces societal standards for how people perform gender and sexuality, one must understand feminist theory's relationship to gender and sexuality. While one may assume that feminist theory is centered on women and sexism, a truly balanced perspective of feminist theory requires analysis of sexuality, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity. Society's general concept of sexuality is that sexuality is binary and cisnormative, leaving no room for the recognition of opposing identities. Heteronormativity and cisnormativity directly harm women who do not fit into society's narrow standards, such as lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women. Along with this, the conflation of femininity with the sexuality of gay men has harmful implications not only for the LGBTQ community but directly shows society's attitude towards women and the idea that women are "lesser than" men. This stereotype encourages hegemonic masculinity and shames men who cannot live up to harmful standards. Gender and sexuality "are simultaneously distinct and intertwined...gender is about femininity and masculinity, and sexual identity is about sexual desire and behaviors...heterosexuality relies on cisgender performances to maintain its stability" (Shaw and Lee, 284). Therefore, feminist discussions must allow for a dialogue surrounding gender and sexuality performance standards. By acknowledging this, one can better understand the intersection between gender and sexuality and how queer identities inherently subvert societal standards.

Media in American culture has a heavy influence on how people view the society they live in and the standards they are meant to conform to. Research has found a significant correlation between queer representation and societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ community.

Portraying stereotypical and one-dimensional queer characters in television often leads to social exclusion because of the severe lack of complex and realistic queer individuals on television. Negative portrayals are especially harmful to queer youth influenced by heterosexist and homophobic depictions of their sexuality and gender (McInroy and Craig, 43). Therefore, it is reasonable for one to conclude that portrayals of the LGBTQ community within popular media have a significant impact on the general perception of queer identities, reinforcing stereotypes about how one should perform gender and sexuality. Representation of queer identities in media can subvert or reinforce the generally accepted opinions towards the LGBTQ community in American culture, either allowing for or inhibiting progress. Positive representations of queer identities in media are necessary to tackle the heteronormative and cisnormative standards in society.

Media has the potential to challenge the standards ingrained in American culture. Shows like *Queer Eye* play a role in presenting this challenge to cisgender, heterosexual Americans, whose perceptions of gender and sexuality are binary and misinformed. Because *Queer Eye* is a reality show focused on makeovers and lifestyle, the show has the power to challenge or affirm narrow-minded views on gender and sexuality by depicting how these things are performed in a cisnormative and heteronormative world (Lievens, 11). *Queer Eye* presents audiences with a unique window into the lives of multifaceted and humanized queer men. By portraying the cast in their everyday lives, viewers can see performances of gender and sexuality that are rarely seen elsewhere. For the sole reason that the show includes “queer” in the title, *Queer Eye* makes a statement on LGBTQ life and identity. However, when watching the show, one can notice how traditional views of gender, sexuality, and the body are challenged. Biological sex is the primary determinant for how American culture believes people should act, look, and assimilate because

society is what gives the body and gender meaning. There are no actual rules as to how one must act according to their biological sex, and the rules that people adhere to are only actual regarding their culture. Body and culture are deeply connected, as “culture becomes embodied and is literally inscribed or represented through the body. Gender and other identity performances are scripted...an essential aspect of the gendering of bodies is objectification” (Shaw and Lee, 158). In *Queer Eye*, the stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity—such as men being large, strong, dominant, and aggressive—are absent. The cast is allowed to have feminine attributes. The Fab Five includes a nonbinary individual whose expression of gender does not adhere to the masculine standards that one would typically ascribe to a male body. *Queer Eye* can effectively shift the narrative surrounding queer identities in American culture because of its bold portrayal of queer life and its frequent reminder of queer identities present in how the show is filmed and edited. For example, transitions in *Queer Eye* will often be edited to show quick images of rainbow landscapes, pride parades, and pride flags (Lievens, 34). By showing queer people who do not ascribe to the standards and expectations of a heteronormative society, viewers are exposed to new and challenging performances of gender that they may not normally interact with.

While the cast of *Queer Eye* is occasionally portrayed as masculine, their masculine behaviors are typically followed by behaviors society considers more feminine. Femininity in *Queer Eye* is performed through the body of people who would typically be represented as masculine. Arguably, queer individuals feel more freedom because they often don't need to adhere to their biological sex and perceived gender expectations. For this reason, makeover and lifestyle transformation reality shows like *Queer Eye* are not only a place to show a unique performance of femininity but a place where queerness can be considered beneficial and equated

to a level of high expertise in the subject. In this sense, *Queer Eye* is impactful because it reframes how viewers perceive gender and sexuality, challenging a previously accepted worldview. Portraying gender performance from an angle vastly different from the generally accepted norm in American culture, whether it elicits anger or awe in the viewer, directly opposes the gender binary that society typically adheres to. *Queer Eye* shows the value of gender expression regardless of one's biological sex, encouraging people to embrace their unique identity by separating their bodies from cultural expectations.

Even though *Queer Eye* explores the relationship between body and gender performance in a boundary-breaking way, one must look at how *Queer Eye* subverts or reinforces stereotypes surrounding sexualities that diverge from the heterosexual standard. In the culture surrounding American media, showing authentic queer identities in a positive light is groundbreaking simply for existing. For this reason, it is rational to say that *Queer Eye* has had a positive impact in many ways. The show has the potential to normalize the LGBTQ community and encourage self-acceptance regardless of identity. However, one must have a broader dialogue surrounding *Queer Eye* and how it relates to gender and sexuality. One of the main issues that many LGBTQ individuals perceive when expressing their identity is that the labeling of a collective "queer" community, while it should be freeing, has been forced into its form of binary. Society often attaches specific behaviors and gendered attributes to queer identities, such as gay men equating with femininity and lesbians equating with tough, masculine women. Given the negative connotation of the word queer, one can understand that "any form of non-heteronormative embodiment or behavior can be perceived as queer, [and] comes with a negative connotation and is often linked with a queered sexual orientation as well (Lievens, 22). Though queer identities are not bound by the restrictions of societal standards for gender and sexuality, many people

struggle to understand queerness outside of their gendered mindset. For this reason, people associate gay men with girliness and lesbians with manliness. People often treat nonbinary as the “third gender,” inadvertently placing it within a binary through the expectation that nonbinary individuals all present as androgynous. Because the standards of gender presentation are so relevant in American culture, these standards have inevitably become intertwined with what people constitute as “acceptable” queerness.

The concept of acceptable queerness is one of the main issues faced when analyzing how *Queer Eye* has shifted the perception of LGBTQ identities in American culture. One can see that *Queer Eye* has, in many ways, subverted society’s general expectations for gender itself. While the show breaks ground for its nuanced portrayal of gender, viewers have questioned the perceived lack of diversity amongst the cast—diversity, which presents a limited view of queerness. Though one cannot deny the progress in LGBTQ representation in media, most representations present queer identities that are seen as acceptable to society and that fit into what the general population will tolerate. *Queer Eye* advertises the cast as five gay men, only addressing a particular portion of queer identities “displayed in a way that makes them approachable for a heteronormative audience” (Lievens, 3). The issue that one can find in *Queer Eye* is not that it portrays these queer identities but that these are the only identities being portrayed. Gender, sexual, and racial diversity are lacking, with few cast members falling outside the socially acceptable queer performance. Due to this, the show arguably adheres to societal standards and contributes to narrow-minded perspectives of what queerness looks like. As the show is focused on makeup and lifestyles, the individual cast members are often forced into the role of the feminine, sassy gay man, not being given the space to express their sexuality differently lest they be seen as unacceptably queer.

However, the reasons behind the arguably stereotypical representation of queer life are more profound than decisions made by the cast members to present *Queer Eye* in a way that appeals to heterosexuals. One must acknowledge that the world operates by a heteronormative and cisnormative framework. Heteronormativity is an inescapable aspect of the world, and because of this, many queer people unknowingly perpetuate stereotypes. Society negates the varied nature of queer identities and expression, as queerness “goes beyond the binary, covering all the ways in which heteronormativity is challenged or objected” (Lieven, 49). Lieven further deduces that the Fab Five may unintentionally encourage heteronormativity and cisnormativity throughout specific segments of the show, such as a woman being pushed to wear heels and a mother being told that she needs to cook for the rest of her family (50). The reinforcement of heteronormative standards in *Queer Eye* is not uncommon in media showing people who are explicitly queer. Though the cast may not intentionally present in a way that is acceptably queer, the show elicits interesting conversations surrounding how gender and sexuality co-exist or contradict each other.

Ultimately, when addressing the issues present in the portrayal of LGBTQ identities in *Queer Eye*, one must acknowledge that the nature of oppression is often contradictory. The true nature of discrimination involves “few pure victims or oppressors....each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression that frame our lives” (Collins, 61). While the cast of *Queer Eye* defies gender norms by performing femininity and not adhering to the strict standards of masculinity, one can also argue that the cast’s gender performance reinforces negative stereotypes regarding sexuality and how queer identities are understood. Therefore, *Queer Eye* both subverts and reinforces stereotypes surrounding gender and sexual identity and how the two intersect with one another. However, one cannot blame the

aspect of reinforcement seen in *Queer Eye* solely on the cast but rather on the unseen presence of heteronormativity in every culture. Breaking free from heteronormative standards is daunting and challenging, and many people unknowingly adhere to these standards through their gender and sexuality performance. The world operates with a limited understanding of what oppression is because oppression is seen as requiring a dominant oppressor and a submissive, oppressed group, ignoring the multiple facets of identity that cause oppression or allow privilege. Due to this, the general understanding of oppression and identity in American culture is built off of narrow-minded, misinformed stereotypes surrounding marginalized genders and sexualities.

One's gender performance is influenced by how one performs sexuality, and vice versa. Ultimately, people cannot understand feminist theory entirely if they do not view the world outside of heteronormative and cisnormative standards. Though the representation of queer identities in shows such as Netflix's *Queer Eye* challenge these standards in some aspects, other stereotypes are unconsciously reinforced because of how reliant society is on viewing the world through a restrictive and binary lens. *Queer Eye* provides viewers with an intimate look at queer life and gender's role in queer identities while giving insight into the often contradictory nature of oppression. However, because the show is advertised as following five gay men, *Queer Eye* arguably fails to show the vastness of queer identities and expressions that fall outside of what may be seen as acceptable queerness. Though the show is inherently feminist in how it challenges gender, one can argue that the lack of diverse queer identities takes away from *Queer Eye*'s progressiveness, begging the question of how society can understand queer identities without diminishing these identities to stereotypical caricatures.

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