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America's Next Top Model Magnified

Being in the public eye is nothing more than criticism and intrusion of privacy and media does not help that. It influences how we view ourselves, the world, and the people around us. In different media, people have different experiences especially when it has to do with gender and race, even if they are in the same situation. *America's Next Top Model* is a prime example of every woman having their own experience, whether it was good or bad. The women on this show were put in many uncomfortable situations, but we're silent because they did not want to be seen as difficult to work with, which would be a different story if it were men. Reality television seems like a whole different universe because it is all about drama and unscripted dialogue, but is it unscripted? Do the creators and producers create the drama to get views?

Even though media is a form of entertainment, it changes the way we think about everyone and everything. As women, we are always under a microscope with everything we do and say. There seems to be a lack of respect when it comes to making women heard, especially in the entertainment industry. This essay will discuss the background of the feminist theory, Sandra Harding's version of the feminist theory and how *America's Next Top Model* shifted the way we treat women on television and in society.

The feminist theory has relations with how there should not be one gender associated with power in general. What gender you are should not define how much power you should have because gender and power have not mixed well for as long as

we can remember. The feminist theory not only has to do with gender and power because race, class, and sexuality. Lisa Cuklanz explains three strands of feminist theories from the 1970s to now: “The first and most common focuses on the inclusion and support of dominant ideologies with mainstream media texts.” “The second is based in psychoanalytic theory and focuses on the role of desire, sexuality, and visual pleasure within mediated texts.” “The third and most recent examines the recent evolution of textual representation in relation to feminism and gender, culminating with the emergence of postfeminist media culture.” (Cuklanz, 3)

Referring to the first strand, the media has a way of gendering ideas, problems, or events so that they can target their audience: the men. They feel the need to show representation of men, just so that men will watch and keep watching for their numbers to increase; therefore, it's always by men for men. Women have always felt devalued when it comes to many situations, especially when it comes to the media. We see many male-dominated industries, especially in the media, such as the news stations. We all know the saying that women belong in the kitchen and men should do the work, but that phrase is centuries old and irrelevant. “Feminist theory posits that women's lack of power to define and create media topics and products largely explains lingering disparity in media representation.” (Cuklanz, 3)

The second strand of this theory focuses on objectification and the male gaze, a sexualized gaze from the man's perspective. Cuklanz mentions Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which points out three perspectives of the male gaze: “the camera angle, the gaze of the male character within the film, and the gaze of the audience member, were effectively collapsed into one point of view.” (Cuklanz, 7) While

men's nudity in films is shown to be powerful, women's nudity is shown to be vulnerable and scandalous. When watching television or a film, female viewers most likely have different experiences watching a sexual scene than male viewers. When it comes to women's magazines, the female readers do not desire to read it because of the sexual elements while the male readers have the desire for the models in the magazine: "Men are invited to *want* the woman in this sexualized image while women are invited to want to *be* the woman in the image." (Cuklanz, 9)

The third strand explains that "Third-wave feminism is understood as a stage in the development of real-world feminism that is reflected in many examples of media representation." (Cuklanz, 9) We have seen that feminism has made some significant changes in the world, but there is still so much to do for equality. This new wave allows women to explore and embrace their sexuality and not be shamed for it, even though there are still people that think otherwise. This allows women to express themselves through clothes, music, art, makeup, and more, which is what we have been told not to do by many people, including men. Pornography and stripping are things we have been told are forbidden and very scandalous, but in this new age, women should be able to choose what they want to do with their bodies without suffering the consequence of judgment. Women that are beautiful and successful can be seen from other people's perspective as selfish and bossy.

Sandra Harding is an American philosopher who received her undergraduate education from Rutgers University and received her doctorate in philosophy from New York University. Harding is known for discovering the term "strong objectivity," which means that there is bias when men research because they have to stay neutral, but

Harding argues that this is not possible. In “The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory” written by Harding, she points out that we use the experience for feminist theories from a white woman’s perspective and nothing from other women, “We have come to understand that whatever we have found useful from the perspective of the social experience of Western, bourgeois, heterosexual, white women is especially suspect when we begin our analyses with the social experiences of any other women.” Harding is trying to say that behind the perspective of these theories, the women or men writing them are white and heterosexual, which is only a small percentage of the world’s population. Experiences should be pulled from other women and men that are diverse and not straight, which would give us even more to think about.

The standpoint theory, which has Harding as a theorist, makes three statements: “Knowledge is socially situated,” “Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized,” and “Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized.” (IEP) Harding mentions “Starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order.” (IEP) For *America’s Next Top Model*, this was not the case. In the show, the contestants had to hold back from saying anything about the wrongdoings of the show, but contractually, they could not say anything. In 2021, now that the show is on a hiatus, audiences are noticing how wrong and disrespectful the show had become in the mid 2000’s.

Patricia Hill Collins, another theorist for feminism, told her opinion about the standpoint theory. “While my individual experiences with institutionalized racism will be

unique, the types of opportunities and constraints that I encounter on a daily basis will resemble those confronting African Americans as a group.” As women, we all have similar experiences, but because of our differences, such as race and class, we automatically do not experience the same things. In the show, the contestants have different and similar experiences because of race, class, sexuality, and more except gender. *America’s Next Top Model* was a reality television show that changed the way we thought about modeling and the fashion industry from women’s perspectives while growing up in the 2000’s.

America’s Next Top Model is a reality competition television show about women learning how to model, created and produced by supermodel Tyra Banks. The show aired on United Paramount Network from 2003 to 2006, The CW from 2006 to 2015, and VH1 from 2016 to 2018. Banks became one of the judges alongside other judges that changed every season, but Banks, photographer Nigel Barker, and runway coach J. Alexander were the judges that stayed for the most seasons. Other judges from different seasons include supermodel Janice Dickinson, supermodel Twiggy, fashion journalist André Leon Talley, and publicist Kelly Cutrone. The winner of the show would receive a contract with Elite Model Management or Wilhelmina Models, a cover and six page spread in *Seventeen* magazine, and a \$100,000 contract with *CoverGirl* cosmetics.

Thousands of girls try out for the show, sending home videos about why they should compete on the show. Out of these girls, Banks would choose about 30 girls to move on and compete in a photoshoot and/or fashion show. Banks would then choose about 14 girls to be finalists and move into a house together while living in New York

City or Los Angeles, in which locations changed every season. Every season, within the first few episodes, would start out with a makeover for each contestant, where they get a new hairstyle and hair color and learn how to apply makeup. Every week, the contestants are taught a lesson from an expert about modeling with some topics being practicing doing interviews, posing, acting, dancing, runway lessons, styling themselves with clothing, and learning to apply makeup. They then have to do a challenge, testing them about what they just learned, and one of the contestants is given a prize.

Every week, the models have a photoshoot with a different theme every week with Jay Manuel, the creative director for the photoshoots, and a different photographer every shoot. After each shoot, the contestants go to panel, where the judges critique each contestant's best photo from the shoot. The judges deliberate and choose which contestant will not move on in the competition and goes home. When it comes down to the top six contestants, the contestants fly to another country, such as Milan, Paris, Japan, South Africa, London, Thailand, and so many more, to learn how to be a model for foreign designers and audiences. When it gets to the top three contestants, they do a *CoverGirl* commercial to test if they can be a spokesperson as well as a model. When it gets to the final two contestants, the two participate in a fashion show for a designer in that country. The judges deliberate, critiquing the two contestants' photos throughout the weeks and their final runway and this determines who will become *America's Next Top Model* for each season.

The show has been on the air for 24 seasons and audiences have gone back through seasons and have pointed out where the show has gone wrong and some of the terrible situations the contestants were put into. YouTube creator [cortreezy](#) created

a two-part video about what went wrong during the show. Since the show started in 2003, society has changed so much throughout the years so what passed in the early and mid 2000's does not go over smoothly when audiences watch the show today. One of the situations happened during season 4 episode 5.

The lesson this week was to apply makeup that gives a natural, fresh look while the challenge was to do a haute couture makeup look, which is a makeup look that is over the top and not a basic makeup look. When explaining the concept of the photoshoot, Jay Manuel explained how the power of makeup can transform you which is why they are doing a photoshoot with a milk mustache for *got milk?* and change their ethnicities. The goal was to take "on the persona of that other ethnicity while in the photograph and owning it." The 11 contestants were madeover to look like another ethnicity: Christina, a caucasian woman, was East Indian; Tiffany, an African American woman, was Native American; Brittany, a caucasian woman, was African American; Keenyah, an African American woman, was Korean; Kahlen, a caucasian woman, was Hawaiian; Michelle, a caucasian woman, was Eskimo; Naima, a biracial (African American and Mexican) woman was Icelandic Scandinavian; Tatiana, a white-passing Hawaiian woman, was biracial; Lluvy, a Mexican woman, was a Swedish milkmaid; Rebecca, a caucasian woman, was a tan Sicilian woman; and Noelle, a biracial woman, was a traditional African woman with a headpiece.

This concept for the photoshoot was completely offensive because most of the contestants were in blackface. Some of the girls did not take the concept seriously because Brittany, who is caucasian, was transformed into an African American woman, and while she was getting her makeup done, she said "I'm a black woman with a nose

job,” while the makeup artist replied saying “You are. You’re a Jackson,” referring to the Jackson family, who are famous African Americans that got plastic surgery. Even though the show was trying to do something different for the photoshoots to challenge the contestants, it does not come off that they had good intentions and Banks and other producers have apologized for their behavior. The creators put the contestants in an uncomfortable situation that they could not complain about because they would have been seen as complicated to work with to the judges.



In May 2020, Banks tweeted in response to the backlash that had been circulating the internet at the time, “Been seeing the posts about the insensitivity of some past ANTM moments and I agree with you. Looking back, those were some really off choices. Appreciate your honest feedback and am sending so much love and virtual hugs.” Ken Mok, one of the producers of the show, also tweeted, agreeing with Banks, “Want to reiterate what @tyrabanks said. I look at some of those #ANTM moments and cringe. Just a FYI- the entire creative team made the choices in those shows- not just Tyra. So please feel free to yell at me for some of the worst moments in ANTM history! Apologies to all.” While Banks and Mok did publicly apologize, these apologies were

only sent out because the creators were being called out for the mistake and most likely would not have said anything if the situation was not brought up.

Unfortunately, that was not the first and last time blackface happened on the show. In season 2, one of the photoshoots was for each contestant to portray a female icon. One of the contestants, Xiomara, a Cuban and Curacaion woman, had her skin darkened to portray Grace Jones, a Jamaican-American woman. In season 13 episode 8, the contestants had a photoshoot where they had to portray biracial women, being “hapa” which means half in Hawaiian. Banks, the photographer for this photoshoot, explained “What happens when men and women from different places come together? Babies! Lots of babies from different cultures, a mix.” Laura, a caucasian woman, was Mexican and Greek; Erin, a caucasian woman, was Tibetan and Egyptian; Sundai, an African American woman, was Moroccan and Russian; Brittany, a caucasian woman, was Native American and East Indian; Jennifer, an Asian American woman, was Polynesian and Botswana; and Nicole, a caucasian woman, was Japanese and Malagasy.



Other than blackface, there were other issues on the show when it came to the contestants' look or identity. On season 5 during the first episode, one of the contestants, Kim, told the panel of Banks, J. Alexander, and Jay Manuel that she was gay, "I'm gay and I'm really proud of it." Banks responded by saying "I think there's a certain thing of being proud. Like, I'm black and proud, you know what I mean? But I'm not walking down the red carpet: 'I'm black. I'm black.'" Kim meant her statement as something that makes her different than the other contestants, which Banks did not take it as and did not want Kim to flaunt that she was gay, which can come off as homophobic. During season 6, one of the contestants, Danielle, was called out by Banks because she refused to close the gap between her two front teeth, "Do you really think you can have a *CoverGirl* contract with a gap in your mouth?" Danielle realized that by not pushing after that statement to close the gap between her teeth, Banks was making this season reality television gold. Danielle ended up deciding to close the gap because she knew it would affect her place in the competition, even though she was proud of her gap and won that season, ironically.

Everyone knows the modeling industry looks for tall and skinny women. Being a plus size girl in the competition meant they would be criticized extra by the judges because the industry looks at plus size women differently. There were girls who were skinny but too skinny, so the judges would call them out to put on more weight. In the first episode of season 3, while interviewing the contestants, the panel meets Amy, who is very skinny, but Banks makes a comment saying "I do feel like you are too thin. Of course, people know that fashion models are slender, but your body, I think, does send a little negative image to women." Amy explains that she drinks 3,000 calorie shakes

three times a day. Tyra interrupts stating “I don’t need those shakes, girl. I eat barbecue ribs and potato salad and that’s what gave me this ass. So you need some food.” Amy comments saying “It was all really good constructive criticism.” Banks’ comments, even though she may have been trying to help, came off as insensitive and her forcing Amy to eat without knowing her background, in which she may have a condition where it is difficult to gain weight, which is not uncommon.

When girls would gain too much weight when they are not considered plus size models, the judges would notice and criticize. In season 4, one of the contestants, Keenya, had gained weight throughout the season because of stress, which was noticed and criticized by the judges. In season 12, the same situation happened to a contestant, London, who began to lose herself and gain weight, which sent her home. Watching this television show back has made viewers realize how controversial the show was and how the creative team would do anything to get drama for the views and popularity of the show.

The way early season contestants of *America’s Next Top Model* were treated behind the scenes should not go unnoticed. Sarah Hartshome, season 9 contest who got 8th place in the competition, had no filter responding to a fan on Twitter. On November 29, 2021, @jiggyjay2 tweeted “The fact that the girls on ANTM were getting paid \$40 an episode and Tyra and them judges were making BANK, is kinda sick.” Hartshome was tagged and was asked “this for real???” She responded saying “\$40 an episode and we had to pay for food.” On season 4, contestant Tiffany Richardson was ripped to shreds by Banks, but not everything Banks said was aired. This took place when Richardson was in the bottom two for not taking the competition more seriously

and giving up. Banks told Richardson, "You can go back to your house and sleep on your mattress on the floor with your baby." (Ranker) Richardson commented on how difficult it was to get harsh criticism from the judges, "Every time I did something wrong, I'd shut down a little bit more, and it just got to the point where I was over it. I felt like we were just there to be humiliated. It was like, 'What the f*** [else] could we do to them?'" (Ranker)

After season 1 contestant Adrienne Curry won that season, the winner was promised a contract with *Revlon* and *Wilhelmina Models*. Curry explained on her blog that she won the competition to just be ignored, "When I met with Revlon, they informed me they never planned on using the winner, whoever she may be, for any ads. They hired me for 15k to model makeup in a room with 10 execs in it to honor said contract. Wilhelmina then informed me they didn't [sic] want me to be successful in any way to spite top model. They bragged how they'd push Elyse (also signed with them) and not me. I reached out to Tyra and *Top Model*, desperate to get out of my contract and get advice as I was not being given any castings, etc by an agency that wanted me to fail. CRICKETS. Phone calls ignored." (Ranker) These are just a few examples of how the behind-the-scenes of the show did not reflect the essence of the show that was being edited and shown.

Season 3 runner-up, Yaya DaCosta, is now an actress and currently starring in *Chicago Med*, but being a part of *America's Next Top Model* did not help her career. In 2016, DaCosta explained, "There was such a stigma in Hollywood, and people don't realize that. The very directors and writers that were hiring me had just gotten their shows denied by a network because a new reality show was taking up that time slot, so

the stigma didn't just have to do with being a model, it was reality TV in general. You didn't talk about it. It wasn't on your résumé.” (The List) Angelea Preston, winner of season 17, was stripped of the title after the producers found out that she used to be an escort and they announced the winner to be Lisa D’Amato, the runner-up. This caused Preston to sue the show for \$3 million. Preston also claimed that there was mistreatment behind the scenes, “They allegedly had to film for 16 or 17 hours per day without refreshment breaks. One time, Preston suffered a panic attack and no one allowed her medical attention.” (Ranker) Preston told the Daily Mail, "I used to admire Tyra so much. I wanted to be like her. I don't want to be like her now. Tyra was nonexistent. The only time we saw Tyra was at panel. Tyra never came in to talk to us personally. When the cameras stopped rolling it's like she's a stranger." (Ranker)

While watching the show, seeing how the contestants feel about each other is what some audiences look forward to. These confessionals were not optional for contestants and every night, each contestant would have to be in a room by themselves with a camera for 20-30 minutes. This became a miserable cycle for the contestants and season 13’s Erin Wagner was against doing the confessionals, “For about a week, I refused to do my confessionals. I just sat in that little room with the camera and talked about my lunch and such, because I was bored with what was happening and I probably wanted to be difficult and not give them anything to use.” (The List)

Allison Harvard, season 12 runner-up, mentioned that after every contestant is eliminated, they are not allowed to go home, but have to stay in a hotel. Harvard said “The stay was determined by the time of elimination. Sometimes a girl would stay there for a few weeks (if she was eliminated early on) and other times only a few days.” (The

List) The electronic ban of no television, phones, or Internet in general was very serious in terms of the show. Season 13 contestant Erin Wagner explained, “The first thing we did when we woke up was get a microphone put on. Whenever we were waiting for challenges and such, we couldn't talk in the limo, and when the cameramen were on break or went home for the night, we just had to read or something silently.” (The List) Even though they did this to save the drama for the cameras, it made the experience miserable for the contestants. The casting process became a disrespectful process to the contestants. Sara Longoria, season 16 contestant, explained her experience first hand, “During cast week, they separate us by type: 'blonde athletic,' 'Latinas,' 'exotic and edgy,' etc. It was easy to figure it out when they stood me in a line with all the tattooed, short hair girls. I was a naïve 18 year old and even I knew I was just a 'quirky, androgynous, token gay filler' for the cycle.” (The List)

Unfortunately, the disrespectful treatment did not stop during the earlier seasons. In season 21, the creative director of the photoshoots, Yu Tsai, called contestant Chantelle Brown-Young a “panda” because of her skin condition called vitiligo, where you can lose skin color in patches. Brown-Young confronted Tsai, telling him how insulting that is and he kind of apologized. Chantelle Brown-Young now goes by Winnie Harlow and is one of the most successful models in the world.

On August 5, 2015, season 22, which is different from earlier seasons, of *America's Next Top Model* aired on the CW. Changes were made during this season since the show has been running for many seasons. Like season 20 and 21, season 22 features not only female models, but also male models. For the first time in several seasons, the height requirement stopped, which gives petite men and women a chance

to join the competition. The prize for this season is a contract with Next Management, a spread in Nylon Magazine, \$100,000 and a national ad campaign for Zappos Couture. This season featured a contestant, Nyle, who is the first deaf contestant on the show, who also won this season. From season 19 to 21, the way of determining who had good photos and who did not do as well changed. The implemented social media voting, where fans could vote on every contestants' photo every week on a scale from one to ten and the judges would vote this way as well, but this was removed from the show during season 22.

The photoshoots in season 22 were very different from previous seasons. Some concepts used include photographing without retouching, being harnessed in the air in a "fashion exorcism," being in a commercial for deodorant, becoming life-sized dolls, portraying dogs while photographing with them, and being in a music video. In comparing early seasons and season 22, the photoshoots have become more normal and less offensive, which means the creative team may have learned from their mistakes.

America's Next Top Model's purpose was to inspire girls and women that they can be models too. This show gave women the opportunity to live their dreams and open doors for them in the modeling and fashion industry. Now, it has become a joke to society, that this reality show turned into a draining experience on screen and behind the scenes. The way these women were treated on the show and the different kinds of situations they were put in is not the way they are supposed to be treated. The modeling industry has everything to do with how you look, especially for women, so the pressure for these contestants to be perfect in every way could not be easy. Even though women

in the modeling industry are treated terribly, the contestants on the show were not treated correctly since the judges were getting them used to the harsh critique from the industry. Feminism is about equality and being treated equally, but the producers took advantage of these women that were teenagers to young adults and put them in situations they could not say no to or else they would be taken out of the competition. The theory of feminism, about not one gender being in power, relates to *America's Next Top Model* because the contestants were under so much pressure by judges on the show and people behind the scenes who cared more about the popularity of the show than their own contestants.

As seen, there are many examples of how disrespectful and horribly the contestants were treated on this show. Modeling is supposed to be an empowering and inspiring industry, but behind-the-scenes, people in the industry just tear you down. Contestants are finally able to share their stories and how much this experience changed them for the best or for the worst. The treatment that women received on this show was very uncomfortable to watch, so I cannot even begin to imagine what they went through. With the feminist theory, women should be able to have power and control, but because of legal reasons, the female contestants were not allowed to comment about the show. This reality show put the modeling and fashion industry in such a horrible light and after the show, it was difficult for contestants to live their dream of becoming a model because of the show about becoming a model, ironically. Standing up for yourself as a woman is the only thing you can do in a difficult situation like *America's Next Top Model* and it is shown that the contestants were finally able to.

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