

## Extreme Beauty: Body Image in German and American Popular Media

### Introduction

Popular media in the United States is “selling dreams” to the public. This is the end goal of the advertising industry according to Marc Baptiste, one of the leading fashion photographers in the United States. In an interview for Darryl Robert’s documentary *America the Beautiful*, Baptiste explains that he routinely retouches his photographs to make his subjects look as perfect as possible. He claims that this is the most effective method to market products to the public. Roberts’ documentary goes on to reveal many ways the media “sells dreams”, including transforming a twelve-year-old girl into a supermodel. Roberts reaches the conclusion that the media, pop culture, and the fashion industry set increasingly unrealistic ideals of beauty that negatively impact the body satisfaction of the American populace and create dangerous role models for America’s youth.

In the years since 2007, when Roberts’ documentary was released, body dissatisfaction has become almost a given in America. Research shows that female college students, adolescents, and pre-adolescents regularly compare their physical attractiveness with that of models in advertisements (Martin and Kennedy, Richins, cited on Martin and Gentry 19). This pervasive habit of comparison has contributed to the fact that a majority of American children believe they are fat, even when they are normal-weight (Seligman et al., cited on Cash and Hicks 328). The trend of unhappiness with one’s appearance continues into adulthood and generates a culture in which body discontentment is the norm.

Like the United States, the population of Germany suffers from widespread issues with body image. In general, there has been a considerable decrease in the body size of media

representations of the ideal figure, which may contribute to the inclination of individuals in Western societies to evaluate slender or underweight female forms as most attractive (Swami et al. 311). Hence, it is unsurprising that studies have found that exposure to Western cultural ideals results in higher rates of body discontentment and higher frequencies of disordered eating, especially for women (Tiggemann and Pickering, Lake et al., cited on Hewig et al. 729; Stock et al. 113). Furthermore, men with more exposure to Western media are more likely to find slender women attractive, while women with greater exposure are more likely to indicate that men are more attracted to slender women and report greater levels of body dissatisfaction (Swami et al. 318). Thus, eating disorders are on the rise in both the United States and Germany, which is to be expected given the evidence that “due to the belief that they have to be slim to be sexually attractive, women are under greater pressure than men to lose weight” (Williamson et al., Benedict et al., Meadow and Weiss, Ross, cited on Stock et al. 113). A study of German youths discovered that the appraisal of oneself as being too fat is associated with the greatest risk for development of an eating disorder, more so than eating behavior or insecure body attachment (Wick et al. 223). In addition to associating thinness with sexual attractiveness, women also tend to overestimate how slender they must be to appeal to men. In Germany and America, “men preferred a female body weight that was heavier than women’s perceptions of what men prefer” (Swami et al. 315). Nonetheless, women in both countries feel pressure to conform to the increasingly demanding beauty ideals depicted by Western media, and an end of this trend is not in sight.

However, despite their multiple similarities, more significant body image issues can be detected among American women. Studies of the German population have found that around



forty percent of women are concerned about the appearance of at least one body part (Rief et al., cited on Buhlmann et al. 172), whereas studies of body image among women in the United States reveal that over fifty percent of women feel unhappy about their bodies (Garner et al., cited on Grogan 46; Cash and Hicks 328). The results of the first International Body Project, which surveyed 7,434 individuals in ten major world regions about body weight ideals and body dissatisfaction, confirm that women in North America communicate greater discontent with their bodies than woman in Western Europe (Swami et al. 317). Furthermore, the most attractive female figure according to American men and women is more slender than the figure favored by the German population (Swami et al. 316). Although these differences are slight, they are not necessarily insignificant and will be addressed subsequently in connection with the popular genres of chick literature and makeover reality television, such as *What Not to Wear* and *The Biggest Loser*, as well as more extreme programs like *The Swan*.

In her documentary *Make Me Young: Youth Knows No Pain*, Mitch McCabe investigates Americans' use of plastic surgery as a way to preserve their youth. During her interviews with countless women, McCabe realizes that plastic surgery is primarily used these days to repair perceived flaws or signs of aging and not, as was the case with her father, a plastic surgeon himself, to help victims of accidents regain their full body functions. McCabe's documentary summarizes Americans' perpetual pursuit of beauty and unwillingness to tolerate physical imperfections. For McCabe's subjects, and McCabe herself, one operation is not enough, which demonstrates that even plastic surgery does not produce satisfactory results in the ongoing construction of appearance.

Thus, the issue of body image is a serious matter in both Germany and America, since "media images of thinness steadily fuel the drive for thinness, which is unattainable given the



media's unrealistic comparison group. This leads to permanent body dissatisfaction" (Hewig et al. 734). Media portrayals of idealized beauty are highly intertwined in the development of ideals about body weight and appearance. In light of this problem, it is imperative that societies throughout the world work to "[promote] more realistic and healthier body weight ideals, and [challenge] associations between extreme thinness and femininity, success, and health" (Swami et al. 321). In other words, individuals must be made aware of the potentially damaging effects of popular media on body image and overall life satisfaction, especially for women. The first section of this paper considers the representation of women in German and American chick literature. The second section discusses makeover reality shows from these countries that involve weight-loss and fashion. The third section investigates reality television series that use cosmetic surgery to overhaul participants' appearances. The conclusion summarizes comparisons between German and American national identities and contemplates implications of this study.<sup>1</sup>

### Constructing Femininity in the Chick Lit Heroine

Extensive studies exist that concern the effects of the media's unrealistic depictions of the female body on the self-esteem and body image of women in Western culture. Yet, less attention has been given to the effects of its non-visual representations. In the relatively new genre of chick literature, or chick lit, female protagonists in their 20s and 30s obsess about their bodies and discuss their opinions of what an ideal appearance would be. The tendency of chick lit novels to fulfill romantic fantasies makes the genre similar to traditional romance novels, but chick lit differs in its often exclusive emphasis on the protagonists' struggles with weight, dating, and careers (Kaminski & Magee 255). This section will consider body image and female agency in chick lit, with specific focus on the American novel *Conversations with the Fat Girl* by Liza Palmer and the German novel *Mondscheintarif* by Ildikó von Kürthy. Both are popular novels



written by notable chick lit authors and illuminate national characteristics with regards to the representation of body image in mainstream media. Whereas the German narrative seems to be less critical of women's physical qualities, and particularly weight, *Conversations with the Fat Girl* exhibits an obsession with women's body size and appearance, thus placing the German novel in a more flattering light. However, in the end, as this section will demonstrate, neither the German nor the American protagonist is particularly liberated from traditional norms of femininity, since beauty becomes a vehicle to get ahead in the world and, above all, secure the man of one's dreams.

Generally speaking, readers who closely identify with the characters in chick lit novels may experience "story-consistent beliefs" about their body image and self-esteem. According to the transportation imagery model (Green & Brock, 2000), individuals frequently report story-consistent beliefs after reading a narrative, especially when the narrative contains vivid imagery or identifiable characters that help immerse the reader in the story (Kaminski & Magee 256). Melissa Kaminski and Robert Magee found that, after reading excerpts from chick lit novels, women's concerns about weight were strongly influenced by textual representations of body esteem (257). In other words, protagonists' obsession with weight and appearance encouraged readers of chick lit novels to feel more negative about their bodies. Natalie Rende notes that "one problem in dealing with the physical appearance and attractiveness of fictional personas lies in the discrepancy between the author's pen and the image created in the mind of the reader" (14). Readers determine their perceptions of chick lit characters based on the characters' opinions of themselves, which are typically unfavorable. Readers see the world of a chick lit novel through the eyes of the protagonist. Thus, the reader is transported into whatever reality the protagonist



experiences. It is therefore plausible that readers of chick lit who identify strongly with the protagonists may adopt the characters' insecurities and body obsessions and may be more convinced that women who conform to societal standards of beauty are more capable of achieving satisfaction in life than those who do not.

In *Conversations with the Fat Girl* and *Mondscheintarif*, readers experience the viewpoints of the respective protagonists Maggie Thompson and Cora Hübsch. At the beginning of Maggie's narrative, she is evicted from her residence, works in a coffee shop despite her college degree, and worries constantly about the upcoming wedding of her best friend, Olivia. Throughout the novel, Maggie endeavors to accept herself and woo her romantic interest, Domenic. She ultimately becomes empowered by the realization that she should not evaluate her worth based on comparison to others. Her romantic interest reciprocates her feelings, and she makes progress in the pursuit of her career. Maggie's development demonstrates chick lit's constructive potential to inspire readers to pursue goals regardless of social limitations, which also holds true for *Mondscheintarif*. At the start of Cora's narrative, she is a relatively attractive and successful woman, but she lacks ambition. This changes when she meets Daniel, the man of her dreams, and she becomes determined to pursue him. The novel occurs during the span of only several hours as Cora awaits a call from Daniel and includes flashbacks about Cora's past romantic encounters. In the end, Cora stops waiting and proactively calls Daniel instead. Like Maggie, Cora ultimately realizes that she should have more confidence and be more accepting of her flaws even if her looks and behavior do not conform to societal norms.

Interestingly enough, the majority of chick lit novels are written from a first-person perspective. This is significant because it demonstrates a change in the representation of women.



Whereas romance novels traditionally utilize a third-person narrative, which objectifies female characters, the shift towards a first-person narrative in most contemporary chick lit novels “not only strengthens the heroine’s voice and increases the reader’s opportunities to identify with her but also offers at least temporary escape from the feeling of constantly being watched or controlled by male-dominated society” (Mabry 196). Although this does not guarantee that the narrative will offer a realistic depiction of the female experience, it validates the lives and feelings of women.

Overall, the chick lit genre encourages women to pursue their own desires. It illustrates how women relate to society, and particularly how women can gain agency. In addition, chick lit novels focus on the sense of empowerment women gain from beauty, in contrast to a more feministic philosophy that rejects beauty and the conforming to societal norms. As Paula Kent asserts, “The real question arises when a woman recognizes the unrealistic standards concerning beauty: does she seek to change them or simply recognize them and decide whether or not she will try to meet them?” (82). This question illuminates the contention between second and third wave feminism. Whereas second wave feminists sought social change that would create better choices for women collectively, third wave feminists settle for making individual choices. Second wave feminists want to change society’s standards of the female body, while third wave feminists believe it is crucial for women to make their own decisions about their bodies, whether these decisions conform to existing societal standards or not. Thus, chick lit may be inspiring for readers, since it portrays women acting independently while, at the same time, not rejecting feminine behavior or appearance.

However, despite the aforementioned female agency that can be gleaned from chick lit novels, the obsessive preoccupation with the female body in the majority of such writings is



problematic and counterproductive. Femininity, which was formerly defined by social and psychological properties like motherhood or nurturing, is now regarded as a bodily property, and the attractiveness of a woman's body defines her identity. The body in chick lit novels is specifically constructed as "a body that is always already unruly and which requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodeling in order to conform to judgments of normative femininity" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 498). Chick lit novels echo women's magazines by immersing readers in "a world in which the pursuit of beauty is never ending" (Wells 61). Chick lit novels define women as their bodies and hold women responsible for disciplining and maintaining their physique. Despite the first-person narration, this constant monitoring reinstates women as objects of male as well as even female gaze, and "represents the notion that regulation and policing of the body are necessary evils" (Rende 16). Hence, beauty regimens are not so much about pleasing oneself as they are about pleasing others. Chick lit novels suggest that choosing to conform to social standards of beauty will lead to greater life satisfaction.

Chick lit authors must carefully consider how they portray the beauty of their heroines and other female characters. The protagonist must not be so stunning that readers resent her, but she should also not be so ordinary or unattractive that she gives readers nothing to admire. Furthermore, the heroine should not be completely self-accepting, since this would be too unrealistic to appeal to image-conscious readers (Wells 59). The lack of self-accepting female characters indicates one of chick lit's "departures from second-wave feminist theory, which deconstructed the very myths of beauty that chick-lit, for the most part, vigorously upholds" (Wells 59). Chick lit protagonists are represented as works in progress. They do not accept themselves until they obtain a certain standard of beauty, usually marked by the ability to



attract an ideal man. Neither Maggie, the narrator of *Conversations with the Fat Girl*, nor Cora, who narrates *Mondscheintarif*, is particularly unattractive, yet both complain about the perceived flaws of their bodies.

Regardless of how attractive chick lit protagonists are, they are made to seem normal or even unattractive when compared to at least one of the other female characters in the novel. Writers often “[provide] their essentially good-looking though anxious heroine with a more gorgeous foil who is also much more irritating on the subject of beauty maintenance and makes the heroine appear normal by contrast” (Wells 59). Maggie, in *Conversations with the Fat Girl*, constantly compares herself to the women she encounters, but she is particularly frustrated by Olivia, who was morbidly obese until the end of college, when she decided to have gastric bypass surgery and lost a great deal of weight. After her first surgery, Olivia has multiple other surgeries for purely cosmetic reasons and begins to pursue the goal of the “elusive size 2.” However, Olivia’s fiancé and new friends do not know she was ever obese. Her new relationships are shallow, and her self-esteem is arguably lower than it was before her transformation. Maggie is happier when she begins to lose weight through exercise and healthy eating, which suggests that this normal method of weight loss is preferable to Olivia’s extreme method but conveys the message that a weight-loss transformation is a necessary component of becoming beautiful. Although Maggie envies Olivia’s weight loss, Olivia’s poor attitude serves as a reminder that physical beauty is not a panacea. Inner and outer beauty are separate pursuits.

In *Mondscheintarif*, beauty and a pleasing personality are not as mutually exclusive as *Conversation with a Fat Girl* seems to suggest. The protagonist Cora also has a foil, Carmen, who is exceptionally beautiful, and makes Cora seem more representative of the common

woman. Cora dislikes Carmen because she perceives Carmen as flawless. Cora believes she must compete with Carmen for her dream man, Daniel. At the end of the novel, Cora and the readers discover that Carmen is actually a lesbian, and therefore not a threat to Cora's romance with Daniel. Von Kürthy suggests that it does not make sense to compete with other women based on appearance alone, and reinforces the notion that a person's internal characteristics are ultimately more significant than external appearance. However, unlike *Conversations with the Fat Girl*, *Mondscheintarif* illustrates that physically beautiful women, like Carmen, can also have endearing personalities.

Yet, whereas beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, weight does not, since a woman's weight impacts the way society perceives her. Second wave feminists created the "fat activist" movement to change the demands of society using techniques such as education and training about body image and eating disorders, reeducation about health and beauty standards, and political lobbying to change laws and institutional policies that allow discrimination because of body size (Kent 47). Feminists of the second wave believe women's opportunities should not depend on their bodies and that "fat" need not be a derogatory or taboo word. Thus, the usage of "fat" in the title of the novel *Conversations with the Fat Girl* is noteworthy in that it exemplifies the straightforward quality of chick lit novels and may appeal to readers who believe or have been told that they are fat. Nevertheless, this narrative's message about weight is no different from other chick lit novels. Although Maggie acknowledges some "good" qualities about her appearance, and various characters believe Maggie to be attractive and confident, Maggie's fatness is always contextualized in a reproachful way, and her worries about her weight dominate her interactions with others. She submits to the notion that life is easier for normal- or



underweight women and only gains confidence in herself once she begins to lose weight. At the end of the novel, Maggie uses Olivia's former obesity to shame and embarrass her, and she exposes herself as a hypocrite by doing to Olivia what she always feared her enemies would do to her: call her fat. By this point, Maggie has resolved that she wants to look and feel beautiful in her own way, yet she denies Olivia the same choice. Maggie exhibits a double standard in the way she treats thin women. Thin-shaming and fat-shaming are essentially the same issue, since they both involve a type of body policing based on arbitrary notions of what a body "should" look like. Maggie wants women like Olivia to be unpleasant because she wants a valid reason to dislike them, yet her decision is primarily based on appearance.

In comparison, Cora, the narrator of *Mondscheintarif*, rarely complains about weight and does not use fatness to shame others. Whereas in *Conversations with the Fat Girl*, Maggie's loved ones are more excited for Maggie when she goes down a dress size than when she obtains a competitive internship in her field, Cora believes that clumsiness is her greatest flaw. Thus, she considers her behavior to be more worthy of attention than her looks. Cora is critical about her appearance, and she compares herself to others at times, but her worries about her appearance do not dominate her life and interactions to the extent that Maggie's do. Cora ultimately gains confidence not by changing her looks, but by realizing that she has the power to call Daniel instead of waiting. Her confidence is not necessarily linked to her appearance, which suggests that German culture is less critical of external characteristics than it is of internal qualities.

Another pronounced difference between German and American chick lit novels is that American chick lit perpetuates gender stereotypes with regards to women's behavior of consumption to a far greater extent. In America's consumer culture, "fat women are punished for

visible overconsumption, [whereas] thin women are rewarded; the equally visible markers of high-end shopping...are met with appreciative nods, not disapproving glances" (Umminger 243). Before her weight loss, Maggie dreads shopping and has an unhealthy relationship with food, alternative overeating and deprivation. Once she starts to lose weight, Maggie loves buying new clothes and devotes herself to healthy eating. The overconsumption of clothes and accessories represents high social status, while the overconsumption of food conveys a lower-class behavior that should be restrained (Gross, cited on Umminger 241). Though Cora talks about eating junk food, drinking multiple bottle of wine consecutively, and smoking excessively, overconsumption is not presented as an issue in Cora's narrative. This may be because Cora is not overweight and therefore does not visually depict overconsumption, but it also indicates that German consumer culture is not as unconstrained as American consumerism.

However, despite Cora's lack of obsessive consumption, she is still subject to the male gaze, and so is Maggie. Before the turning point in *Conversations with the Fat Girl* when Maggie begins to lose weight, she never considers the possibility that a fat person can be beautiful and sexually attractive. On the contrary, she seems to perceive overweight people as foolish and disgusting. During a meal with Olivia and her fiancé Adam at a restaurant, the conversation is interrupted when Adam notices an overweight woman who is stuck in a nearby booth. Maggie finds the scene mortifying, while Adam questions how a woman could allow herself to become so large. He explains that the display "is a manifestation of what has gone wrong with this country" (52). Rather than standing up for herself or commenting on the harshness of Adam's words, Maggie internalizes his comments as a personal affront and an uncontested truth. A similar situation can be noted in *Mondscheintarif*. Cora describes the



lengthy process of preparing to go out for the night. She applies makeup and wears uncomfortable clothing and shoes in order to make herself more appealing to the men she will meet while she is out. Furthermore, Cora surrenders her authority to Daniel, since she waits all evening for his call, which will determine if she is good enough for him or not. Like earlier romantic heroes, men in chick lit “are still presented as knowing better about what women want and who they are than women themselves” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 498). As physically attractive white men, Adam and Daniel have an authority that Maggie and Cora do not believe they can challenge.

Thus, it must be concluded that chick lit novels fail to fully challenge traditional representations of women’s sexual liberation. To a certain extent, chick lit is progressive, since “contemporary chick lit often presents the heroine in sexual relationships with men other than the narrative’s intended hero, but without ‘punishing’ her or questioning her actions” (Mabry 204). Maggie and Cora both describe relationships they had prior to meeting their current romantic pursuits. Maggie’s flashbacks about past sexual encounters are full of shame and regret, since she believes that no one could find her attractive in her current state. In contrast, Cora’s flashbacks are full of details and critiques about each encounter, and she does not regret her sexual experiences or find them embarrassing. Nevertheless, although some of these experiences were embarrassing, their occurrence is not depicted as abnormal. The protagonists control these former relationships by reciprocating the male gaze through their objectification and superficial evaluation of these men. However, just like in classic romance novels, chick lit heroines surrender their agency once they meet their heroes, which reinforces that chick lit novels “still ultimately emphasize that what a woman really wants is to find the right guy with whom to



spend the rest of her life” (Mabry 204). Chick lit protagonists do not actually seek sexual liberation and downplay their intelligence to create a dynamic in which the strong hero must save the needy heroine “with the chivalry, wit, and expertise she may not have herself” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 495). Thus, Maggie whines about wanting a man because she is tired of taking care of herself, and she complains about being “the man” in her relationship because she has to ask her crush out, decide on a restaurant, and drive there herself. In *Mondscheintarif*, Cora is initially uninterested in entering a serious relationship, yet, once she becomes involved with Daniel, does nothing but wait for him. Both women assume a passive role as their men take care of them, despite the fact that Maggie and Cora are both intelligent and capable young women with otherwise progressive worldviews.

The genre of chick lit is an improvement on the romance novel, since it gives a voice to women and their everyday struggles. German chick lit may be more liberating for women, since it is not preoccupied with weight and appearance to the extent that American chick lit is. Even so, neither German nor American chick lit grants protagonists sufficient choice about their bodies. Contemporary chick lit “is indeed rewriting the romance, but not in ways that allow for complex analyses of power, subjectivity, and desire, but rather in ways that suggest women’s salvation is to be found in the pleasures of a worked-on, worked-out body, and the arms of a good man” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 500). Even though Maggie and Cora do not necessarily conform to society’s unrealistic appearance standards, neither woman attempts to change these beauty ideals. Both women decide to be more accepting of themselves only after confirming that their dream men reciprocate their feelings, which questions whether the choices of these women are driven by a desire to please themselves or to please their men and male-dominated society as a whole. Chick lit novels appeal to many readers because a considerable number of women can



identify with the protagonists' desire to become content with their bodies and lives. Still, women in chick lit and in reality only have the illusion of choice. Since they cannot change society, women must change themselves if they want to gain the agency available to those who conform to standards of beauty. This notion extends beyond the genre of chick lit and is prominently featured in the genre of makeover reality television as well.

### Questioning the Authenticity of the Televised Makeover

Like the genre of chick lit, reality-based television programs have become popular relatively recently. In particular, the sub-genre of makeover reality television shares many qualities with chick lit novels, and has significant implications for the expectations and body satisfaction of their viewers. Both chick lit and makeover reality television programs feature supposedly normal, or 'real', individuals and focus on wish fulfillment in the form of becoming more socially acceptable by transforming one's external appearance. This section discusses the original American version of the weight-loss show *The Biggest Loser* and its German spin-off of the same name as well as *What Not to Wear* and its German counterpart *Shopping Queen*, which are both fashion makeover shows. Fashion makeover shows and weight-loss shows suggest, at first glance, that their solutions to appearance-related problems are attainable for the average person, yet, the situation is actually more complex. Viewers may be disappointed when they compare themselves to the "real" people who compete on reality television programs, since these competitors are able to change only because they have access to resources that many viewers do not, such as large quantities of money or unlimited time to exercise. The German shows seem to treat contestants less harshly than the American shows, but ultimately, the German and American fashion and weight-loss makeover programs both reinforce unrealistic beauty goals.

Egbert and Belcher investigated how different sub-genres of reality television influenced viewers' body image and used cultivation theory to explain the potential effects of long-term engagement with reality television. Cultivation theory explores the relationship between television exposure and beliefs about the world and "suggests that heavy television viewers tend to have worldviews that overlap what they see on television" (Gerbner and Gross, cited on 413). Egbert and Belcher found that people who watch a significant amount of television are more likely to see the television world as similar to the real world, and this effect may be especially prominent with regards to reality television, which by nature already suggests a resemblance to actual life. However, rather than including more "realistic" representations of male and female bodies, "RTV casts include a disproportionate number of members with idealized body types" (Egbert and Belcher 411). The sub-genre of competition-based reality television programs, such as *Dancing with the Stars*, *American Idol*, or *The Biggest Loser*, elicited the most problematic results, since Nicole Egbert and James Belcher observed that exposure to this type of show was associated with negative body image among the participants of their study (424). Hence, viewers may develop the impression that the appearances of competitors in the casts of reality television shows are representative of the average person, and they may subsequently perceive their appearance as abnormal or inferior.

On the whole, the German and American versions of *The Biggest Loser* have the same premise. The series consists of overweight and obese men and women competing over a period of months to lose the greatest percentage of weight in relation to their starting weight. Participants live in an enclosed location, isolated from the outside world, for the duration of the series. Trainers work with the competitors throughout the season and teach them exercise habits



they can utilize after leaving the show. Each episode involves various exercise and food challenges and concludes with a dramatized weigh-in that determines which contestants are safe and which will be dismissed from the competition. The winner receives a large cash prize and the ironic title of biggest loser.

Although the premise is entirely identical, there are a number of differences between the series of the two countries that make the German version seem less problematic than the American. One significant difference is the popularity of *The Biggest Loser* in each country. In the United States, NBC recently aired its fifteenth season of this program. The American series quickly grew in popularity, and each season sought new extremes to increase shock value and viewer interest, establishing new benchmarks for heaviest contestants, with increasing numbers of contestants whose initial weights exceeded 400 pounds and some who initially weighed upwards of 500 pounds. In contrast, the German series was not immediately popular, and it was cancelled after its first season, which aired in 2009 (Schader 2). Another network took over the series, and a growing number of Germans watch the program, but producers of this spinoff have made no effort to include progressively heavier contestants in the competition. The German series' relative lack of popularity compared to the abundant popularity of the American series demonstrates that there may be a greater obsession with weight ingrained in American culture than there is in Germany, since Americans are apparently more interested in watching overweight individuals rapidly shed pounds than German audiences are.

Another significant difference in the German series is that German contestants have a visible and constant source of support. German contestants begin each season as pairs of friends or couples who want to lose weight together, whereas American contestants compete

individually. Even though the contestants in both countries must take off their clothes to weigh themselves, German contestants are weighed at the same time as their partners, so they do not have to experience this stress and humiliation alone. The German series acknowledges the importance of having a source of support during a challenging ordeal, whereas the American series reflects Americans' individualistic determination to succeed without relying on others.

Furthermore, German contestants typically do not lose as much weight as American contestants. The safe rate of weight loss is only one to two pounds per week (Pappas 2), yet producers and trainers expect American competitors to drop pounds in the double-digits at each weekly weigh-in. In comparison, even though German contestants typically lose more than two pounds each week, they often lose less in total as pairs than the American contestants lose individually. Therefore, the weight-loss presented to American audiences is more extreme and unrealistic than the weight-loss observed by German audiences. The fact that the German series provides participants with emotional support and requires them to lose weight less rapidly than the American contestants makes the German spin-off apparently healthier than the American original.

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However, the German and America series are equally problematic because they publicly shame contestants by associating their obesity with a lack of control. According to the mantra of the show, contestants on *The Biggest Loser* are all receiving the opportunity of a "second chance" at life, which implies that they failed at their lives before coming on the show. The competition gives them a chance to regain control over their bodies through diet and exercise and promises them greater life satisfaction once they lose weight and conform to social appearance standards. Katharine Sender observed that many regular viewers of this series perceived the



“public shaming on *The Biggest Loser* as helpful in forcing candidates to change” and they considered “the shame induced by being on a makeover show as a necessary part of its success” (3). Like the chick lit novels discussed in the previous section, weight-loss reality shows associate fatness with uncontrolled consumption, thereby placing the blame on individuals for allowing themselves to become overweight. The fact that viewers see shaming as a necessary aspect of motivation illustrates the common tendency to disregard external causes of obesity, such as health issues or genetic traits. *The Biggest Loser* propagates widespread misconceptions about what it means to be fat. This series “is completely dependent on the assumptions and misinformation about weight and dieting that saturate mainstream media, reinforced by the increasing hysteria about the ‘obesity epidemic’” (Winter 17). Trainers and doctors on the show convey to contestants and viewers that overweight people are necessarily unhealthy and that they are not beautiful. The program communicates the unfounded generalization that all overweight people became fat because they regularly overate and did not exercise, and it insinuates that if these people decided to work out and eat healthy, they would become thin and beautiful. To add to this mentality, the series repeatedly demonstrates contestants ridiculing themselves for being weak-willed, unattractive, and unhealthy. In both the American and the German series, trainers motivate the contestants by making them feel ashamed of their bodies, and they humiliate the contestants by requiring them to remove their shirts during each weigh-in. These tactics are effective for facilitating weight loss, but they convey to contestants and viewers that fat bodies are shameful and unattractive.

Even more problematic, both the American and the German series are misleading because their premise claims to prioritize the health and fitness of the contestants, yet, like any other

network television program, the producers of *The Biggest Loser* are primarily concerned with maximizing ratings and profits. Producers utilize the fact that increasing numbers of Americans and Germans are overweight or obese and present *The Biggest Loser* as a way to help a handful of obese individuals lose weight and perhaps inspire overweight viewers to do the same. The contestants work with trainers and doctors to supposedly lose weight in a healthy way. Nevertheless, *The Biggest Loser* is about “wow factor” and offers no pedagogical aspect that might allow viewers to “convert these fleeting images of transformation into changes in [their] own [lives]” (Sender 1). *The Biggest Loser* is not meant to instruct viewers about how to lose weight or become healthier. Rather, the producers use weight-loss competition as a means to create the drama and suspense that will draw in viewers and increase ratings and revenue.

Thus, it is no surprise that American and German audiences observe only a limited portion of the competitors’ weight-loss struggle, which may encourage viewers to develop unrealistic impressions about contestants’ fitness regimens. For instance, the viewer seldom witnesses healthy eating occurring during an episode, and the diets of the contestants are somewhat of a mystery. Occasionally, the show features certain foods for product placement, but food is typically portrayed in a negative context. Dramatized flashbacks repeatedly depict contestants binging on junk food, and many episodes feature temptation challenges, in which contestants are presented with their favorite unhealthy foods that they must resist at all costs. These temptation challenges are featured in both the American and the German series. Whereas German chick lit appears to be less focused on food and weight than American chick lit, it seems that weight-loss reality television in both cultures takes an extreme approach to this subject matter. These challenges are designed to prepare contestants to confront temptation after they



return to their everyday lives (Majeski 1). However, rather than teaching contestants how to cope with temptation, they foster anxiety about eating by suggesting that moderate consumption is not an option, and indulgent snacks must be completely rejected.

Ultimately, it is not evident in either series that “contestants were supervised by doctors while participating in the show, and their diet and exercise regimen was tailored to their medical status and their specific needs,” despite a disclaimer aired on every show. On the contrary, contestants are pushed to the point of vomiting on the first episode of the season, and a one mile foot race sent multiple contestants to the hospital. In addition, the healthiness of contestants’ diet regimens is questionable in itself. In particular, Kai Hibbard, a finalist from season three of the American *The Biggest Loser* admitted that competing on the series gave her an eating disorder. She claimed that trainers and producers consistently overruled the advice of the program’s dietitians, and, despite exercising for several hours per day, the contestants ate barely over 1000 calories each day and routinely dehydrated themselves in order to weigh less on the scale (Poretsky 2). A similar controversy occurred regarding the biggest loser of the most recent American season, who lost sixty percent of her body weight and admitted to over-exercising, under-eating, and purposeful dehydration. Trainers encourage contestants to push their physical limits, and weight-loss, not health, is their primary goal, since they must lose weight in order to win.

In comparison to weight-loss makeover shows like *The Biggest Loser*, fashion makeover series such as *What Not to Wear* and *Shopping Queen* may seem less extreme, but they demonstrate similar problems with regards to their representation of beauty. Both series focus on



changing contestants' appearances by adjusting their hair, makeup, and wardrobe. Each episode of *What Not to Wear* features one contestant, typically female, whose friends and family believe that her appearance and fashion sense are socially unacceptable. The contestant brings her entire wardrobe to the show's studio in New York City, where the hosts, Stacy and Clinton, discard most of her belongings, which they deem unacceptable. To compensate for this loss, the participant receives five thousand dollars and two days to overhaul her attire and appearance.

Unlike *What Not to Wear*, the German show *Shopping Queen* takes place in a different city each week and features five contestants, who compete to be the city's "shopping queen". Competitors receive a theme, such as "Valentine's Day", and have four hours and five hundred Euro to purchase an outfit and get their hair and makeup fixed. Each episode focuses on one of the five contestants, and at the end of every episode, the featured contestant models her outfit for the other participants. They provide her with feedback about her appearance and privately give her a score out of ten points, which the host uses to determine the winner on the fifth episode. Even though these shows seem benign, they emulate programs like *The Biggest Loser* on a less obvious level.

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In the same way that fitness experts humiliate contestants on *The Biggest Loser* about their body size, fashion experts on *What Not to Wear* and *Shopping Queen* shame contestants about their overall appearance and sense of style. In the American series, Stacy and Clinton are candid with their criticism, which Brenda Weber refers to as "quasi-cruelty" (97), since "the pre-makeover moment of shame on parade functions as an opportunity to ridicule and humiliate the makeover subject, all seemingly meant as good-natured teasing" (83). The hosts make negative judgements about the contestant's appearance and throw away clothing regardless of its potential

sentimental value. This portion of the episode is particularly degrading and sometimes reduces contestants to tears. In the same vein, the German series *Shopping Queen* has an element of shame. Although *Shopping Queen* lets contestants utilize their unique styles to coordinate outfits that suit their bodies and personalities, the host makes sarcastic comments to the viewers via a voice-over during the entire shopping process. He frequently questions the competitors' choices and critiques their fashion sense. Like Stacy and Clinton, the host of *Shopping Queen* uses mockery to entertain the audience at the expense of the contestants.

Furthermore, *What Not to Wear* and *Shopping Queen*, like *The Biggest Loser*, create unrealistic expectations because they propose solutions that seem to be attainable to the average viewer but are actually not possible for many people. Both series suggest that women can become beautiful simply by dressing better, getting a fashionable haircut, and learning to apply flattering makeup, yet many women lack the resources to purchase an entirely new wardrobe or spend hundreds of Euros on one outfit. Fashion makeover shows link femininity to commodity consumption, since "the effective operation of the commodity system requires the breakdown of the body into parts - nails, hair, skin, breath - each one of which can constantly be improved through the purchase of a commodity" (Doane, cited on Fraser 183). Consumerism plays a significant role in the cultures of both Germany and America, and there is a particular pressure on women to keep pace with ever-changing fashion trends. Accordingly, these shows teach viewers how to shop and promote consumerism by authorizing women to spend money in order to achieve an otherwise unattainable level of social acceptability.

Both fashion series advocate capitalistic attitudes not only in terms of money but also in terms of behavior towards fellow members of society. Fashion makeover shows represent the



exclusivity of consumer culture. According to McRobbie, “makeovers such as *What Not to Wear* generate forms of class antagonism between women. The new cultural intermediaries (the expert and hosts) admonish those members of the working class and lower-middle class who lack the taste competencies of the elite, spurring them to change themselves” (McRobbie, cited on Redden 154). Fashion makeover programs illustrate that beauty is a privilege available to those who have the means to purchase it. The exclusivity of consumerism represents an issue discussed in the previous section with regards to chick lit. Both genres display women as largely competitive towards one another. Instead of working together to advance their social positions or change standards of beauty, women pursue their goals individually and choose to conform to existing appearance norms. *Shopping Queen* does not depict women as only competitors, since the contestants gain insight into each others’ lives during each episode and appear to become friends over the course of the week. However, there can only be one winner at the end of the week, which means that, despite their camaraderie, these women are ultimately competitors. The goal of fashion makeover shows is for contestants to learn how to dress in a way that conforms to societal beauty standards, and the reward, “we are made to understand, is universal approval, and thus love” (Weber 61). Women may be required to sacrifice a certain amount of individuality in order to adhere to appearance norms and thereby earn the approving gaze of others.

Along these lines, *What Not to Wear* and *Shopping Queen* both promote stereotypical beauty ideals that are meant to please the male gaze. Makeover shows like these two series tend to be limited in their representation of diversity, especially in terms of race and socioeconomic status. Despite the way the hosts of *What Not to Wear* “emphasize that candidates must boost their best features and minimize their flaws, some respondents perceived this advice as both

generic and racially homogenizing” (Sender 68). This lack of racial diversity suggests that the default model of female beauty is white, and the generic advice fails to consider economic status, indicating that beauty is attainable exclusively to middle- or upper-class women. *Shopping Queen* seems more accepting of different body sizes than *What Not to Wear*. The former features participants with a wide range of body shapes, and contestants who are heavier are not automatically disadvantaged. In contrast, when *What Not to Wear* features an overweight contestant, the challenge is no longer about overcoming a flawed sense of style, but rather about discovering fashionable ways to dress a body that does not fit into department stores’ cookie-cutter sizes. Nevertheless, the competitors on *Shopping Queen* are not racially diverse, and their socioeconomic statuses do not differ considerably. Both *What Not to Wear* and *Shopping Queen* promote the notion that rules exist about how to fit in to society’s standards of beauty and fashion. In theory, conforming to these standards gives women greater social agency, but “unfortunately, the makeover’s emancipatory possibilities are hampered by the narrow gender, class, and race codings that apply across the makeover canon” (Weber 61). Contestants are told to be more conventionally feminine and to refrain from eccentric style choices. For example, women on *What Not to Wear* “are not encouraged to go without makeup, wear clothes that ‘make them look like boys,’ or in any way detract from conventional forms of femininity” (Weber 61). The American and German presenters represent the authoritative male gaze, which “enables the celebrity experts to hold the power in defining what constitutes appropriate taste” (Powell and Prasad 58). Contestants conform to the ingrained beauty ideal of their societies and therefore endeavor to please the dominant male gaze.



Ultimately, viewers in Germany and the United States should be cautious about the beauty and health messages communicated via makeover reality shows. Fashion and weight-loss shows are potentially dangerous because they create unrealistic expectations about what types of appearance transformation are attainable to the average audience member. That said, weight-loss and fashion makeover shows offer viewers hope that it is possible for them to improve life satisfaction by making relatively simple lifestyle changes. Like the genre of chick lit, the makeover show genre demonstrates women's power to make choices about their bodies, yet, at the same time, these genres illustrate the pressure to constantly work at the body in order to comply with the demands of society.

#### Taking Beauty to the Extreme

Another subsection of the makeover show genre is the cosmetic surgery show. Like *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Shopping Queen*, cosmetic surgery shows involve contestants being made-over and physically changed, but, instead of losing weight or receiving new hair and wardrobe, participants undergo drastic procedures that may endanger their health. Like, for example, the genre of chick lit, discussed previously, cosmetic surgery reality television has gained popularity over the last decade. This section will focus on the American series *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, as well as the German series *Extrem schön! Endlich ein neues Leben* (Extremely Beautiful! Finally a New Life). It will consider each show individually and then examine how viewers interpret and interact with such programs. Unlike the genres discussed earlier, cosmetic surgery series in America and Germany do not display unique national differences. They both encourage viewers to perceive plastic surgery as a common and reasonable tool of beauty maintenance and thus seem to provide both the contestants and the

viewer with the prospects of greater agency with regard to their social opportunities. However, as I will argue and have argued in previous sections, these shows promote unrealistic beauty ideals and societal norms of femininity.

In general, the rate of plastic surgery procedures in America and Germany has increased in recent years, which coincides with the rise in cosmetic surgery makeover shows. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, there was a 77 percent growth in the rate of cosmetic surgery procedures performed from 2000 to 2011 (Markey and Markey 211), and breast augmentation alone increased by more than 700 percent in the United States between 1992 and 2004 (Levy, cited on Gailey 114-15). In Germany, professionals involved in the German Medical Association responded to the escalating demand for plastic surgery and the growth in cosmetic surgery shows by forming the Coalition Against the Obsession with Beauty in 2004. This organization advocates a responsible representation of cosmetic surgery procedures in the media and public sphere (Milkis). It is likely more than a coincidence that these mounting demands for plastic surgery parallel the proliferation of appearance enhancement in media and television.

*Extreme Makeover* pioneered the cosmetic surgery television genre when it aired on ABC at the end of 2002. There had been surgery and plastic surgery shows prior to this series, but these programs focused more on the doctors and medical technology than on the patients or their struggles. *Extreme Makeover* had immediate success. Over one thousand people applied for the initial three positions, and more than thirteen million people viewed the television special and watched plastic surgeons transform the appearance of these three people (Huff 71). *Extreme Makeover* was revolutionary because it converted cosmetic surgery into a form of entertainment. The series became the second highest rated program for adults under age fifty in 2003 (Mazzeo



et. al. 391). The success of this program inspired the creation of various shows with similar premises.

Nevertheless, *Extreme Makeover* was not universally accepted. In particular, the series encountered criticism from within the plastic surgery community. Some members of this community complained that the show encouraged extensive surgeries that went far beyond what a normal person would undergo in one sitting. Another complaint was that the show downplayed the pain and suffering a person experiences after plastic surgery and portrayed a glamorized version of such operations instead (Huff 72). Indeed, all three original participants received more surgical procedures than expected. This is a common occurrence in cosmetic surgery shows. Participants initially take issue with only one or two aspects of their appearance, but they ultimately consent to the array of additional procedures their surgeon suggests. They do not question the validity of the surgeon's advice and thus surrender their agency to the reality show.

A year and a half after the launch of *Extreme Makeover*, FOX aired *The Swan*, in which "ugly ducklings" transform into swans with the help of cosmetic surgery. At the conclusion of each season, participants compete with one another in a beauty pageant. The program only aired for nine months, but in this period, it received 500,000 applicants, forty of which were accepted (Weber 260). Cecile Frot-Coutaz, chief executive officer of FremantleMedia, the series' developer, said, "With *The Swan* we're offering the kind of dream makeover that's normally available only to the rich and famous. This is a positive show where we want to see how these women can make their dreams come true once they have what they want" (Huff 69). *The Swan* goes a step further than *Extreme Makeover* and other cosmetic surgery shows and provides its contestants with therapy. These women thus transform psychologically as well as physically.

Like makeover shows such as *The Biggest Loser* or *What Not To Wear*, producers of *The Swan* promote the show as an opportunity for contestants to obtain the tools they need to improve their lives. However, instead of actively working to lose weight or dress professionally, participants in plastic surgery shows are passively transformed by surgeons. These women believe they will gain agency in society by altering their appearance, but they must conform to an extremely narrow image of beauty to do so.

Enthusiasm for cosmetic surgery shows also developed in Germany, and, in 2009, *Extrem schön* aired on RTL2. The opening of each episode shows a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, which suggests that participants will undergo a metaphorical metamorphosis from an undesirable caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly, just like *Swan* contestants transform from ugly ducklings to beautiful swans. *Extrem schön* does not include a competition element, but most other aspects of the show are identical to its American counterparts. In each episode, a woman shares her upsetting story, discusses her problem areas, and undergoes a variety of aesthetic surgery procedures. The show concludes with the revealing of her new appearance to herself and her loved ones. Similar German series include *Alles ist möglich* (Everything Is Possible), *Die Beauty Klinik* (The Beauty Clinic), and *Letzte Hoffnung Skalpell* (Last Hope Scalpel). It is unsurprising that corresponding patterns emerge in these German and American cosmetic surgery shows, since FremantleMedia is a subsidiary of the RTL Group, which operates the German television stations that air these programs. The prevalence of these types of programs in Germany is indicative of the extent to which cross-national appearance standards have converged and conformed over the past decade.

Despite their overall popularity, American and German cosmetic surgery shows have received a great deal of criticism in their respective countries. Critiques are primarily concerned



that these types of programs convey to viewers that cosmetic surgery leads to greater life satisfaction and does not result in any significant complications. An article in the weekly German news magazine *Stern* criticized *Extrem schön* for implying that anyone can become happy just by securing the services of a capable cosmetic surgeon. The article explains that the subtitle of the series, "Finally a New Life", is misleading because the show ultimately only furnishes participants with new body parts and do not assist them in dealing with the aftermath of surgery (Miklis). This lack of follow-up care has also been a concern with *The Swan* participants. For example, Lorrie Arias, a former *Swan* contestant who received the most surgeries in the history of the show, recently told *The New York Post* that the program ruined her life. She claimed that insufficient post-surgery treatment generated her current physical and mental disorders (Radar). Since these are profit-oriented programs, it would be unreasonable to expect reality television series to take care of participants after the show. However, the fact that cosmetic makeover programs completely ignore medical complications and other negative aftereffects misrepresents the risks of plastic surgery.

This misrepresentation of cosmetic surgery has also raised concerns that observing such reality shows might be particularly dangerous for young viewers, since youths spend increasing amounts of time watching television and may become desensitized to the risks of surgery. Cultivation theory, which was discussed in the previous section in relation to weight-loss and fashion makeover programs, posits that the more television a person watches, the more likely the person is to perceive the real world as similar to the television world and to accept the information delivered by media as truth in reality. The cultivation process is not a one-way action of the media influencing the viewer. Rather, this process hinges on the interaction between the

viewer and the media. It follows that watching more cosmetic surgery shows would lead one to believe that surgery is an acceptable way of fixing one's flaws and that the benefits far outweigh its risks. According to Joachim Graf von Finckenstein, medial specialist and president of the German Society for Aesthetic-Plastic Surgery, shows like *Extrem schön* are above all a danger for young viewers, since they suggest that an aesthetic operation is no more costly than a visit to the hairdresser, which can decrease the level of inhibition young viewers feel towards such risky operations (Miklis). Research in Germany indicates that cultivation processes tend to be similar in Germany to those reported in the United States (Appel 76). The amount of time adults and children spend watching television has increased in the United States and Germany over the past decade. On average, Americans spend more of their leisure time watching television than doing any other activity (BLS), and watching television takes up the largest portion of Germans' leisure time, aside from using the internet (Meulemann and Gilles 255). This steady consumption may lead to an increase in cultivation effects (Webster, cited on Appel 76). In other words, audiences in the United States and Germany watch increasingly greater amounts of reality television and therefore are more likely to associate these programs with truth in the real world.

Furthermore, frequent viewers of cosmetic surgery programs may come to understand surgery as a routine beauty procedure, rather than an extreme and often unnecessary measure, and they may decide to pursue surgery to correct their own perceived imperfections. Cosmetic surgery makeover shows may increase viewers' willingness to undergo aesthetic surgery, since, "on the one hand, cosmetic surgery is portrayed as just another in a series of logical, self-management practices - not unlike everyday grooming rituals - carried out by average women. At the same time, however, the practice is also swathed in familiar narratives of spiritual



transformation and empowerment” (Gailey 115). These narratives present cosmetic surgery as a simple and desirable solution to fix any appearance flaws, particularly in order to more closely approximate conventional female beauty. Women who responded positively to an episode of *Extreme Makeover* indicated an interest in pursuing cosmetic surgery, whereas women who negatively evaluated the show were relatively uninterested in pursuing cosmetic surgery (Markey and Markey 215-16). Thus, the female viewers’ interest in surgery was positively correlated with their appraisal of the show. This proves the premise of cultivation theory, since these women believe that the cosmetic surgery operations they would undergo in real life would closely resemble the transformations they observe on television.

Another problem with cosmetic surgery series, which I already discussed with regard to the chick lit genre, is the reinforcement of the authoritative male gaze. Most surgeons who critique and manipulate contestants’ bodies are male and thus represent the power men have to dictate the standards of female beauty. Furthermore, as Charlotte and Patrick Markey discovered, even though watching cosmetic surgery programs does not appear to influence men’s desire to pursue cosmetic surgery, it leads them to internalize unrealistic female beauty ideals that may encourage them to support women in pursuing cosmetic surgery (216). Hence, women will likely experience greater pressure to resort to drastic measures in order to alter their appearance. Cosmetic surgery shows raise the standards of beauty for the average woman. Accordingly, women will have to go to greater lengths to satisfy the male gaze.

Despite claims that women are liberated through physical and emotional transformation, cosmetic surgery shows in Germany and the United States actually relegate women to traditional gender roles and thrive off their shame. The originally German concept of *Schadenfreude*, or the

pleasure of watching others suffer, has become a prominent aspect in the reality television programs of both countries. Women on these shows are expected to be cheerful, grateful, and optimistic, and, for example, "*Swan* contestants who are ungrateful, recalcitrant, resistant, or just negative are relentlessly portrayed as difficult" (Weber 111). Even though reality television programs claim to be unscripted to a degree, there are implicit guidelines that contestants must follow. Participants are rewarded for their compliancy and willingness to share their shameful stories. In this regard, cosmetic makeover shows are similar to the weight-loss and fashion makeover programs discussed in the previous section. These programs utilize humiliation to increase entertainment value and thus propagate and normalize the compulsive practice of body shaming. Therefore, the participants are susceptible to the judgement of the female gaze in addition to the male gaze.

Along these lines, both male and female viewers are likely to perceive beauty not only as an end in itself, but they also discern the power of beauty as social capital. Prior to surgery, contestants struggle to claim agency in their lives or take pride in their achievements. Those who emerge triumphant from their struggles "are depicted as role models not only to themselves but to the people watching, and part of the visuality expressed by the After-body celebrates the subject who stands victorious and worthy in the public eye" (Weber 259). In a way, this seems empowering, but it is also troubling that pre-makeover individuals are typically powerless and void of physical appeal. Makeover shows suggest that women's appearances must be constantly worked at, and that those who do not work to improve themselves have not met their true potential or claimed their true selves.



Makeover shows present a narrow concept of what a person should be, and they endeavor to discover participants' so-called true selves, which are invariably buried or untapped.

Participants often comment that they are happy to have found their real selves, which were hidden prior to transformation. Accordingly, Weber points out that, "one of the makeover's more critical premises is that it does not construct, it reveals. That is to say, the makeover does not create selfhood but rather it locates and salvages that which is already present, but weak. Though a 'you' may exist, these stories suggest the 'better you' can only be achieved through the makeover" (70). Audiences internalize the notion that their natural self is inherently inferior to their potential self, and they consider the increased social acceptance and agency they could achieve if they only lost weight, improved their wardrobe, or got a new nose.

Though noticeable cultural differences exist with regards to German and American chick literature and fashion makeover shows, cultural identities are not pronounced in the more extreme makeover shows, as already mentioned at the beginning of this section. Both German and American makeover shows culminate in the "new" individual appearing to their family and friends, who unfailingly greet them with awe and enthusiasm. In plastic surgery shows, this is typically also the first time that the participants see their new selves, and, despite dramatic and often even "freakish" transformations, participants react with unwavering happiness and are frequently moved to tears. In both countries:

The makeover's ideologies evince a deep cultural desire for a coherent celebrated self, here described as empowered and confident, where selfhood will find loving consummation in romantic and social acceptance. The makeover thus indicates that achieving such love and empowerment requires writing normative gender,

race, and class congruence on the body in ways that can be visually policed and affirmed by a collective body of like-minded citizens. (Weber 257)

In makeover shows, and especially cosmetic surgery shows, participants all strive for the same notion of beauty, and they welcome so-called professionals to evaluate them based on their appearance. Makeover shows suggest that an individual's selfhood can only be validated by the approval of society and that people without this external approval have inferior ability to claim the status of selfhood. The questionable ability for unmade-over women to claim selfhood demonstrates one aspect of the complicated representation of women in reality television.

Feminist thinking about the representation of these women is somewhat divergent, since participants are simultaneously empowered and subjugated. On one hand, these shows depict women taking control of their lives and changing themselves in order to allegedly gain greater agency in society. However, the normalization of cosmetic surgery as part of women's self-maintenance takes this notion too far. Critiques of cosmetic surgery shows in both Germany and America have compared such programs to pornography, since the images of surgeons working on female bodies "are compelling not only in their claims to authenticity, but also in their appeal to the taboo and voyeuristic, to the fantasy of 'complete access to all that is hidden'" (Deery, Baudrillard, cited on Gailey 107; Schneeberger). These women are at the mercy of male doctors and surgeons. They lay vulnerable and paralyzed on the operation table, with no control over what happens to them. When these women emerge from surgery, they are both liberated from their outcast status and subordinated within patriarchal norms of female beauty. Participants obtain the appearance they desired, but these desires ultimately derive from the intense pressure to conform.



Finally, cosmetic surgery shows suggest that it is the responsibility of women to take the necessary measures to maintain their appearance according to societal definitions of beauty. It is especially common to see mothers participating in cosmetic surgery shows in order to reclaim the body they sacrificed to childbirth. These “mommy makeovers” are routine and substantiate the notion that “the underlying mythos of plastic surgery RT is not only that the ageing process is preventable and that women’s roles as sexual subjects may be extended almost indefinitely, but that women bear the responsibility when this (patriarchal) fantasy breaks down” (Gailey 118). Society celebrates and encourages motherhood, yet simultaneously places immense importance on youth and the perpetuation of a pre-motherhood body.

Overall, German and American cosmetic makeover shows are extremely similar and portray plastic surgery as both normal and normative. Audiences engage these programs as reflexive experiences that lead them to consider their status of selfhood and the social agency they might obtain by changing their appearance. Although it is not evident that cosmetic surgery shows cause an increased demand for plastic surgery, the rise in popularity of this genre of reality television correlates with an increased rate of cosmetic surgery procedures in both Germany and the United States. Cosmetic makeover programs demonstrate the possibility of attaining or prolonging beauty, which contributes to a new dimension of social pressures and expectations.

### Conclusion

Popular media reflects slight differences between societal beauty demands in Germany and the United States, as has been shown in connection with chick lit and fashion makeover shows. However, for the most part, the German and American examples are extremely similar. Women in chick lit novels and reality television are both subject to the authoritative male gaze. Accordingly, they alter their appearance not out of a personal impetus to improve but rather to

become more acceptable to the men in society. Moreover, women change themselves to avoid the body shaming that is present in society but also utilized to increase entertainment value of makeover programs. The media misleads women into believing that, if they conform to social ideals of beauty, they will gain greater agency, yet, in reality, women sacrifice agency when they surrender control of their bodies to the demands of society. Popular media encourages women to pursue beauty at any cost. For a substantial proportion of women, obtaining beauty means unfettered spending for the purpose of creating a socially acceptable facade, but, for a growing number of women, this entails undergoing surgical procedures. Nevertheless, women should not feel pressure to drastically alter their appearance just because cosmetic surgery is an option for them.

Rather than competing with and scrutinizing one another, women should believe that they have agency as a product of non-physical traits. Media portrayals should depict women who are more characteristic of the average person and who are not defined in relation to the male gaze. Ultimately, women in Germany and the United States would benefit if the media stopped “selling dreams” and started incorporating more realistic representations of beauty and femininity.



## Notes

1. The purpose of this study is to compare two cultural contexts within the Western world, and therefore, this paper offers only broad conclusions about national identities. It would be worthwhile to expand on this comparison by considering factors, such as race or sexual orientation, which may have mediating effects on body image satisfaction.

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