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WOMAN NEWS

Risque reality

Scantly clad contestants draw surprising TV audience

By Erin White
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Amy Watts works two jobs, regularly watches the news and spends a chunk of her free time tuned in to the History and Discovery channels.

Then there are the hours she devotes to "The Ultimate Coyote Ugly Search" when it's in season on CMT, a program whose plot revolves around the search for a new "femme fatale" to dance on the bar and pour drinks at one of the chain's locations.

Mallory Neill sometimes gets sucked into "The Girls Next Door" too -- an E! Network show that follows Hugh Hefner's girlfriends -- in and out of his house.

These shows, and others like them -- with titles such as "Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll" (on CW), "Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team" (on CMT) and even "America's Next Top Model" (on CW) -- feature scantily clad females in what many would say are situations that degrade women and turn back the clock on generations of feminist work.

Yet it's women who are setting aside hours at a time to watch.

The CW network says more than 70 percent of viewers of its surprise hit "Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll" are women. That's roughly the same breakdown for the CMT shows, too.

The female-skewed ratings surprised executives at CMT, says Mary Beth Cunin, vice president of programming strategy.

"We thought it would be pretty evenly split," she says.

Perhaps that's because some women wouldn't want to be caught watching them - - at least not by anyone who isn't a fellow fan.

So why are ladies hoarding the remote during these shows?

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"It's mindless television," Watts says. She likens her "Coyote Ugly" viewing to a summer beach read.

The drama created from the tossing together of strong personalities on reality competition shows draws her in, she says.

But those conflicts bother Elayne Rapping, a media critic for the University at Buffalo, who studies pop culture and gender issues. She says such shows reinforce the idea that women can get ahead only by putting other women down.

"What they encourage is the old-fashioned pre-'60s competitiveness among women. In those days it was because women didn't have jobs, so there was catfighting over men," she says. "This is a somewhat different version. It's 'Who's going to get the prize?' But I think it brings out the nastiness in women."

Erica Espiritu, who periodically watches "Cheerleaders" and "Search for the Next Doll," says she understands why a mother might not want her 10-year-old watching such programs. But she disagrees that they're anti-feminist.

"I say, if you've got it, flaunt it," she says. Judging these women for using all their looks, she says, is a form of sexism in its own right.

Espiritu, a 25-year-old graphic designer, says she watched "Search for the Next Doll" to get ideas about style.

Rapping says envy keeps women watching, too.

"On the one hand, we love to look at these women and vicariously imagine that we're them. But deep down inside there's something depressing about it because we aren't them. That's really the contradictory nature of women's mentality right now."

Neill says part of the reason she's conflicted about her enjoyment of "The Girls Next Door" is the message it sends that looks are a woman's most valuable asset.

Though one of the women on the show occasionally studies for the college courses she's taking, the girls devote most of their time to trying on skimpy outfits, posing for risque photos and discussing which thong/miniskirt/thigh-high boots Hef will find most attractive. One episode focuses almost entirely on one woman's choreographing a burlesque routine she plans to perform after popping out of a birthday cake.

Neill favors a tamer lifestyle and modest clothing, but she can't help making a comparison.

"I find myself saying, 'Oh, she's so pretty,' " she says. "And I'm like, not me. I look nothing like that."

That attitude, says Nancy O'Reilly, a clinical psychologist and founder of the WomenSpeak Project, an online resource for older women, helps explain why Neill stays glued to the girls even if it makes her feel insecure.

"Women love to compare themselves to other women," O'Reilly says. "And women are extremely competitive."

So does that mean women should stop watching these shows?

Cunin doesn't think so. She points out that both "Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team" and "The Ultimate Coyote Ugly Search" have strong female leaders who place a high priority on work ethic: Liliana Lovell turned a bar idea into a Coyote Ugly empire singlehandedly through smart business decisions. And Kelli Finglass worked her way up from a member of the cheerleading squad to her current position as director of the organization.

Both women are whip-smart, well-spoken and exacting in their expectations, and they sharply chide contestants for whining, gossiping and crying. The programs make no bones about the importance of appearance, but they also make it clear that winning a top spot takes more than an hourglass figure and flowing extensions. The contenders must demonstrate athleticism, toughness, the ability to speak in front of a crowd and charisma.

Indeed, the winner of "Search for the Next Doll," while still beautiful by any conventional standard, wasn't the best-looking woman of the bunch.

"You certainly see in the "Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders" and "Coyote Ugly" that some of the prettier girls don't make it," Cunin says. "It is empowering. If anyone is out there working hard to get to a goal, I don't think you can completely devalue that."

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