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**A STUDY INTO REALITY TELEVISION PRODUCTION
IN NEW ZEALAND: GENDER REPRESENTATION ON
*THE BACHELOR AND FBOY ISLAND***

A thesis
submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Master of Arts in Screen and Media
at
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by
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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways producers and editors of New Zealand romantic heterosexual dating reality television programmes portray gender and their motivations for creating specific representations. Giving a broader outlook from an international perspective, it brings to light New Zealand's reality television industry comparing it to studies done on its international counterparts. The study is informed by interviews with New Zealand industry experts, producers and editors of the genre, discussing specific excerpts from two locally produced shows *The Bachelor New Zealand*, Season 4 and *FBoy Island New Zealand*. It looks at the roles of editors and producers within reality television, their tasks and responsibilities, and presents an exploration into the techniques and industry expertise that shape the content of the shows, as well as discussing cisgender representation on these shows. By comparing portrayals of gender in the two programmes, it investigates the intentions and rationale for the storylines and character depictions created by the practitioners. Ultimately, it gives an insight into how reality television in New Zealand is manipulated and constructed to appease audience expectations and commercial investment in this popular reality television genre.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Emma O'Connor

2025

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Chapter One Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This study examines the practices and motivations for shaping cisgender romantic reality television content created in New Zealand during the early 2020s. The purpose of this study is to demystify and explain the processes and methods that producers and editors use to create reality television in New Zealand. Reality television has become an influential cultural force, shaping and reflecting societal norms, including those surrounding gender and relationships (Hall, 2009). The purpose of romantic reality television is to entertain, and the productions must simplify and reduce complexities within the cast's characters and the storylines to create narrative content that audiences can easily understand and engage with (Mast, 2016).

Audiences of reality television are largely aware of the construction and manipulation of the content that they are presented with, but research indicates that audiences struggle to differentiate what is 'real' or not (ACMA, 2021). The vast majority of viewers of this genre are young women who shape their world views on the representations they are subjected to through the programmes (Behm-Morawitz et al. 2016). The portrayals can be harmful as characters have been reduced to be one-dimensional and not representative of their true selves (Trelease, 2019). In this context, this study focuses on the construction of gender portrayals, acknowledging Butler's theories about the concept of gender being culturally learnt and performed (2007) and examining these constructed portrayals by exploring the decisions and motivations as articulated by industry professionals, both producers and editors of this genre. The study further seeks to determine whether these portrayals are embedded with cultural and societal meanings, serving to reinforce or challenge prevailing notions of gender and romantic courting dynamics. The principal study is into the representation of cisgender portrayals on romantic reality television shows produced in New Zealand.

For the purpose of this research, I am focussing on heteronormative romantic dating shows made in New Zealand during 2021-2022, namely *The Bachelor NZ* and *FBoy Island NZ*. *The Bachelor* is an American reality television format created by producer Mike Fleiss, which first aired on the American ABC network in 2002 (IMDb, n.d.). The format has since been recreated in at least 37 countries (Angelo, 2018), and it continues being made globally in its original form, as well as various spin-offs of the show, such as *The Bachelorette* (2003-present), *The Golden Bachelor* (2023- present) and *Bachelor in Paradise* (2011- present) (IMDb, n.d.). The concept of *FBoy Island* is accredited to American producer Elan Gale, with

its first series airing on HBO Max in 2021 (IMDb, n.d). The format was picked up internationally by at least five other countries despite being decommissioned by HBO Max in the United States after two seasons, with the explanation being cost-cutting, as the network was reducing the production of its unscripted content (Waiwiri-Smith, 2022). Both programmes follow a competition format, starting with a large number of contestants vying for the attention of the chosen hero or heroine/s whilst taking part in semi-scripted activities. By the final episode, this large group of contestants has been whittled down to one lucky winner of the said prize by being their chosen match and a chance of a fairytale ending with their hero or heroine/s. It is questionable how many people in real life would be happy to knowingly compete for one person's attention if they were aware that the person they were pursuing was simultaneously “dating” several other people (as the contestants do). In other words, these shows bring to light emotions and character portrayals that may never happen in real life. Both formats intensify and speed up the dating process; in *The Bachelor*, he gets to sequentially separate off several women at any social gathering and interact with them one-on-one. Again, another scenario that would be unlikely in real life is to expect women or men to be happy to “wait their turn” while the object of their desire woos various other hopefuls under the watching eyes of all involved. It could be argued that the premise feels outdated, the idea of women passively waiting for their turn while the man gets to literally feel the field before picking the woman he sees as the most desirable.

The premise of *FBoy Island* is different from *The Bachelor* as the leads are three females with a large group of men vying for their attention as well as a cash prize. *FBoy Island* does mimic *The Bachelor* in its competitive format; the finale will see each female choose a partner, but the ‘twist’ of the show is that half of the male contestants have entered the competitions as self-proclaimed “FBoys”, who are solely after the cash prize without any real romantic intentions and the “nice guys” who are presumably looking for love. The show's format challenges traditional dating show tropes by integrating the concept of the "FBoy" and making the women’s journey about discovering the men's true intentions rather than picking and choosing among a group of genuine suitors.

In this study, I aim to examine the way producers and editors manipulate the coverage of reality television and how cisgender males and females are represented on screen in order to gain an understanding of these cultural texts. The study aims to define how the experts who construct these shows work to achieve what, according to audience figures, are highly successful formats, often having the most viewers in their timeslot (New Zealand Herald,

2017) and continued growth in ratings (Bell, 2023), and to investigate further what messages they convey, and ultimately to determine if there is any bias in the portrayals.

1.1 Context of study

The research begins by situating itself within the broader academic discourse on reality television, acknowledging the contributions of international and New Zealand-based studies to understanding this genre. It examines reality television's fluid and ever-evolving nature, a genre that is hard to define due to its hybridisation of entertainment, drama, and unscripted authenticity. By studying the genre of reality television, this research aims to bring to light the complexities of the gender portrayals audiences are presented with; according to Oprea and Kühne, young viewers can be incognizant of the manipulation and construction the genre uses to create the stories and characters (2016). This nescience could lead to younger audiences accepting the gender portrayals on these programmes as the norm (Behm-Morawitz et al. 2016). Therefore, deconstructing the representations and the processes of creating them as constructed by industry professionals will positively contribute to ongoing research within this area.

The study also considers the broader shifts in the broadcasting landscape, marked by technological advancements and the increasing competition from streaming platforms to more traditional broadcast methods. It examines how new technology has and continues to transform audience engagement and content production practices.

The theoretical framework is informed by established theories on gender representation, concurring with Mulvey's theories around the notion of gender being culturally indoctrinated (1975) and Butler's principal elements of gender being acts that are performed (2007), further exploring whether the representations adhere to the heterosexual script (Kim et al., 2007).

These frameworks provide a lens through which the study critically evaluates the depictions of traditional gender roles and the reinforcement of normative heterosexual relationships in reality television. Additionally, this study explicates the methodology adopted to investigate these issues, which, in this case, is an ethnographical approach. Berry states that ethnographical investigations can enrich studies into creative outputs, as it is a valuable tool to explain how theory and practice are implemented in the screen production industry (2018). Albeit acknowledging the implications of the author's bias as "Ethnography enacts the

reflexivity of the ethnographer as the writing moves between states of immersion and detachment” (Berry, 2018, p.105). The methods applied in the research are also explained, such as the data collection processes and analysis of the semi-structured interviews with industry professionals, which offer valuable insights into the creative and editorial decisions that shape gender portrayals on-screen.

This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender and relationships are mediated in popular culture in New Zealand and the implications these representations hold for contemporary audiences.

1.2 Research question

Having identified an area of interest and informed by the studies that will be covered in the next chapter, the literature review, based on this knowledge and the author’s personal industry experience lead to the research question:

How and why do producers and editors in New Zealand influence the portrayal of gendered identities in 'romance' sub-genres of reality television?

1.3 Qualitative Research

Ethnographic research, such as qualitative analysis, has been used to understand and interpret society since Herodotus's time (Clifford, 1986, p.2). In this study, ethnographic research is used to examine aspects of contemporary society by applying Clifford’s perspective:

“Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion” (1986, p.2-3). Berry states: “The space of ethnography creates a place where social and material practices can be better understood alongside each other through the lens of theories of social structures, customs, norms and rituals.” (2018, p.109).

In this study, I will use ethnographic research by comparing and discussing televised excerpts from two New Zealand reality television shows to gain insights into the world of television

production in New Zealand. The study acknowledges that societal changes are continuous, and that ethnographic research must reflect that, making this research a representation of its time. This study discusses specific excerpts from a given time and seeks to interpret and comment on the meaning of these portrayals and to explain how and why they were constructed in such a way. I acknowledge that I bring my personal experiences into this study, as Clifford points out: “The ethnographer’s personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognized as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and ‘objective’ distance.” (1986, p.13)

Although I have previously worked in television production for many years, mainly as an editor, my goal is to gain a better understanding of the impact editors and producers have on the outputs by looking at the production of a specific genre of television from a more distanced, and more broadly informed perspectives.

The concept of being a participant and the notion of ‘objectivity’ is problematic; Clifford maintains that it doesn’t exist (Clifford, 1986, p.6). Kerrigan refers to the term as constructionist, acknowledging that there is only subjective truth, quoting Crotty: “All knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.” (2018, p.19).

As I am an active participant in the industry of my study, it gives me a unique outlook to which I can present my findings – from a constructionist ethnographical position.

Therefore, I attest that this study will be framed by the researcher’s own experiences and opinions, but I endeavour to present the findings as neutral and ‘objective’ as possible.

1.4 Author’s viewpoint

From a personal point of view, having worked in the screen industry for over twenty years, I have found that working in reality television has involved some of the most challenging but rewarding experiences. Over time, I have fulfilled many different roles such as creative producer, field director and camera operator, to mention a few, but for the majority of my career, I have been employed as an editor. My work spans from advertising, live television,

news, sports, factual television, comedy, children’s programmes, promos to corporates, thousands of hours of content. Although a resident of New Zealand since 2009, I was born in Sweden; after finishing high school, I moved to London to undertake my undergraduate study in Communications and Audio-Visual Production at London Guildhall University, now London Metropolitan University. My career has seen a mix of full-time staff roles in the United Kingdom and Singapore, but in Australia and New Zealand, I have mainly been employed on a freelance basis. Toi Mai’s Screen Industry Snapshot from 2023 indicated that 64% of screen practitioners in New Zealand are self-employed, which is four times the national average (Toi Mai, 2023). I have been employed in many reality television productions in New Zealand, including *New Zealand’s Got Talent*, *MasterChef*, *My Kitchen Rules*, *Heartbreak Island*, *The Block*, *Real Housewives of Auckland* and *The Apprentice Aotearoa*.

The complexities of the definition of reality television will be discussed more in detail in Chapter Two, but the outlook of this study assents to Mast’s interpretation that the genre depicts “real people” as opposed to trained actors, making their performances seem authentic and realistic (2016). Bignell and Woods define the genre as encompassing varying content from make-over shows, game shows, cooking competitions and social experiments (2023, p.148). The social experiment shows include *Married at First Sight*, *The Bachelor*, *Love Island* and *FBoy Island*, the latter with romantic and sometimes highly sexualised content. As a former practitioner within the reality television genre, over the years, I have noticed a trend towards escalating spectacle and extremism. My introduction to reality television was in Australia on a programme called *Surprise Wedding* (Granada 2004). The premise of the show was a surprise proposal from the female in an established heterosexual couple, and if successful, a subsequent wedding. The proposal was hidden from the males in the relationships, who were told their partners were participating in a televised makeover programme. This deception the producers believed would be a plausible enough explanation for their partner’s absence during the filming process and the need for them, the males, to be interviewed on camera about their relationships. It was evident in these background interviews that all the couples on the show had gone through, and some were still currently experiencing rather traumatic life experiences. The ultimate outcome for the production was the idea of a fairytale ending – a marriage – as a relationship band-aid to solve their problems. To add to the spectacle of the proposals, they were sprung upon the male contestants in an as-live recorded event with their friends and family present. This show

challenged the gender social script by allowing the females to be the instigators, the ones proposing. Still, the couples' personal stories were so complex and distressing that I personally found exposing their stories made them vulnerable and, at times, ridiculed, which made me feel uneasy. My introduction to being a participant in reality television production left me conflicted and questioning the legitimacy of broadcasting these "stories", a sentiment which continued throughout my time working within the genre. This study evolved from a quest to demystify and explain the techniques and practices industry professionals use to create the content, and in particular, about how gender is portrayed in the heteronormative dating shows in New Zealand.

1.5 Changes in reality television and changing audience expectations

When I was working at a large New Zealand production house known for creating a lot of reality television content, the staff, including me, were shown trailers or parts of episodes of new reality television formats from around the world in order to motivate a workforce that was under intense pressure making New Zealand reality content. In a quick succession of brief introductions and trailers for the shows, one stood out - the Dutch format *Adam Zkt. Eva* (2014-), known as *Adam Looking For Eve* in English. The programme premise is two naked contestants, a male and a female, who meet in a tropical location to see if they fall in love. The dating component of the show is further compromised by introducing more naked contestants further along as the series progresses. My immediate question was, why do they have to be nude? A rhetorical question: As a seasoned collaborator on these shows, I could see that it was due to titillation, notoriety, and publicity. This trend towards "adult" content is documented by Murray, quoting an American network executive as creating shows that "are more titillating and fanciful' in order to temper or contain the reception of its risqué episodes and to help sensationalize more staid subject matter" (as cited in Edgerton and Jones, 2008, p.269). Notably, *Adam Zkt. Eve* has not been made in New Zealand to date, but the format has been produced and transmitted in nine other countries. Watching some of the content of the Dutch show made me question the morals and legitimacy of producing and airing these types of shows.

Since the early 20th century, it has been argued that the widespread appeal of indiscriminate content and trivialities is contributing to the ongoing “dumbing down” of mass audiences (Bignell and Woods, 2023). Specifically in relation to television content as outlined by German philosopher Theodore Adorno in the 1950s:

By exposing the socio-psychological implications and mechanisms of television, often operating under the guise of fake realism, not only may the shows be improved, but, more important possibly, the public at large may be sensitized to the nefarious effect of some of these mechanisms. (1954, p.213).

Theorists such as Adorno have argued that, as a society, we need to be aware of the negative impact of consumerism, especially in relation to televised content and the need to educate audiences about its power. Looking at contemporary society, it is interesting to note that the word “brain rot” was Oxford’s word of the year 2024, the term being defined as “the supposed deterioration of a person’s mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging.” (Oxford University Press, 2024). The term “brain rot” was first found in Henry David Thoreau’s book *Walden* in 1854, to indicate the lack of intellectual effort (Heaton, 2024) but now refers to the dumbing down of a person’s brain who participates in excessive amount of viewing of “low-quality, low value” content online such as Alexey Gerasimov’s viral *Skibidi Toilet* video (Heaton, 2024). The term is most often related to Generation Alpha and Generation Z, who have or are growing up with YouTube and TikTok. These platforms are the major distributors of this type of online content. YouTube was described in 2018 by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green as “vernacular creativity” (as cited in Bignell and Woods, 2023, p.199); its content creators strive to engage communities of audiences that are encouraged to participate while rejecting traditional television production methods, instead creating their content by themselves or with a small team (Bignell and Woods, 2023). The younger generations are the main driving force of change in watching non-sensical content and entertainment, evolving into communities with a shared language based on the phrases and expressions invented for their entertainment, such as “Skibidi Toilet” (Heaton, 2024). This upcoming generation has expectations that are very different from Generation Z and older and will shape the screen industry and the content it produces in the future (Chuhai, 2024).

1.6 The end of reality television?

Within reality television, programme developers are working hard to keep up with the upcoming generation and ideas that seem so far-fetched that they border on the impossible are the growing trend, the latest installation being *Virgin Island* (Hulu 2025), which is literally what it says, a group of attractive virgins putting their choice to hold onto their virginity to the test by living in a bubble with other like-minded, highly attractive people of the opposite sex. This latest venture into the formats of reality journalist Stewart Heritage calls the “logical end point” of reality television (2024). Heritage further notes that a British adaption of the show called *Intimacy Retreat* had to change its casting criteria, as although undisclosed to the public how the production company was going to verify if they were virgins, the British production was unable to find enough contestants, so cast their net to include people who presumably have had sex but are celibate. The American version is in post-production and will be broadcast in 2025 (Heritage, 2024).

Personally, I do not share Heritage’s sentiment about hailing *Virgin Island* as the end of reality television; in fact, I highly doubt that will be the case, and I do not find televising people’s sexual discovery the most far-fetched idea. Instead, I refer to *Mars One*, the brainchild of Dutch billionaire Bas Lansdorp (Andreeva, 2014). Lansdorp’s idea is to fund a human emigration to Mars by broadcasting their journey as a reality show. The idea poses a plethora of questions – the idea of us as a species invading another planet and making it our home, the casting - who decides who we as a human race allow to populate another planet and the contestants’ rights, given that it would be a one-way mission, are just a few that come to mind. Currently the idea has been foiled (for now) as Lansdorp hasn’t found any funding for his idea but watch this space!

Chapter Three - Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine key definitions and themes that inform this study. It will start by discussing broadcast history and changes in viewing habits in New Zealand and then continue to explore the emergence of reality television, its origins and its place in society today. Further, it will discuss the genre's appeal and role in shaping societal norms and values. Finally, this chapter will investigate theoretical frameworks relevant to this study, focusing on established theories on gender representation and how stereotyping and gender bias can impact society. By investigating these themes, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive foundation for establishing the context of this research.

2.1 An insight into New Zealand's broadcast history and changes in viewing habits

Content viewing habits have changed significantly over the last sixty years. In New Zealand, television broadcasts started in June 1960, regionally at first, but the stations were unified into one state-owned station by 1969 (Horrocks, n.d.). It is estimated that more than half of the nation watched a delayed broadcast of the moon landing in 1969 (Horrocks, n.d.). The unified station underwent multiple name changes to eventually settling on TVNZ in 1980; eight years later, it was restructured as a state-owned enterprise in order to become profitable, and in 2001, it became a crown-owned company (Comrie, 1999, p.42). The state-owned broadcaster initially modelled itself on the BBC, which is non-commercial and public-serving. Still, TVNZ moved towards a more commercial approach in the mid-1980s in anticipation of deregulation of the industry (Comrie, 1999). The deregulation occurred in 1989, allowing licence fee money to be distributed to privately owned television stations and independent producers, cementing New Zealand as a commercially driven broadcast space (Comrie, 1999).

The deregulation saw the birth of privately owned TV3, later known as Three, followed by a number of other channels, including paid television services like Sky in 1990 and Māori Television, now known as Whakaata Māori, in 2004 (Horrocks, n.d.).

Comrie states that deregulation led to more diverse content, particularly in the news sector because commercial interests demanded less government-led news items and more content that would interest 'ordinary' New Zealanders (1999, p.51-52). However, it would seem the commercial interests since 2024 have moved away from news journalism, with Three closing its news sector in July 2024 and TVNZ's news department cutting staff on an ongoing basis (McKay, 2024).

Until the 1980s, television was destination viewing; audiences had to be in front of the television at specific times to watch a show. Destination viewing changed when technology such as video cassette recorders became more commonplace, allowing audiences the freedom to watch a programme when it suited them (Stewart, 2014, p.198). Advancements in technology keep changing the way audiences engage with content, from the studio-based shows that marked the early days of television to satellites allowing for content to be instantly shared worldwide (Horrocks, n.d.). Video on-demand was introduced in New Zealand through TVNZ in 2007, followed by a plethora of digital on-demand services being made available for viewers, such as Netflix and Neon (Horrocks, n.d.). Today's viewing habits are ever-evolving, and change is led by the younger generations, Generation Alpha, those born after 2012, and Generation Z, those born between 1997-2012, who favour global content channels such as YouTube and social media channels such as TikTok (NZonAir, 2024). However, with audiences in New Zealand aged 40+ still engaging with linear TV daily and TVNZ leading the way by being their favoured daily provider by almost half (48%) of audiences (NZonAir, 2024), it would indicate that the decline of traditional television stations is yet to come.

More importantly, with audiences becoming more fragmented, networks and broadcasters are now challenged to uphold commercial interests as continuing to be profit-making is more complex (Stewart, 2014). Profitability in content making lies in advertising revenue, but with technology allowing audiences to skip advertisements, an increase in product placements is evident in reality television shows in particular, such as judges in talent contests such as *New Zealand's Got Talent* having branded drinking cups in front of them with the name of the brand visible to the audience (Stewart, 2014). Some reality television shows, such as *The Block NZ*, have segments purposefully created to showcase the show's sponsors, such as

holding ‘planning meetings’ at a particular sandwich chain and house furniture only being purchased from a named store. From the productions’ perspective, these sponsored scenes are vital; the show’s sponsor would have a contract in place with the production company for an agreed amount of time of exposure over the series. The seconds of airtime related to the sponsor are tallied up in each episode to ensure the contractual obligations are met. The role of the producers and editors is to incorporate the sponsored segments without compromising the show’s integrity. New Zealand productions rely on broadcaster funding through advertising revenue or the government-funded New Zealand On Air grants, but changes are afoot. A drop in revenue and government funding is being proposed to be cut by 7.5% by the current coalition Government, which means that local productions are under threat (Brookes, 2024). In the year 2024, New Zealand frequently saw a lot of the media sector in the press about cutbacks, redundancies, and decommissioned local shows (Brookes, 2024). The CEOs of New Zealand’s production companies, such as Rachel Anthony of Greenstone TV, who make *Border Patrol* and *Dog Squad*, are calling for international distributors such as Netflix to be held to streaming quotas (Brookes, 2024). The streaming quota agreement is already in place in Australia, and it forces the distributors to invest in local productions (Greive, 2023). This financial boost allows for local content in Australia to be made. Despite New Zealand television content bringing in tens of millions of dollars’ worth of revenue a year with local reality shows such as *The Traitors NZ* available on BBC’s streaming platform (Brookes, 2024), the continued production of local content is in question. The industry is surviving on the coattails of international productions, such as *Spartacus*, that keep screen practitioners employed, with only a few local productions still going. The findings in the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment review of government investment in the screen sector report state that New Zealand’s “Local industry struggling while putting all the emphasis on international. Don’t want to be service industry.” (2023, p.31). The statement clearly indicates that the screen industry in New Zealand wants to return to making more local content rather than servicing international productions.

2.2 Reality television - how to define an ever-changing and expanding genre?

Globally, reality television is the dominant genre watched by viewers aged 12-34 years, topping 67% of the top 100 prime-time screenings (Watts, 2024). In 2020, reality television

was valued at US\$10.2 billion in the United States, which is just under NZ\$17 billion (Watts, 2024). Reality television is arguably a very profitable genre, but its origins continue to be debated by experts. In 2007, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) declared that no generally accepted definition had been established (ACMA, 2007, p. 29). Perhaps the lack of definition is because the genre seems to be ever-evolving, with new themes and concepts being developed which are then attributed to this genre. The reality television genre encompasses anything from cooking, makeovers, travel, dating and so on. The genre sees continuous growth globally, with reality television production increasing by more than 40% since 2021 and audiences in South Africa, India and China being the most avid watchers (Piana, 2024).

Looking at experts' definitions of the reality television genre and its origins, Clissold argues that it emerged from televised 'candid camera', where pranks on unsuspecting members of the public are filmed for comedic purposes. *Candid Camera* started airing in the United States in the late 1940s (Clissold, 2004). *Candid Camera* led the way in bringing everyday people to our screens during a time when the Hollywood star system set the standards for fame and beauty (Pellegrino, 2024, p.4). In other studies, its emergence has been attributed to developments in documentary filmmaking as defined by Scottish documentary pioneer John Grierson in the 1920s (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2020, p.287). Grierson coined the term "documentary" and argued that depicting "real life" surpasses any fictional filmmaking. Grierson argued his work was 'objective' (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2020, p.287), a viewpoint that could be disputed, as how can any recount be truly considered objective? Grierson neglected to consider that the selection of shots and editing processes are tools in which all recounts are framed in a subjective manner - subjective to the person or persons creating the recount - camera angles, framing, editing and selecting what content to capture, are just a few subjective decisions that the filmmaker/s make when creating their content. Therefore, rendering the notion of objective content/ recounts impossible, all reflections are arguably retold through the perspective of their makers (Berger, 1980, p.60-61).

It could be argued that the reality television genre is a hybrid within the entertainment genre, such as the candid camera shows and documentaries which aim to portray "real life". Most experts agree that reality television, as we know it today, originates in the programmes that emerged in the 1990s with MTV's *Real World* (1992-2017), produced by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray. The series which followed a group of young people living in a house

together and filmed 24/7, became a cultural phenomenon and the format was subsequently made in many countries. The premise of the show was imitated to form new rival shows, such as *Big Brother*.

The consensus from studies on reality television agrees that it is defined by capturing “real people” performing real-time actions, giving the genre a sense of authenticity and realness (Mast, 2016). In the aftermath of Hollywood’s “star system”, which dominated visual productions in the Western World, the notion of an everyday person given the limelight was considered novel and perhaps even a privilege. Since the emergence of smartphones with cameras in the mid-2000s, the accessibility of filmmaking tools has become commonplace. The invention of smartphones has evolved to allow anyone to access sophisticated video-capturing tools and record and share their own videos on platforms like YouTube. Jensen describes these platforms as global communities, “cities” with their own identities and languages (2020, p.99). Despite the public's ability to create and share their own content globally, the popularity and the amount of reality television being produced have not diminished. The 2021 ACMA report into viewers of relationship-based reality television programmes states that over half (51%) of the adult population of Australia have watched at least one episode of this sub-genre in the last season, with young women the most avid consumers (ACMA, 2021). It is most popular in the Australian women’s 18-34 age range, with 62% having viewed the latest season (ACMA, 2021). The popularity trend is echoed in New Zealand, where locally produced *Down for Love* created by Attitude Pictures in 2022, which features people with Down’s syndrome looking for love, won both the critics and the audience, even getting picked up for international distribution by Netflix and currently in production for its third series (Brooks, 2023). However, Pearson argues that New Zealand audiences’ fascination with the reality television genre comes from a desire to showcase our nature and geography through a post-colonial lens (2016). Pearson indicates that locally produced house renovation shows such as *Mitre 10 Dream Home* (1999–2013) derive from a post-colonial framework where “settler colonialism reenacts and reinforces anxious and tenuous claims to the landscape” (Pearson 2016, p.121). Pearson states that these types of shows’ objectives of “improving” the natural landscape by digging, altering and shaping are in opposition to Indigenous Māori wishes to leave the vista untouched (2016). Pearson continues to point out that the post-colonial lens allows audiences to accept, normalise and legitimise New Zealand’s colonial past, as the “improvements” mimic events of the colonial days when the natural landscape was transformed into British colonial spaces (2016). In the

cisgender dating programmes produced in New Zealand, landscapes and exciting locations are often featured, such as the dating scenarios in *The Bachelor*, which tend to be set in vineyards, high adrenalin environments such as bungee jumping facilities and visits to the volcanic Whakaari / White Island (Stuff, 2020). It could be argued that Pearson's position of framing our content through the post-colonial lens also applies to the locally produced romantic reality shows, as featuring manicured landscapes such as vineyards and humans prevailing over natural environments such as volcanoes and steep cliffs could be seen as legitimising the colonial ways of confronting and defeating the natural world.

2.3 Gender representation

Studies into gender representation argue that masculinity and femininity are acts of performance people are taught to fit into society (Butler, 2007). Steinman states: "I take masculine as a term of history and culture, not biology" (1992, p.200). The origins of gender as a taught attribute are also found in Oakley's study about the tradition of giving different coloured blankets to newborns, blue for boys and pink for girls (Oakley, 1972, p.173). Oakley argues that this is done to maintain and teach gender roles in society. It could also be interpreted as hospitals are contributing to the patriarchal hegemonic order that applies in the Western World. Even though blankets may have been neutralised in neo-natal wards now, fifty years since Oakley's statement, gender-based colour division is still prevalent in society. From clothing to toys, gendered colours are still used to target and indoctrinate archaic gender norms in children (Green et al., 2024). Separating gender this way can create connotations that females are softer and more vulnerable, with the colour pink associated with sensitivity and calmness, whereas blue signifying the male gender is bolder (Green et al., 2024). By applying colour codes from a young age, children are taught that the differences between the sexes in their Western world culture should be emphasised. The performative aspect of gender identities and portrayals is, according to Butler, "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders" (2007, p. 227). The acts that we learn to perform to conform to binary gender roles are distinct and opposites.

When ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle created the Pythagorean table of opposites using the terms “limit and unlimited, odd and even, one and plurality, right and left, male and female, resting and moving, straight and curved, light and darkness, good and bad, square and oblong” (circa 350 B.C.E., 986a22-6), the male and female are in direct opposites. The male is associated with light and good, as opposed to the female, bad and dark. This cultural bias is still prevalent in Western societies today, associating aspects of femininity as less desirable than male attributes. Feminist movements have tried to even out the playing field by demanding equality, which has been the principal aim of these movements, currently in its fifth wave. The term “Feminism 5.0” was coined by Sophie Walker, former leader of The Women’s Equality Party, when organising a protest to send a message to Donald Trump on his first day in office in 2017 to bring attention to Trump’s regressive policies in terms of female reproduction rights (Mulvey, 2018). The fifth-wave feminists continue to fight for women’s rights, but it must be acknowledged that some earlier feminist movements have claimed that equality has been attained in some areas. However, looking at the screen industry in New Zealand equality is in question in terms of pay parity. Overall, in New Zealand in December 2024, there was a gap of 8.2% in favour of males (Statistics New Zealand, 2024). In the screen industry, the gap is even more significant, ranging from 18% in favour of males in production to 22% in post-production (Watson, 2023). The difference in pay between the genders is evidence that New Zealand’s screen industry has yet to achieve equality.

Studies into gender representation in reality television point to the feminist concept of the “male gaze”; this concept refers to the viewpoint that the portrayal is done from a male perspective, reducing the woman to an object of male heterosexual desire (Mulvey, 1975). Flynn et al.’s 2015 research into 299 reality television programmes found that women cast members demonstrated higher rates of body exposure and that their bodies were more frequently exposed than those of their male counterparts, thereby portraying women as sexual objects (Flynn et al. 2015). One reason for this dichotomy is that with the gaze posited as being aligned with male sexual looking, to have males looked at sexually raises the possibility of a (still unacceptable) homosexual dynamic, “in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: the look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed.” (Neale as cited in Kirkham and Thumim, 1993, p.63).

In juxtaposition, males are allowed to express an interest in sexual partners but not actively be the object of that attention. In Ferris et al.'s analysis of 64 hours of reality dating shows, they found that the male contestants, on average, referred to females as sexual objects 5.9 times an hour as well as vocalising the desire to have sex 3.6 times an hour, making the males active rather than 'passive' participants in the heterosexual script (Ferris et al. 2007).

2.4 The heterosexual script

The heterosexual script, a doctrine introduced by sociologists Gagnon and Simon in the 1970s, consists of four parts that speak of gendered double standards. According to Kim et al. (2007), firstly, men's sexual experiences are valued over women's (p.147). Secondly, contrasting courting strategies mean that men are expected to actively seek sexual relationships while women should be passive (p.148). Thirdly, men take a non-committal stance to be in a relationship as opposed to women who prioritise being in a couple (p.148). And finally, echoing Neale's statement (as cited in Kirkham and Thumim, 1993), same-sex attraction between men is taboo, while it is acceptable for men to eroticize women (p.148). In summary, the heterosexual script dictates that men are encouraged to engage in sexual pursuits, objectify women, and prioritise physical intimacy over emotional connection. While women are expected to be sexually passive, use their appearance to attract men, and prioritise emotional bonding over physical intimacy (Kim et al., 2007).

An example of adhering to the heterosexual script in cisgender romantic reality television can be seen in the Swedish adaptation of *Love is Blind* (Mastiff /Netflix, 2024), where female contestant Emilia gets engaged sight unseen to male counterpart Lucas, and according to the premise of the show, they are then preparing for their upcoming wedding day. Throughout their interactions in the series, Emilia openly expresses her need for physical intimacy, stating that it is her "love language". Emilia expressing her longing and need for physical contact was an ongoing storyline in the series. It was played out in the interactions with other cast members and with her partner Lucas. It was also repeated in the individual interviews with Emilia and Lucas, which are used to intercut the interactions throughout the series. In contrast, none of the male contestants who openly spoke about their need for physical

intimacy had their comments repeated in a “previously” or flashback moment in their portrayal. After spending weeks of the social experiment on holiday or living with Lucas, Emilia was ultimately left at the altar and found herself alone. It could be argued that Emilia’s inability to fit into the conforms of the heterosexual script, as she was not portrayed as a virginal, passive archetype, instead boldly expressing sexual desire, was ultimately penalised by being abandoned by her fiancé. It could be argued that the double standard of gender portrayals is evident in the Swedish version of *Love is Blind*; it reinforces that women should not express sexual desires, as this will lead to rejection. In contrast, the men’s sexual desires were portrayed as “natural” and valid and therefore did not need to be repeated or legitimised.

Seabrook et al.’s study denotes that the reinforcement of the heterosexual script in content that young adults view may lead to negative impacts on society (2016). In New Zealand, the vast majority (81%) of 15–39-year-olds engage with global video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, on a daily basis (NZonAir, 2024). The streaming content figures for the same age group show that 56% stream content daily (NZonAir, 2024). Because young adults spend so much time with moving image content, “Television offers us a structure of attitudes, norms and values” (Allen, 1990, p.89), so being subjected to the double standards of power dynamics according to the heterosexual script may normalise sexual aggression and objectification of females (e.g., Bevens & Loughnan, 2019; Rudman & Mescher, 2012). A German study into the effects television content had on shaping attitudes towards relationship dynamics found that female viewers were more likely to alter their decisions and behaviour based on what they had been watching, with men almost unaffected (Hartmann, 2024). Hartmann’s study demonstrates that the gender and relationship portrayals on television are a significant component of how women shape their worldviews (2024). Hartmann acknowledges that his findings were drawn from content that had a majority audience of females (2024), but with young females being the majority audience for reality television programmes worldwide (Behm-Morawitz et al. 2016), it is an important aspect for content producers and society to consider. As a society, we need to question if we condone the gender representations reality television portrays and how such representations shape our young women’s worldviews.

2.5 Gender bias

Pearson argues that reality television is an ideal platform to reinforce and establish identities and representation (2016, p.120). Pearson's statement is presented in the light of creating binary identities related to cultural stereotypes, using an "us and them" classification such as "tidy Kiwi / dirty Asian" (Dürr, 2010, as cited in Pearson, 2016, p.125). Imposing negative connotations such as "dirty" to a group of people is harmful and displays a negative bias against this group. It could be argued that the use of bias, but within the context of gender representation, is prevalent in romantic dating shows.

In Denby's analysis of *Love Island UK*, she states that the male contestants are allowed to be portrayed as strong, active and taking charge, whereas women are expected to be passive and demure (2021). Denby argues that the contestants' interactions are portrayed in a way that overemphasises the female participants becoming emotional, such as the production editing a video of a male contestant, who was already partnered up on the show, welcoming another woman to the show in a way that made it appear as if he was pursuing the new woman. Then, sharing the video with his female on-screen partner, who became visibly upset (Denby, 2021). By creating exaggerated and sometimes irrational female characters, Denby argues that the gender portrayals on *Love Island UK* normalise gaslighting and shift blame onto the women (ibid). Denby's study indicates that there is significant gender bias in *Love Island UK* and that females are disadvantaged in these portrayals. Denby concludes by stating that the production manipulates the negative portrayals to titillate and ultimately increase the audience viewing numbers, making the production of the show more lucrative to the production company and the network (ibid). This study aims to uncover if the same production practices exist in New Zealand and whether the same gender bias applies to the portrayals of females and males in locally made programmes.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed theories and past studies relating to reality television and gender portrayals, and it is evident that in many Western cultures, the heterosexual script is

used to frame the content in this genre. The gender portrayals tend to depict men as dominant and active and women as submissive and emotional (Denby, 2021), with programmes showcasing a clear gender bias, as women who step out of the norm are penalised, such as Emilia from *Love is Blind Sweden*. It concurs that gender portrayals can negatively impact society by normalising reductive versions of identity. Therefore, this study aims to establish our practices in New Zealand: how do we portray gender in our locally made reality television content? Do we adhere to the same biases and follow the heterosexual script as scholars have discovered in other territories? This study aims to explore these theories within a New Zealand context and to establish how and if local productions follow the protocols of international productions within the same genre.

Chapter Three - Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the study's research approach and methodology. It will also describe the selection of material for the research excerpts, the procedure of recruiting research participants and the processes of the interviews. It will highlight the research participants' unique positions to explain their importance for this study.

3.1 Methodology

This study looks at gender portrayals from the viewpoint that television shapes the audience's perceptions of gender (e.g., Oppliger, 2007; Behm-Morawitz, 2016) and ideas of normalcy (Pozner, 2010). Reality television, as a genre, often presents itself as unscripted real-life scenarios from everyday people; this creates a notion of authenticity in their portrayals (Hall, 2009). The study further frames the concept of gender from Butler's perspective that they are roles that we learn to act and adhere to fit into heteronormative society (2007). Ellemers argues that society's gender stereotypes significantly influence our choices and experiences and can impact the traits we emphasise and even the careers we choose (2018). Bradley states that the concept of gender is changing (2013), but in contemporary Western society, including New Zealand, we still categorise males and females as opposing and different. We live in a society where it is still common to segregate clothes and toys into female and male genders, which conveys messages to children about the expectations of their societal roles and identities (Fine and Rush, 2018). Green et al. argue that this practice actively prevents girls from choosing a career in areas such as engineering; instead, women are expected to select careers in more nurturing fields, such as teaching or nursing (2024). There are many other expectations attached to the gender norms as dictated by patriarchal society, one being the emphasis on female physical attributes (Kim et al., 2007). In addition, Sidani's research states that reality television celebrities such as Kim Kardashian posting provocative selfies has led to the practice becoming normalised and imitated by minors (2023). The sexualisation of females leads to objectification, Sheppard's viewpoint says: "When girls are viewed as objects, they begin to

prioritize their physical attractiveness and sexual worthiness over their personal well-being.” (2022). Sidani’s theories surrounding female sexualisation and objectification as a result of engaging with reality television stars and content, combined with Sheppard’s insights into the negative impacts these have on young women’s sense of self-worth, highlight the importance of studying and deconstructing the gender portrayals within this genre in New Zealand.

The study of gender portrayal could have been applied to any format of reality television, but for this study, I have chosen to look at heteronormative dating shows. In New Zealand, there has been some research into locally made reality television productions, such as Rebecca Trelease’s case studies of *The Bachelor* and *Survivor* (2019) and Jane Roscoe’s study about the links between reality television and documentary production, neither of which delved directly into gender representation nor exclusively studying New Zealand made content. In my research, I have found studies into reality television shows from other Western cultures, for example, the United States, Great Britain, Australia and the Nordic countries have a tendency to stereotype their cast along gender lines, where males are stereotyped to promote traits like competitiveness, ambition, and leadership and are portrayed as dominant, independent, and willing to take risks (Archer and Lloyd, 1982, p. 40; Papp et al., 2022). In contrast, female participants tend to be stereotyped as emotional, caring, and passive (Denby, 2021). The stereotypes influence dating behaviours and sexual dynamics, constructing a heteronormative framework known as the heterosexual script (Kim et al., 2007). In this script, men are expected to pursue sexual encounters actively, prioritise physical attractiveness in women and avoid emotional commitment.

In contrast, women are expected to be sexually passive, set sexual boundaries, use appearance to attract men and prioritise emotional connection (Kim et al., 2007). This research aims to determine if the heterosexual script is present in New Zealand-made reality television shows. Further, it seeks to establish whether the New Zealand productions of these formats promote portrayals of one-dimensional characters that lean into heterosexual script stereotypes (Berman, 2022; Kim et al., 2007) and whether there is any gender bias in the portrayals. The research will be conducted by interviewing industry experts and discussing the production methods used to construct these shows.

3.2 Process

I conducted a series of interviews with industry experts, highly experienced screen professionals who have worked on reality television productions in New Zealand to gain industry insight from the practitioners as to their methods, techniques and motivations in order to understand the decision-making process for the gender portrayals on cisgender dating shows made locally. The requirement to be considered as a participant was to have worked on at least two New Zealand reality television shows. The semi-structured interviews were based on discussions about six specific excerpts selected from two New Zealand-made productions: *The Bachelor* Season 4 and *FBoy Island*. The questions that the semi-structured interviews were based on are attached in the appendix. Both programmes are competition-based international formats that have been produced by Warner Bros locally for the New Zealand market in 2021 and 2022, respectively.

The Bachelor (2002-present) is arguably one of the most successful reality television formats globally; it debuted in the United States in 2002 and has been made in almost forty countries, including New Zealand, to date, as well as sparked a multitude of spinoffs such as *The Bachelorette*, *Bachelor in Paradise* and *The Golden Bachelor* to name a few (IMDb, n.d.). The premise of the show centres around a male lead who is “dating” up to thirty female contestants who compete for his attention and affection while all co-habiting in a large, luxurious property dubbed The Bachelor Mansion. *The Bachelor* must eliminate contestants weekly by handing out a single rose to the ones he wishes to continue pursuing on the show, leaving the women without a rose to depart the series. Each season's finale centres around a marriage proposal where the male lead must decide between the final two female contestants. Essentially, the competition prize is a “happily ever after” with *The Bachelor*, but there have been other incentives too, such as jewellery for the chosen female.

FBoy Island (2021-present) is a more recent format; it was also created and debuted in the United States and has since been made in a handful of countries, including New Zealand. Three women, the leads, must determine who is a “nice guy”, who is looking for a romantic relationship, or an “Fboy”, who is motivated by the prize money. The women are simultaneously “dating” up to twenty-four male contestants, eliminating a number every week in an attempt to eradicate the “Fboys” off the “island”. The finale culminates in each woman picking a partner; if the women have chosen a “nice guy”, they split the prize money,

but if a woman has chosen a “FBoy”, he can decide to continue the relationship and split the money or leave the woman and take the cash for himself.

Having explained the premise of the formats, I will discuss specifics of the two New Zealand-made productions that are the focus of this study, in particular, episode 1 of *The Bachelor NZ*, season 4 (2021) and episode 1 *FBoy Island NZ* (2022). Some of the common attributes are that both are heterosexual dating reality shows with themes of romance, relationships and attraction. Both shows have hosts that lead the set parts of the show, such as the elimination, in which all current contestants gather in a “set space” for a selection process determined by the lead, or in the case of *FBoy Island*, the three women. In contrast to other competitive reality shows, such as *Survivor*, these dating programmes lack challenge-based activities; instead, the selection process is left to the leads. The majority of the content of these shows is made up of ‘actuality’, an industry term that refers to interactions between the contestants, which is intercut with individual interviews of the contestants, which are filmed throughout the filming process. One of the differences between the shows is that *The Bachelor* has an additional female narrator, as well as candid moments of the host, Art Green, commenting on the ‘actuality’. It should be noted that the opening episode of *FBoy Island NZ* was marred by controversy as one of the twenty men vying for the women’s attention was found to have been in court over a charge of suffocation of an intoxicated female. However, he had never disclosed this to the production company Warner Bros., as he had been acquitted. The revelation of the contestant’s charges meant that quick changes had to be made to the opening episode, and the charged contestant was effectively edited out of the show (e.g., Fisher, 2022; Venuto, 2022). Another note is the name of the show *FBoy Island*, which explicitly stands for Fuckboy Island. The term fuckboy originated from African-American slang and made popular through hip-hop music in the early 2000s (Zane, 2020). The definition of the word, as Zane describes it, is a man who uses women for their own pleasure without commitment and solely selfish needs (2020). A final note on *FBoy Island* is that the media reception of the show’s finale in The United States in 2021 was applauded by critics stating that the premise of women rallying together to eliminate “Fboys” was in fact “Fun Feminism” (Berman and Dockterman, 2021).

3.3 Research excerpts

In this research into *The Bachelor NZ* and *FBoy Island NZ*, I discussed specific scenes with the research participants; the material from the conversations is the basis of this content analysis. The purpose of the study is to gather evidence of the decision-making processes within the productions about the gender portrayals in these scenes, as well as demystifying the production process. Once the recorded interviews were concluded, these were transcribed, and I started to gather evidence from the research participants' comments. The findings were then analysed and interpreted to form the discussion of my study.

While the selection of the excerpts limits this research, they were carefully chosen because they show comparable segments from the two series.

Excerpt 1 introduces the audience to the three female leads on *FBoy Island*: Kiera, Kita, and Coco. They are greeted by the host, Shavaughn Ruakere, and answer questions presented by the host (*FBoy Island New Zealand*, Season 1, Episode 1, 00.03.50-00.05.02).

Excerpt 2 sees *The Bachelor* Moses meet the host, Art Green and answer questions about his feelings, intentions and hopes for the competition ahead (*The Bachelor New Zealand Series 4* Episode 1, 00.06.35-00.07.55).

Excerpt 3 sees the three women on *FBoy Island* being introduced to a group of men that are vying for their attention, an intercut sequence with brief introductions to sixteen of the male contestants (*FBoy Island New Zealand*, Season 1, Episode 1, 00.07.50-00.10.18).

Excerpt 4 sees *The Bachelor* being introduced to three of the females vying for his attention, an intercut sequence with brief introductions to the women (*The Bachelor New Zealand*, Series 4 Episode 1, 00.17.45-00.19.17).

Excerpt 5 sees an individual “date”, a one-on-one whisk me away scene on *FBoy Island* with Kiera and Dalton (*FBoy Island New Zealand*, Season 1, Episode 1, 00.24.05-00.25.07).

Excerpt 6 sees a one-on-one whisk me away “date” on *The Bachelor* with Moses and Amanda (*The Bachelor New Zealand*, Series 4 Episode 1, 00.53.23-00.55.40).

All participants were interviewed on Zoom, and all watched the six excerpts and answered the same questions. The questions were based on production techniques, decision-making processes, genre and gender portrayal, see appendix. The participants' responses to the questions form the basis of the findings of this research.

3.4 The research participants

The criteria for taking part in this research study was to have experience working on the types of shows that the study is focused on, unscripted formats that fall under the genre of reality television. The New Zealand screen industry has embraced the reality television genre, as it is a much more affordable alternative than scripted content such as drama. For example, looking at funding decisions by New Zealand on Air, an autonomous, government-funded organisation which aims to promote New Zealand creatives and content, *Eat Well For Less* series 5, a reality series, received \$513,471 in funding in July 2024 for six forty-four minute episodes, forty-four minutes being a commercial hour in broadcast television. In comparison, the local drama series *Small Town Scandal* received \$2,994,454 for eight twenty-two minute episodes, twenty-two minutes being a commercial half hour (NZonAir, 2024).

I wanted to interview subjects who had been part of creating this content in New Zealand for a New Zealand market to attain knowledge of the processes and decision-making involved in producing these shows. The minimum requirement was to have worked on at least two reality television shows produced in New Zealand.

Having worked in the industry for over twenty years, I tentatively spread the word about my intended study. I was happy to hear that there were industry experts who would potentially want to participate. The positive responses encouraged me to formalise the participant information and questions for the interviews, and after receiving approval from the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee, I began emailing out the information to a number of screen practitioners, all of whom shall remain anonymous because I did not want in any way to jeopardize their future employment possibilities. The material discussed in the interviews was historical; the content had been broadcast on New Zealand networks in 2021 and 2022, respectively and is still available to stream publicly in

New Zealand today. Ultimately, I interviewed five participants, all of whom met the criteria of having worked on reality shows in New Zealand. Participants were not chosen according to ethnicity or gender, nor did they financially or otherwise benefit from participating in this study. There were similarities in their backgrounds: all had a tertiary qualification within the Arts and had worked in the industry over multiple years.

3.5 The interviews

The study aims to give a broader understanding of reality television production methods by using excerpts of reality television content from *The Bachelor* and *FBoy Island*. The excerpts can be defined as case studies, elucidated by Merriam as “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (2009, p.40). The bounded system is the excerpts I have chosen, and by interviewing industry experts, it aims to attain a more holistic approach and a greater scope than simply using the author’s personal experience, whilst acknowledging my ethnographic input (McIntyre, 2018). The structure applied was semi-structured interviews, following Merriam’s guidelines of using more and less structured questions, applying flexibility when asking the questions, as well as ensuring that the core of the questions were asked of all the research participants (2009, p. 89). This approach was to assure that the data collected be a truthful “emerging worldview of the respondent, and (introduce) new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p.90). By repeating topics and themes that developed during the process it allowed for a deeper analysis of the data collected.

The research participants were interviewed individually online at a time that suited them. I had designed the interviews to be kept within the hour, as I couldn’t offer any compensation for their time. They had been sent the questions, see appendix, in advance but not the specific excerpts that were used. The interviews all extended to about ninety minutes, some taking two hours. After the one-hour mark, I offered to end the interview, but all participants were willing to continue.

The interviews were informal and started with a few questions about the participants’ work experiences, daily work tasks and whether they had undertaken any study relating to the screen industry before they began their careers.

The remainder of the interviews were based on the reality programme excerpts; the excerpts were screened uninterrupted, followed by six questions. Depending on the answers, this led to follow-up questions based on a particular theme or topic, which contributed to the added time used for the interviews. The questions were written to encourage open answers rather than agree/disagree statements (Merriam, 2009). The idea was to gain an understanding of their personal viewpoints as experts in the field, all with industry experience creating similar content for the New Zealand market. Given that all participants work or have previously worked with similar content, I wanted to keep the interviews more as discussions as I wanted them to enjoy the process or at least not feel that it was a chore or job that they had agreed to help on. Although I aimed to create a relaxed atmosphere for the interviews, I was mindful about adding any value judgments that I may have, instead adding to the discussions by reaffirming their viewpoints and steering them to keep to the framework of the interview but allowing more elaboration of themes and topics that they brought up.

During the interview process, it became evident that specific themes were reoccurring, some echoed by every participant, such as the content manipulation and the rigid control over the storylines and characters exerted by the productions, and the research participants were able to explain in detail about the techniques and processes for how these were executed. There were multiple keywords that the participants used to illustrate the production processes, such as format, stereotypes and 'reconstructing reality', which will be presented in the findings of this study.

The final part of the interview was a more general discussion of the excerpts, as well as comparing and contrasting the excerpts between the two different shows. The comparisons naturally came up during most of the interviews, so they were not exclusively discussed at the end of the interview.

Reflecting on the interview process, I think I succeeded in creating a relaxed and open atmosphere to allow my participants to speak freely and candidly. I deduce that they all enjoyed the process on the basis that none wanted to terminate the interview when we exceeded the estimated time. Another successful aspect was gaining a lot of data from their expert knowledge on the processes of the creation of reality television shows in New Zealand, as well as being able to establish themes and topics for the findings, as there were repeated elements in their answers.

What I could have done better was to share the excerpts in advance of the interviews, which I believe would have given even further depth to the interview discussions. However, screening the excerpts “live” exclusively during the interviews created impromptu conversations, making the findings more candid and less considered and imitating an audience member's experience of watching the shows, which most likely will only be once.

Before discussing the findings from the interviews and fully understanding the research participants' viewpoints, it is necessary to explain the roles and tasks that producers and editors fulfil in their professions in the reality television industry, which will be covered in the next chapter.

Chapter Four – Findings

4.0 Introduction: Findings

In this chapter I will discuss and outline the findings from the interviews conducted for this research. During the interview process, as well as through critical analysis of the interview transcripts, it became evident that there were common themes, concepts and techniques being used to create New Zealand reality television content. The purpose of this chapter is to explain in detail how and why producers and editors influence the portrayal of gendered identities in cisgender romantic reality television shows from a unique New Zealand outlook. Firstly, I will explain the research participants' roles and duties extensively to understand the tacit knowledge these experts bring to this research.

4.1 The roles of producer and editor in reality television in New Zealand

A report into viewer responses to relationship-based reality television in Australia found that a vast majority (87%) of the respondents “believe editing occurs to portray participants (the cast) in a certain way”, and almost three-quarters (74%) of the respondents “believe the producers control the content” (ACMA, 2021, p.2). These statistics indicate that reality television audiences understand that there are factors that shape the programmes they are watching, but what do the roles of editor and producer of reality television shows entail?

4.2 The role of a producer in reality television

This study is informed by interviews with screen industry professionals, editors and producers who work or have worked in reality television in New Zealand.

Billinge defines the role of a producer from a British perspective as the person who “handles many of the editorial and creative aspects of the film’s post-production. This will include working with the editor to structure the film and write the script.” (2017, p.223). Billinge further explains that in the United States, the producer’s role also includes handling the

production and staff budget, including hiring freelancers (2017, p.223). From my experience in New Zealand, the role of a producer, or post-producer in particular, aligns very closely with Billinge's descriptions. In addition, in New Zealand, producers sometimes fulfil the role of producer director, which is defined by ScreenSkills as "Producer directors do two jobs at once: creating and producing the content while also directing the action." (2024).

The producer directors are often involved in the filming of the series, as well as the post-production. The duality in the role helps the information from the filming to translate into the post-production and the editing process. Therefore, producer directors' influence over the content can start during the filming. A recount into the extent of this influence, as told by Sarah Gertrude Shapiro from her time as producer director on the American *The Bachelor*:

"The night they were going to get dumped, I would go to the hotel room where they were staying and say, 'I'm going to lose my job for telling you this, but he's going to pick you—he's going to propose.'" (Max, 2016)

Shapiro's admission clearly conveys the manipulation of the storylines; by lying to the contestants, i.e. the women vying for *The Bachelor*'s attention about their prospects of being chosen, she was able to create false hope for the narratives. Presumably, a contestant feeling dejected or non-committal over the selection process would not create the jeopardy in the elimination process the production seeks. Shapiro further elaborated by revealing that she kept lemons and jalapenos in her pockets during the filming so that she could rub the acidic substance into her own eyes in order to simulate tears to trigger the contestants (Max, 2016). Shapiro famously used her three years of experience from the American *The Bachelor* to produce the satire *UnREAL*, about a fictional romantic dating show.

The practice of using producer directors can benefit the production as it enables the information from the filming to be brought to the post-production phase of the project, which can speed up the editing process. The post-production phase, as described by one of the research participants who works as a producer director: "trawling through sometimes hours and hours of footage and then putting down into block cuts (...) putting down the selects to create a storyline and then passing on to the editor to make it more presentable." (Research Participant 1).

In summary, the role of a producer in reality television, drawing on Billinge's definition, is that a producer oversees the editorial and creative aspects of post-production, structuring content, scripting, managing budgets, and hiring staff (2017). In New Zealand, producers often also act as producer directors, handling both content creation and directing. The dual role of producer directors streamlines the transition from filming to post-production as they organise footage, create storylines, and collaborate with editors to finalise episodes.

4.3 The role of an editor in reality television

Another key component when creating reality television is the role of the editor. A professional editor needs to have both technical skills and a creative mind. The editor, as defined by Billinge:

“works with footage gathered by the director, making selections and combining these shots along with other elements into sequences that ultimately constitute the finished film. The editor's job is both technical and creative: working with images, dialogue, graphics, music, sound effects and other elements to create a compelling and meaningful experience for the audience. The editor is the last person in the filmmaking assembly line and so is the ultimate determinant of what the audience will see in terms of both content and context.” (2017, p. 214)

The role as described by ScreenSkills: “Editors are some of the most important people in TV programmes, commercials and films. They can have a huge impact on the success of the production.” (2024). An editor needs to have the technical skills to operate the software and sometimes set up the hardware to create a workable set up, often with several monitors, a computer and occasionally audio equipment such as mixing desks and microphones. Editors need to be able to securely transfer footage from the filming to software that allows them to use the material for edit, sometimes referred to as digitizing or ingesting the rushes, but they also need to be creative storytellers.

“Editing is not, as many industry outsiders might think, a job that simply consists of cutting out ‘the bad bits.’ In a world which at times seems predominantly left-brain orientated, editing is a remarkable antidote. It is both analytical and system-orientated (left-brained) and creative free-thinking (right-brained).” (Billinge, 2017, p. 8)

Billinge’s sentiment was echoed by one of the research participants who works as an editor who stated:

“I work with a sort of producer, director or story producer to create narrative, to create stories within the format of the show. And so that involves getting the footage that is filmed and sort of getting an idea of what the content is and trying to get an outline from the producer to create the story and then basically collaborating using what's there, using the pictures and the words and as well as music and sometimes voiceover to tell the story that we want to tell to fit the programme.” (Research Participant 4)

The technical element of operating the software and hardware can be learnt, but the creative aspect of editing is highly individual. “Editing is highly idiosyncratic. The same material given to a different editor is likely to result in an entirely different film” (Billinge, 2017, p.8) Given the individual input editors contribute to a project, producers often have favourite editors that they like to work with. Creating content is a close-knit collaboration process. Producers usually base their choices of editors on their ability to collaborate most effectively, using each other’s skills to the best of their capabilities. The ultimate goal for editors and producers is to create the best possible output (Billinge, 2017, p.174), as the final outputs are then credited to them. Credits are important as they allow for recognition and future employment opportunities for screen workers who, in New Zealand, primarily work as freelancers (Toi Mai, 2023, p. 2).

One research participant who works as an editor stated: “I’m quite lucky that I work with a lot of people that give me a lot of creative control.” (Participant 5). This creative control and industry recognition of the influence an editor has within the unscripted television industry has created another hybrid role, the one of producer editor or preditor as it is known in the industry. The term preditor as defined by Erhart and Dooley as “an editor who is given footage and must formulate an episode’s storyline/s, without input or instruction from a

supervising producer or from a director who was hired during production, and without additional financial compensation” (2022).

The benefits a predictor can bring to a production are not only financial and can speed up the editing process, but the role also allows for self-fulfilment for the editors, as having autonomy over the project creates a sense of satisfaction and ownership (Erhart and Dooley, 2022). As confirmed by one of the research participants: “I get a lot of creative control. And I spend a lot of time almost producing things as well. So yeah, my job is not just putting things together, but crafting.” (Participant 5).

4.4 Summary: The roles of producers and editors in reality television in New Zealand

In summary, in the New Zealand screen industry, the traditional roles and tasks of producers and editors can be defined as producers’ responsibilities, which include overseeing post-production, collaborating with editors to structure content, and sometimes being in charge of budgeting and staffing. The editors’ responsibilities lie in being the technical expert - shaping the footage by cutting and pasting material to build the stories intended and making creative decisions on which footage to use and when. With tacit knowledge, these experts bring a wealth of knowledge and understanding of what “works” for this type of content, becoming highly skilled and efficient at shaping the narratives and characters to suit the production. The trend is towards more hybrid roles, seeing the rise of producer directors and producer editors as jobs become more scarce and budgets cut (RNZ, 2024). These are still specialised skilled roles but have adapted to fulfil more than one specialisation.

4.5 Introduction: Hypersexualisation

The purpose of reality television is to entertain audiences: dating programmes like *Love is Blind* dominate television ratings and social media conversations, attracting millions of viewers globally (Flixpatrol, 2024). *Love Island UK* (2015-) has run for eleven seasons to

date and sparked multiple spinoffs worldwide. In June 2024, it had a record audience of 2.2 million in Britain for its latest season premiere (David, 2024). Behind the allure of love, dating, and drama, studies from the United States point out that reality television's depictions include hypersexualisation of participants and their representation through the frames of regressive gender roles. These shows often reinforce societal stereotypes, focusing on superficial traits such as physical appearance and trivial aspects of sociability, particularly among female contestants (Kim et al., 2007). In this chapter, the aim is to establish whether New Zealand-produced programmes of these formats contain hypersexualisation and reductive gender portrayals.

4.6 Hypersexualisation in reality television

Hypersexualisation refers to the process of excessively emphasising or overvaluing a person's sexual attributes to the detriment of other qualities, such as intelligence, emotional depth, or individual personality (Sheppard, 2022). Sidani (2023) states that women's bodies have been subjected to change and manipulation to appease the patriarchy through means of infantilisation such as the trend for hairless bodies, imitating a young child as well as very young females choosing to wear provocative clothing to satisfy the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). In reality television, hypersexualisation can be a deliberate choice, one that producers believe appeals to specific audience demographics, particularly young viewers. Audience figures in New Zealand for 2024 reveal that 15–39-year-olds are some of the most prolific media consumers, with 81% engaging with global video-sharing platforms every day and half viewing content on Netflix daily (51% of those aged 15–24, and 49% of 30–44-year-olds) (NZonAir, 2024). Reality television shows, especially those focused on dating and romance, have a history of portraying women in a hypersexualised manner, emphasising their physical attributes far more than their personalities or intellectual qualities. Grumbein and Goodman describe the women as “Barbie” dolls (Armstrong, 2013, p.113). Sociologist Danielle J. Lindemann further defines these portrayals by stating that female contestants on *The Bachelor* are showcasing conventional representations of femininity (2022), with their formal attire and heavily made-up faces and hair. It could be argued that they are, according to Butler, performing roles and acting out identities that conform to the heteronormative hegemonic order (2007). The women on *FBoy Island* are acting out roles that could be

interpreted as less conservative, given that the premise of the show is that the female leads have to determine who the “good boys” are and eliminate the “FBoys”, the “bad boys”, whilst fundamentally and ultimately looking for a romantic connection.

4.7 Evidence of hypersexualisation in the research excerpts

In the first excerpt I shared with the research participants, the women’s introduction on *FBoy Island*, the participants noted that the women’s physical attributes were emphasised. Their appearance was accentuated by having them dressed in revealing clothing and sitting on stools as if they were perching. More than one participant noted that it was as if they were sitting on pedestals, making them appear vulnerable while emphasising their physical attributes by using camera angles from their knees up, showcasing their midriffs and low-cut necklines. The three female contestants are all wearing strappy heels and summery colours; Kita’s outfit is bright green, reminiscent of a sarong that has been tied to cover her areolas but with her cleavage and stomach bare. Kiera’s dress is a vivid pink, about mid-thigh length, with a plunging neckline and a cutout under her breasts. Coco’s dress is a more muted beige colour, a sleeveless figure-hugging tube dress, leaving her neckline bare and about mid-thigh length. The host, Shavaughn, is also in high heels and a figure-hugging mid-thigh length dress in vivid pink with an open neckline to her belly button. One research participant even exclaimed: “Shavaughn’s neckline is just like ridiculous. Yeah. That whole outfit is like, are you kidding me?” (Research Participant 2, Excerpt 1 *FBoy Island*).

Misha Kavka states that reality television blurs the boundaries of authentic performances and staged realities, often transgressing into pornographic content to entice and titillate audiences (2017). The participant’s response to Shavaughn’s clothing as “ridiculous” indicates that this research participant considers that a line has been crossed, suggesting that it is pornographic as opposed to the more conservative attire of the females portrayed on *The Bachelor* (Lindemann, 2022).

The term “eye candy” was used by multiple participants to describe the women, and Participant 5 noted that they were dressed “sluttily”. The definition of slutty, as explained by Armstrong et al. (2014), is a judgmental term relating to women that engage in casual sexual activity, often from a low-status background (p.101). Evans states that female reality television stars in the United Kingdom that have been portrayed in a hypersexualised manner

sometimes turn to glamour modelling, which can have the connotation of being “trashy, slutty, vulgar” to the parts of society that condemn such ways of obtaining an income (2017, p. 251). In describing the portrayal of the female leads in the research excerpt from *FBoy Island*, the research participant further added that the disparaging term “slutty” is commonly used during the production process of these types of shows. The participant stated:

Participant 5: Probably so that the eye candy, like the show, is just aimed at, and I guess with the title (*FBoy Island*) as well. It quite clearly says that that they're looking to make a show that is just entirely about sex. They're not looking necessarily for relationships. They're going to be looking for, yeah, eye candy. I think that they're trying to get young people to watch the show. They just want to ogle at the women, and that's probably why the women have been told to be dressed or dressed like that, that they are. Yeah.

Researcher: So that's the decision. That's what drives these decisions?
Do you think the audience...

Participant 5: Or to get the audience, or from the production. Oh, I definitely think that's for the production. I think they would have picked, they would definitely have been picked contestants. They would have looked at people, and they have to be of a certain beauty standard and be able to dress... which I have heard in working on shows similar “sluttily”.

Researcher: Yeah, okay.

Participant 5: Literally described as dressed slutty, and that's what that seems like what they've done on that.

...

Researcher: Yes, okay, just a curious about that word term you use slutty, is that one? Is that one that's kind of thrown around in the production office, or the, you know, while making these shows, or?

Participant 5: And not by me.

Researcher: No, no! I'm not.

Participant 5: Actually, I really hate it. But yes, I have. I have heard that. And I've been working on the shows. I've seen that typical double standard that... women can be (implied under) ... If women describe how many men they've slept with, that's always seemed like “Oh, gosh! She's had too many”. But, guys, it's kind of like, a yeah, a high five. Wow, you did great! And wow, I'm always... It always surprises me that that's still, that still is a thing. And I've I have actually had to put that in an episode.

(Research Participant 5 on Excerpt 1, *FBoy Island*)

The research participant's statement confirms that New Zealand productions follow the same tropes of representing women in an over-sexualised manner as their international counterparts (Kavka, 2017). The research participant's assertion also conveys that the portrayals of the females in revealing, suggestive attire are driven by and encouraged by the production. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the productions adhere to a double standard in portraying men's and women's sexuality. The statement dictates that men are allowed and encouraged to be sexually active, whilst women are not. Evidence of double standards in sexual prowess between males and females in New Zealand-produced reality television shows was documented in 2018 by the George FM team in relation to *Heartbreak Island* Season 1. *Heartbreak Island* is a New Zealand-produced dating show with an original format created by Bettina Hollings and Darryl McEwen and filmed in Fiji. The programme caused controversial headlines for its “popularity” contest, ranking male and female contestants purely on their looks (NZ Herald, 2018). Despite ranking both genders, the explicit disparity between males and females, as stated by the George FM team, was evident from episode 1, as male contestant Harry had a romantic liaison with female contestant Wei-Ting (2018). Wei-Ting subsequently went on to be rejected by Harry in the coupling up process because, in his words, “I'm not going to get with someone that easy” (ibid). His statement allowed Harry, although an active participant in their encounter, to voice a judgemental comment about Wei-Ting while she was portrayed as a passive bystander (*Heartbreak Island*, 2018). The George FM team calls out this double standard by noting that Harry “is also THAT easy. Takes two to tango, love.” (George FM team, 2018). The George FM team labelled the show as “one of the worst fucking TV shows NZ has made” (2018).

It is common practice in the industry to “dress” contestants, but it goes beyond the clothes the audience sees on screen. In *The Guardian* interview with an anonymous contestant from an

Australian reality television show, they stated that they had been given clothes they would not normally wear by the production (Hunt, 2017). According to the anonymous contestant, the production went as far as providing another contestant with the wrong prescription glasses and swapping another contestant's guitar for a ukulele, all to create the aesthetic vision and characters the production determined would fit their vision of the show (Hunt, 2017).

The research participants in this study declared that the practice of "dressing" contestants is also practised in New Zealand-made productions. The research participants stated that the production's justification for the female leads in *FBoy Island* wearing revealing clothes would have been the chosen setting for this introductory scene, i.e. by the pool on a tropical island. The setting is used to normalise the women's low-cut attire to create a voyeuristic viewing experience. The tropical setting and the age range of the contestants, which is from late teens to early thirties, are used to de-formalise the attire to be more exposed.

"They're by a pool, they're in tropical beach land, so of course they have to have their little clothes off. Yeah, but by a pool. It's like, 'okay.'"

(Research Participant 5 on Excerpt 1, *FBoy Island*)

In discussing Excerpt 1, *FBoy Island*, in more detail, all research participants confirmed that in this New Zealand production, showcasing women's bodies in this way is not incidental but a fundamental aspect of the show's aesthetic and the production's vision. The camera angles, the setting and the editing all work together to sexualise the women in a way that reduces them to their bodies. Their interactions, while superficially centred around forming romantic connections, are framed in ways that foreground sexual chemistry over deeper emotional or intellectual connections, with the research participants pointing out *FBoy Island's* Coco's line about "Who wants to pick vanilla? And all nice guys tend to be vanilla", as an example of this. Coco's line suggests that a man with genuine romantic intentions may not be attractive to her, reinforcing the importance of physical attributes and hypersexualises the male contestants.

In contrast, in the equivalent scene of *The Bachelor*, where the audience meets *The Bachelor* in his introductory segment with the presenter, the two men meet outside a large house, or *The Bachelor* mansion, as it is referred to in the show. *The Bachelor* Moses, a 30-year-old New Zealand Samoan, is fully dressed in a three-piece dark grey suit, buttoned up white formal shirt with a muted pink and grey bow tie. The host, Art, who was New Zealand's first

Bachelor in 2015, is in a formal blue two-piece suit and a white shirt with a few of the top buttons undone. The slight informality of that last detail is an index of his experience and confidence as someone who previously found a life partner from the programme and is now guiding the latest Bachelor. In his research into Māori and Pasifika men's portrayal in New Zealand advertising, Bannister denotes that the portrayals of these ethnicities centre around "fatherhood" (2022, p. 51). The paternal representation signifies attributes of being older and wiser, which could explain the formal attire of our Pacific Bachelor. Bannister furthermore argues that the relationship between Māori / Pasifika and Pākehā men is centred around the ethnic "welcoming" the white man symbolically onto the land (2022). However, this power dynamic is in stark contrast in *The Bachelor* excerpt, where the scene portrays the Pākehā host, Art Green, as the dominant one, literally welcoming Moses to the show.

The research participants further commented on discrepancies in power dynamics between the two programmes. They noted the difference in the portrayal of the male Bachelor compared to the women on *FBoy Island*, noting that the former maintains an air of respectability and emotional control. "They are looking really well presented. So they're putting their best version of themselves forward, like who doesn't love a guy that looks well-dressed, like it says a lot about, about them."

(Research Participant 1, Excerpt 2 *The Bachelor*)

It could be argued that *The Bachelor*, being a more conventional romantic reality series (Lindemann, 2022), explains the formal attire, but the female contestants in this show are also reduced to their looks, or rather, the initial shots tease the audience about their physical attributes with a titillating shot of a slim, high-heeled foot stepping out of a car.

In the fourth excerpt, where we meet three of the female contestants vying for *The Bachelor's* attention, the hypersexualisation of the female contestants becomes more pronounced. After viewing Excerpt 4 from *The Bachelor*, all participants commented that the women's physical appearance became the focus point of the scene - the women were all in elaborate gowns with their makeup and hair meticulously styled to present a fantasy of feminine beauty. The hyper-focus on appearance is cemented when *The Bachelor* refers to one of the women as "Lady in white", reducing her being to an item of clothing. Sidani's study points to the demeaning and adverse effects impacted on females by referring to them as objects (2023). Sidani further explains that the hypersexualisation of women:

has a myriad of negative impacts on females and ultimately only serves the patriarchy. Hypersexualizing girls is setting them up to carry a lot of trauma and unnecessary societal pressures that boys do not ever have to face or carry (2023, p.196).

The research participants agreed that the portrayals of women in the New Zealand version of *The Bachelor* reinforce the heteronormative patriarchal order.

“He is the one in control, obviously, and this, he's still the one in control. They come to him. They get, you know, they come to him. He's still dressed in a suit. They've all got this skimpy skintight dresses on every single one of them.”

(Research Participant 2 on Excerpt 4 *The Bachelor*)

The comments surrounding the nature of the women's portrayals in *The Bachelor* echoed Sidani's theories about the negative impacts of objectification (2023). Participants agreed that this hypersexualisation of females has significant implications on how women are perceived, both by other contestants and by the audience. By framing women as objects of desire, these shows reinforce the notion that a woman's worth lies primarily in her appearance and sexual attractiveness. Their inner lives, ambitions, and personalities are downplayed, leading to a superficial understanding of who they are. One participant's comment on the scene was:

“Interesting that he gets to meet them one by one ... They're quite objectified to the women. Again, a conveyor belt of women or how did he describe it? I was like. Oh, he just described it like there were objects. He was being shown candy or something.”

(Research Participant 5 on Excerpt 4 *The Bachelor*)

Although hypersexualisation primarily affects the portrayal of women, reality television also perpetuates damaging stereotypes about men. Male contestants, while expected to be physically attractive, are allowed a broader range of emotional expression; they can be romantic, funny, assertive, confident, and loyal (Archer and Lloyd, 1982, p. 40), whereas women are often confined to roles defined by their desirability and availability.

After watching excerpt 3 from *FBoy Island*, the participants pointed out that the male contestants were allowed to be different, funny, and shy, allowing “different flavours” of masculinity to be portrayed.

“The men are just absolutely like you've got all the different characters, all the different flavours, the funny guys, the entertaining, the cheesy guys. They're all definitely hitting one of every kind of guy you might've liked, women might've dated maybe in their lifetime.”

(Research Participant 1 on Excerpt 3 *FBoy Island*)

They also noted that the male contestants were categorised as either “FBoys” or “Nice Guys,” playing into the archetypal binary of the “bad boy” versus the “good guy”. This dichotomy oversimplifies male behaviour, but it also highlights the double standards in how male and female sexuality are portrayed. At this early stage in the competition, it is not explicitly revealed to the audience who falls into which category. Still, there are some blatant hints, as explained by research participants - the men categorized as “FBoys” exude sexual confidence.

“And then it's just the ones that are just balls out. Like getting naked. That's like, they're really laying it out on the table. There's some shameless. Yeah, I think they're definitely hitting a lot of different masculine (types).”

(Research Participant 1 on Excerpt 3 *FBoy Island*)

In analysing gender portrayals in New Zealand commercials, Desmarais concluded that masculinity was portrayed by mental and physical strength displays, usually in the context of sporting prowess (2007, p.215). The segment that highlighted this the most for the research participants was the introduction of *FBoy Island* contestant Dalton, a loud and proud male entertainer. His introduction is a provocative dance culminating in him tearing off his singlet and throwing it into Kiera’s lap. This segment evoked a lot of discussion about the construction and the reasoning behind the choices the production had made, in what the participants all agreed was manipulated to appear as if he chose Kiera, an act of confidence and conquest. Dalton’s actions are in stark contrast to the passivity of the women on *FBoy Island*, seated on the stools as if awaiting to be wooed, a scene that could be argued is reinforcing regressive gender stereotypes.

“That top was ripped off. It wasn't going anywhere near her lap as they threw it across the pool on the wide shot. And there it was, landing in her lap, and she was so surprised.

It was like, yeah, it was very fake. “

(Research Participant 3 on Excerpt 3 *FBoy Island*)

Female contestants must balance being both desirable and “wifely,” a tightrope that forces them to present a carefully curated version of themselves. They must be sexy enough to stand out among other contestants but virtuous enough to be considered worthy of a long-term relationship (Ward et al., 2022, p.14). This gender dynamic reinforces outdated notions of masculinity and femininity. The men are allowed to be multi-dimensional, while women are often reduced to tropes - either the desirable temptress or the virtuous wife.

“I think we're sort of experiencing it through Moses’ (the male) point of view, so he's sort of likeable to us and funny and ... but for the women, I think, again, it's very visual. So, you know, we see shots of .. it's very much what they're wearing and how they look.”

(Research Participant 4 on Excerpt 4 *The Bachelor*)

“It's really about their looks and him watching them arrive, and it's his view.”

(Research Participant 2 on Excerpt 3 *The Bachelor*)

Participants expressed that both the New Zealand-made programmes of this study reinforced negative and unrealistic gender portrayals, in particular for the females, who were characterised by their ability to be attractive and appealing to men. This binary view of gender roles not only limits how contestants behave but also reinforces harmful stereotypes for viewers.

4.8 The motivation for using hypersexualisation in reality television

The hypersexualisation of female and male contestants and the reinforcement of reductive gender roles in reality television is not accidental but is driven by apparent commercial interests. Dobscha et al. explain that terms of marketing tropes of what today may be considered offensive, such as using scantily clad women for promotional purposes, may be reduced (2025). Still, advertising is “now slanted toward the more implicit use of sex appeal that favours heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy.” (Dobscha et al., 2025, p.51). Through

analysis of the interviews conducted, it is evident that New Zealand productions are acutely aware of reality television being a business, and producers believe that the most marketable elements are sex, drama and conflict.

“I think that's just sort of all about engagement, audience engagement and making it more dramatic or amusing or interesting, because if it's boring, no one's going to want to watch.”
(Research Participant 1 in summary of excerpts)

“I suppose the decisions really is who's going to watch it is young men want to see young women and young women also want to see something sexy. So I don't know, women want to be that, guys want to watch that or fuck that. There's no, nobody watching a show called *FBoy Island* or whatever is watching it for intellectual stimulation.”
(Research Participant 2 in summary of excerpts)

These shows are designed to attract viewers, and one of the most reliable ways to do so is by emphasising physical attractiveness and sensational behaviour. Women are often cast because they fit a particular mould of conventional beauty, and they are styled in ways that emphasise their sexual appeal (Grumbein and Goodman, as cited in Armstrong, 2013). Their outfits, makeup, and even the settings of these shows, the beach, tropical islands, or luxurious villas, are all part of the formula to attract a target demographic that is drawn to visual and sexual stimuli.

Casting directors seek out individuals who fit specific beauty standards, selecting women and men who are physically attractive, athletic, and conform to conventional beauty ideals. Choosing contestants that fit traditional beauty standards ensures that the show remains visually appealing and feeds into viewers' desire for aspirational beauty. The producers also know that casting attractive people in highly sexualized scenarios retains audiences and, therefore, revenue (Buontempo, 2024). Two of the participants in my study indicated that the contestants willingly choose to dress and behave in an overtly sexual manner in order to gain fame and further leverage their hypersexuality on social media, becoming influencers who profit from brand partnerships with companies that sell beauty, fitness, and fashion products. Nygaard states that:

The prevalence of reality programming has also trained potential contestants in the behavioral displays that get the most coverage; those seeking fame are quick to imitate such behavior and even to embody particular stereotypes. (2011, p.12)

Nygaard's quote echoes Evans's (2017) statement that contestants use their reality television persona, represented by their bodies and their external appearance, as a commodity that can be monetised. This research into the New Zealand cisgender dating shows indicates that contestants may be drawn to be cast in these types of programmes as a monetary incentive.

4.9 Conclusion: Hypersexualisation

In summary, by examining the prevalence of hypersexualisation in gender portrayals in New Zealand reality television shows, it is evident that the New Zealand-produced reality television productions of *FBoy Island* and *The Bachelor* do follow their international counterparts by presenting superficial and overtly sexualised gender representations. In discussions with experts in the field and looking in detail at the New Zealand productions it was clear that the women's portrayals were characterised predominantly with emphasis on their physical attributes and their ability to be appealing to men. The research participants further stated that the females were objectified and that the narratives were mainly told through a male voyeuristic lens reinforcing patriarchal norms. Further discussion concluded that these portrayals could be deemed to be reinforcing negative and unrealistic gender stereotypes.

4.10 Introduction: Control

Audiences may perceive reality television as unscripted, spontaneous entertainment that gives viewers a glimpse into the lives of its partakers. However, the truth behind these shows is far more controlled than the "reality" they claim to represent. This chapter will discuss how producers and editors (themselves employees of commercial or state media companies) wield control over the content of reality television, shaping narratives, constructing characters, and selectively editing footage to create a specific story.

4.11 Casting for reality television

The pre-production in reality television shows is a vital part of the construction process. Pre-production refers to the planning process before filming begins, which includes the casting process. The selection of contestants is one of the most significant ways the production company can steer the show's direction. Casting can be an overt process with advertising in the form of a call-out on the production company's and/or the network's website, often with a link to apply. The casting can be more of a covert operation, targeting individuals through other means, such as social media (Derschowitz, 2022). Casting directors may scroll through social media and contact individuals that they deem suitable for their show, even using fake profiles on dating apps to recruit talent for romantic reality television shows. The production justifies the fake profiles with the excuse that the people approached are already "looking for love", with a promise to meet potential matches if they agree to be on the show. I have personally worked on New Zealand productions where this technique has been successful in finding talent for the show. Technology has sped up the casting process – online meetings and self-made casting videos are quickly replacing the in-person casting studio meeting (Derschowitz, 2022). The cast members are chosen not just for their ability to compete or fit the show's premise but for their potential to generate drama, emotional conflict, or comedy. Ye Hee Lee explains that the aim is to "Make reality interesting" (2009). Producers are looking for people who can express themselves in a way that comes across as intriguing yet genuine and honest to the audience (Ye Hee Lee, 2009). In reality television, often the narratives and storylines are told through formal interviews and interactions the cast expresses on set, so having the ability to be able to speak about your experiences, motives

and feelings is key to being cast within the genre. David O'Connor, casting director of Chicago's O'Connor Casting Co, points out that "if you don't have anything interesting to say, you're not TV material" (Ye Hee Lee, 2009). The premise of reality television is often the interaction of cast members, hence the careful consideration of who the producers select for the show. Casting choices are made with certain character archetypes in mind - villains, heroes, hopeless romantics, or comedic relief. Producers know that by populating a show with specific personalities, they can shape how events will unfold. These personality traits are specific to the genre of reality that is being produced. David O'Connor points out that for a talent quest such as *New Zealand's Got Talent* or *Pop Idol*, they are looking for the great, the terrible and the freaks (Ye Hee Lee, 2009). Having personally worked on *New Zealand's Got Talent*, I can attest that the casting selection in New Zealand was based on the same principles. On many occasions, members of the production agreed that the "audition" episodes were the most rewarding yet time-consuming to work on because you get to showcase all the different archetypes. The early episodes in a talent series often work on the premise of "auditions", in which contestants who had no real chance to make it through the competition were chosen to add comedy and light-heartedness to what would otherwise be a very repetitive and tiresome process. These contestants would be allowed their moment on stage and swiftly eliminated by the judges.

The Australian documentary *You Can't Ask That* featuring ex-reality television star Ryan Jones, who had been one of the contestants in the Australian version of *The Bachelorette* in 2017, states that with the amount of material filmed, the production, and the editing in particular can "flip you, they can turn you" (ABC, 2018). Jones explains that during the filming process, he was unaware that he had been assigned the character archetype of the villain and goes on to say of the manipulation of his portrayal: "How naïve of me to think that possibly somebody had my best interests at heart" (ABC, 2018). Contestants of reality television have no control over how they are portrayed: as part of the casting process, they have to sign contracts or consent forms giving the production 'absolute control' as well as legal immunity, meaning that contestants cannot sue the production company in any aspect after they have consented to participate (Whitlock, 2012, p.58). Signing the consent forms gives production free rein to manipulate the content as they see fit, sometimes resulting in contestants finding themselves 'unrecognisable' once watching the completed episodes. The production's response to such a claim would be to point to the authentic recordings of the cast; therefore "there always resides 'some truth' in the narrative arrangement of these images and sounds" (Mast, 2016, p.913).

4.12 Stereotyping characters in reality television

In his analysis of New Zealand commercials, Desmarais found stereotypical masculine personalities portrayed as physically strong and sports-oriented, whereas females were supportive and beauty-centred (2007). Desmarais' study further noted that the female portrayals were restrictive and leaned to depictions of passivity and characterisation that could be ridiculed (2007, p. 214). In reality television contestants are often reduced to stereotypes within the narrative, such as the "good guy," the "FBoy", or the "bimbo."

The research participants, who are all industry experts, were careful about projecting these stereotypes onto the cast members in the excerpts but acknowledged that the terms exist. One participant explained: "It's humorous to make fun of women. It's humorous to make fun of a girl, isn't it? They want them to be bimbo-y and pretty and whatever."

(Research Participant 2 on Excerpt 6, *The Bachelor*)

Making comedy of a projected "female trait", such as attributing Amanda to be a bimbo or an airhead, confirms that the stereotyping Desmarais uncovered in New Zealand commercials almost two decades ago is still being used in television production in the cisgender romantic reality television realm.

These projected roles are not necessarily reflective of the contestants' true personalities but are constructed through selective editing and careful manipulation of footage (Trelease, 2019). Producers and editors are skilled at creating story arcs for each character, even deciding in advance of filming who will be the focus of each episode and how they will be portrayed. This process of character construction and the interactions between 'constructed' characters ensure that the show has the emotional highs and lows necessary to keep viewers engaged. Mast describes it as producers of reality television shows favouring candidates that showcase a willingness to expose their 'real' selves in front of the cameras in order to capture performances or interactions that are perceived as authentic (2016).

In dating shows, for instance, producers may highlight contestants who create the most tension, ensuring they receive more screen time. Those who fit into specific narrative moulds, such as the "bad boy" or the "hopeless romantic", are given more attention, even if their real personalities are more complex – those complexities will be edited out. As an example of this, I will use Rebecca Trelease's description of her portrayal on *The Bachelor NZ* Season 2: in her scholarly work from 2019, she examines the lack of depth and complexity her on-screen character was allowed. She states that she and her fellow contestants were encouraged to present themselves within the one-dimensional characters they had been assigned by the

production. Trelease, being the oldest, felt she was given a “last chance saloon” persona, and once the media learned that she was a PhD student in media studies she was dubbed a spy. Her true self, with its complexities and her Māori heritage, were never mentioned (Trelease, 2019).

Findings from this study found that the practice of creating one-dimensional portrayals was evident. Research participants pointed to Excerpt 6, in particular, where real estate agent Amanda has a one-on-one date with the Bachelor Moses as an example of this.

Researcher: Yes. So, would you say stereotyping is common practice?

(...)

Participant 5: On those shows. I think, yeah, yeah. I think they do stereotype (...) like in the structure of the show they're looking for (...) with the casting, they'll be looking for those exact people. So they actually look to tick those boxes and to have those stereotypes.

(...)

Participant 5: Yeah, but the ditzy blonde. Yeah, that's an old, tired stereotype. I mean, she's a real estate agent. She's obviously not stupid, but they've definitely made her look it.

(Research Participant 5 on Excerpt 6 *The Bachelor*)

Reality television by presenting negative stereotypes, normalises the portrayals of femininity and masculinity in these ways to their audience and society (Pompper and Holtzthum, 2022). Establishing “benchmarks for what is deemed socially acceptable and desirable – and ridicules that which is not” (Pompper and Holtzthum, 2022, p.24). In the discussions around stereotypes, the research participants confirmed that these portrayals are used in the New Zealand productions and can therefore set the norm for what society deems acceptable in terms of projecting negative attributes to males and females.

Once filming commences, the control that producers exert over the content continues. Events such as the one-on-one interactions in Excerpts 5 and 6 may appear organic, but producers will steer conversations or interactions in a particular direction. This can be done with prompts, guiding them to make certain statements or specific topics that fit the desired

storyline. In an interview with former American *The Bachelor* producer Sarah Gertrude Shapiro, she states that she befriended the contestants under false impressions and made them “open up, and to give them terrible advice, and to deprive them of sleep.” (Shapiro interviewed by Max, 2016). In the research interviews it became evident that the same practices are used in New Zealand-made productions as well.

“Obviously someone has been in their (the contestant’s) ear about what they should say, what would prep them for the scene and maybe done that in a way that makes them, you know, they may have been deceived a little to portray themselves in a way because that suits the production. It may not be who they are. Yeah. But yeah, it's done for the, for the TV version of themselves.”

(Research Participant 3, in summary of excerpts)

It could be argued that the content the audience is presented with is far from authentic, given how much guidance and prompts the productions use to influence and manipulate character portrayals in order to suit their narrative. Given that characters are chosen on their ability to perform a role that fits a stereotype, or the television version of themselves, the ‘realness’ of such portrayals need to be questioned.

4.13 Environmental control in reality television

Beyond casting, producers also set up the conditions under which the show will be filmed. Environments are controlled to prompt certain behaviours, such as placing contestants in social situations that can create tension or putting them in competitive situations that heighten emotions. The production carefully plans the scenarios to provoke specific reactions, making it easier for producers to capture the type of content they need to build an engaging narrative. Adding props or using other methods to glean drama, such as on Australian *Big Brother* in 2007, where they made contestants look after a crying babydoll when the production knew that one of the contestants had recently had a traumatic experience giving birth to a stillborn baby (Network 10, 2007). It could be argued that these methods are morally questionable, as they serve the productions’ desire to create what it deems as more compelling content by forcing heightened emotions and the contestants to reveal more about themselves.

In competition-based reality shows - which both *The Bachelor* and *FBoy Island* can be categorised as - the rules and structure of the competition itself are often designed to create drama. Impending eliminations and surprise twists are all mechanisms that heighten the stakes for contestants and increase the likelihood of emotional outbursts or confrontations. Even in shows that seem to centre on romance, producers create a competitive atmosphere that puts pressure on the cast members, leading to more compelling footage (Mast, 2016). This manipulation of events is key to the producer's ability to maintain control over the storyline as it unfolds.

4.14 Exercising control in the editing of reality television

One of the most significant ways productions control reality television storylines and characters is through the editing process: while filming captures hours of raw footage, only a fraction of that footage is ever shown to the audience. In addition, the formal interviews that are intercut with the scenes are most often filmed retrospectively, where contestants may be asked questions that fit the narratives that the editors and producers have created from the actuality scenes.

Another technique that reality television relies on to keep audience engagement is by exaggerating and intensifying scenarios to create more compelling content (Mast, 2016). For example, full-cast scenarios, such as the cocktail parties at the Bachelor Mansion, will be filmed over several hours, yet condensed in the edit to showcase a few minutes that highlight the event's most explosive conversations and interactions. In the Australian documentary *You Can't Ask That*, featuring Ex-reality television stars, we meet Mike Donaher, who was a cast member of *Sylvania Waters* in 1992 (ABC, 2018). Donaher comments about the filming process of *Sylvania Waters* that:

There was agenda there that we weren't aware of, and until it actually went to air, we had no idea that that's the way it was going to be edited because there was definitely over 100 hours of film there" (ABC, 2018).

The production's agenda is to create as much dynamic and intriguing content as possible by focusing on conflict and drama. Mast explains why editing is key for reality television shows as it is an expectation of the audience to be presented with narratives that make sense (2016).

The editors and post-production team will start as soon as filming has begun. It is their role to watch and review the footage with the notes from the producers on set.

“You do get people telling you what goes on. I know a lot of it comes from the producers.”

(Research Participant 4)

The research participant further elaborated on the selection process for editing by explaining that everything is dependent on the story that the production wants to convey.

“It goes back to sort of the production, the whole production process, where someone called it reconstructed reality, where you're not making the whole thing up as you go, but creating this environment where you film it and get the content, and then looking at the content, you decide the best ways to get what you want out of it. So, my experience would be that after so much filming, I would probably say, OK, well, this girl is going to get out in episode three, but they have this funny moment here. So, let's set her up as being nerdy and awkward. And then all of a sudden, that informs your editing process (...)

There might be all the stuff that happens, but you have your story, your structured reality, which has come out of what's happened. You get rid of the stuff that doesn't tell that story, that doesn't agree with it.”

(Research Participant 4)

The selection of shots and the production's ability to use the contestants' interviews in whichever context they see fit, often intercut to punctuate an actuality moment, meaning that the formal interviews are used to create more drama or make a statement.

The research participants pointed to Moses' formal interview in Excerpt 6 as an example of an interview used for dramatic effect. His line “Dum, dum, daa. Really, really?” after Amanda tells him that she was in the running to be *The Bachelorette* suggesting that it could have been taken out of context. Moses' response suggests that Amanda is disingenuous, foolish and supercilious.

“I think some of them would be taken out of context and some of them (are) having a laugh with the director or the person that's giving them those things and they're taking the piss out of the person in the IV (interview) and putting it anywhere they like to put it.”

(Research Participant 4)

“I don't believe at all. Every time they cut to an interview and cut people talking. You don't believe that what they're talking about is necessarily what you've just seen.”

(Research Participant 5)

It is a technique where a participant might say something offhandedly during an interview, but in the final edit, that comment is positioned to look like a key plot point. This level of control ensures that the producers get the footage they need to craft a coherent and entertaining narrative. Productions set up scenarios that push participants into playing their roles by controlling what contestants can say, where they go, or whom they interact with; producers can engineer situations that lead to desired outcomes. This control even extends to off-camera moments, as contestants may be manipulated to behave in specific ways through subtle prompting or direct interference, an example of this as pointed out by the research participants, was the “Sold by Amanda” sash that *The Bachelor* contestant Amanda gave to Moses in her introductory scene. In Excerpt 4, she puts the sash over Moses as soon as they meet by saying, “I work in real estate, so I thought I'd give you this”. The research participants agreed that the production team had instigated this: one stated that the production team most likely “thought it was hilarious” (Research Participant 2) and continued to attest that this is common practice in the industry, admitting that they had been part of this practice on similar shows themselves.

Under producers' guidance, the editing team selects specific moments to include, carefully curating what viewers will see. This process allows the production to craft a narrative that may be very different from what happened in real life. The percentage of how much is filmed and how much makes the final edit varies from production to production and is entirely dependent on the format. One participant said the formal segments, such as the eliminations, are filmed with multiple cameras, up to seven cameras at a time, and are filmed for about four hours, leaving the editor with about twenty-eight hours of footage that will be cut down to about ten minutes of the show. Notably, neither *The Bachelor* nor *FBoy Island* contestants are filmed 24/7, which will reduce the amount of available footage. Less time spent filming and editing means less cost for the production, while some formats are open about contestants being filmed 24/7, such as *Big Brother* and *Love Island*. Both shows rely on “hidden cameras” which are permanently mounted in all areas to best capture the contestants in the hope that they “forget” that they are constantly being recorded.

These formats require a huge team of post-production workers. Any reality format requires an editor, post director and/or post producer to view all available footage before decisions are made with regard to storylines and narratives. If the show is also subject to a fast turnaround, it means that the footage gets segmented and shared with several practitioners - editors and post producers - for quick decision-making and editing of the content. It could be argued that these practitioners exercise control over the content that shapes and defines these shows. In New Zealand productions, episodes can be shared with multiple editors to create all the content, before handing it over to a senior editor to give the episode a final pass to make sure that the editing style is consistent and that music, shots and interviews are not repeated throughout the episode - unless the repeated segments are purposeful and deliberately reiterated. Warner Bros International NZ, who created both *The Bachelor NZ* and *FBoy Island*, have, in the past, used multiple editors to work on each episode, but in most New Zealand productions more often than not episodes are handled by one editor due to budget restrictions. Overseas productions with bigger budgets have larger post-production teams and can categorise the editors into processes called 'story', 'assemble' and 'finish'. Story editors are the ones that watch all the actuality footage to create stories of the actuality moments. Assemble editors gather the stories that form an episode and may add additional interviews, while a finishing editor 'polishes' the final output making sure that it fits the style and aesthetic the format requires.

Some challenges that the post-production team may encounter, were explained by one of the research participants, who had worked on a dating show where there was obvious attraction between the lead and a contestant from the beginning. As much as cisgender heteronormative romantic reality television shows sell the fairytale idea, it is still a competition and must take the allotted time to come to a result. The production has a certain allocated amount of hours of content they must deliver to the network, thus killing the competitive aspect of the programme premise is not acceptable. The research participant pointed out that their instant connection had to be played down in the edit to make it appear less obvious to keep the competitive element of the programme alive. The research participant called this process "disingenuous" and added that for the contestants involved "they have to hide their feelings to a certain extent, or not fake them, but go through the motions with people they might not necessarily like as much, for the show, for the format." (Research Participant 4)

Editors can cut scenes together in ways that change the context of interactions, making a friendly conversation seem hostile or a minor disagreement appear to be a major argument.

By controlling what is shown and what is left out, producers and editors can guide the audience's perception of events and characters, shaping the emotional tone of the show. The research participants pointed to Moses and Amanda's one-on-one interaction as an example of this, stating that by the production adding pauses or awkward silences, where there may not have been any, adding reactive looks to indicate the contestants' feelings, along with the intercutting of the interviews as means to construct the scene in a manner that is conducive to the production, in other words telling the story in a way the production sees fit.

The ability to reorder or splice together footage also means that producers can control the pacing and drama of the show. Suspenseful moments can be drawn out, while less interesting parts are trimmed or cut entirely. The production ensures that the show maintains the audience's attention, even if it means sacrificing authenticity for entertainment. The power of editing also extends to the creation of "villains", "heroes" and "bimbos" as participants can be made to look more likable or more antagonistic based solely on which scenes are included and how these scenes are constructed. All research participants pointed to Amanda's portrayal being detrimental to her continued success on the show. For instance, she was constructed as a 'dumb blonde' by making it appear as if she was walking away mid-conversation in Excerpt 4, followed up in the same episode in Excerpt 6 with the one-on-one scene where she was made to appear oblivious and unsophisticated. One participant even challenged the portrayal further by asking the question if Moses speaks any other languages, given that the scene made fun of Amanda's attempts at speaking French. Pointing to the stereotyping of women as "dumb bimbo", and the addition of the voice-over as "cruel" (Research Participant 2). It further enforces the production's narrative of making fun of Amanda's character on the show by presenting a version of her where she is pretty but ridiculous, making it obvious to the audience that she is not good enough for *The Bachelor*.

4.15 Conclusion: Control

In conclusion, the power production teams hold in reality television cannot be understated. They determine not only who appears on the show but also how they are portrayed and what story is told using them. The final product of a reality television show is not an accurate representation of real life, but a carefully crafted version of it. What is shown to the audience

is not random or uncontrolled; it is the result of deliberate choices made by productions who seek to create an entertaining narrative. The control productions wield over casting, the filming process, and the editing of footage means that reality television is less about reality and more about storytelling. This manipulation often perpetuates stereotypes, enforces power dynamics, and simplifies complex individuals into easily digestible characters.

While reality television offers the illusion of authenticity, it is essential to recognise that what audiences are subjected to has been meticulously controlled. The producers, through their control over casting, environments, interactions, and editing, shape the narrative to suit their vision of what will be the most entertaining and engaging for viewers. As a result, reality television is less a reflection of real life and more a reflection of the entertainment industry's priorities and values. This powerful narration can be referred to as 'Storyland', which will be discussed in the next paragraph. Storyland determines what the viewers are seeing through a controlled filter that has been shaped to fit the demands of the format and the expectations of the audience.

4.16 Introduction: Storyland – nothing gets in the way of a good story

Humans have always told stories, and they have been used as a tool to educate and entertain since the first records of human existence (Billinge, 2017). As we grow up, a lot of our early learning is associated with stories told, written or screened. Hence, the ability to recount a compelling story is key to modern television. "Storytelling is the most powerful and enduring means of communication" (Billinge, 2017, p.11). Mittel argues that television shows need to be immediately identifiable; not all audiences watch from the beginning of each episode, so the narrative exposition must be clear and simple throughout the episodes (2015, p. 56). Mittel further explains that this is achieved by building a "storyworld", a world-building technique that allows the audience to easily orient themselves with the characters and the narratives (2015, p. 56). In reality television, the production shapes narratives and characters, including the world-building technique of creating a storyland. A creative tool to simplify and explain to the audience what they are watching. A research participant describes the process as:

“The setup in, I guess “Storyland”, as I've heard people refer to in television, on a show that I'm currently working on, they keep describing as well, in Storyland, they're doing this.”
(Research Participant 5)

It could be phrased as the term “Storyland,” which is industry terminology that indicates an alternative reality where the constructed narratives and characters live.

4.17 How Storyland is implemented in reality television

“Storyland” may have little or no relevance to the actual interactions that have been filmed, but a world is created that suits the narrative the production wants to tell. An example of how the story is manipulated to suit the production, as pointed out by one of the research participants, was in the categorising of the men in *FBoy Island as bad* “FBoys” or good “Nice Guys”:

“I think it's a bit of a shortcut that they're using to try to not simplify the story but to try and create their story (...) I think that quite often, they'll want to simplify the characters a little bit and make them very recognisable to people. And maybe so it's using those bits that will get across the sort of simple story. OK. And I mean, obviously, there's clothing choices and there's tonally the use of the use of music is sort of plays up the humorous nature of it rather than a sincere narrative, you know.”

(Research Participant 4)

In other words, the production adds cues to the audience, this can be done in vision or audio, such as the undressing of male contestant Dalton in the introductory scene where he is seen ripping his singlet off. This act of sexual conquest indicates to the audience that he is an “FBoy”. These portrayals are further simplified to be instantly recognisable to the audience (Mittel, 2015).

“To tell a story that is easily recognisable to people, it's not to sort of challenge their perceptions, and it's entertainment, largely, I think, you know. It's for people to sort of, I don't

want to say be titillated, but it's not, it's not meant to be challenging.”

(Research Participant 4)

The techniques editors use to shape narratives and characters, as explained by Billinge: “The editor is charged with finding the story within the material, clarifying the information, making selections, then structuring and presenting the story in the most effective way.” (2017, p.9).

The research participants confirmed that New Zealand productions mimic this technique. “Once the story is decided, the footage is your fodder, you know, is your material to tell that particular part of the story.” (Research Participant 5). The selection process is a powerful tool in which the narratives and characters take shape. Unlike scripted content, reality television uses the contestants' interactions or ‘actuality’ to create a sense of authenticity for the audience (Mast, 2016).

“Actuality has a unique ability to express the ineffable aspects of the story; revealing subtle emotional interplays between characters in a manner that is highly realistic and authentic. Interview material, by comparison, can often come across as much more constructed, manufactured and clinical.”

(Billinge, 2017, p.36)

Editors use segments of characters interacting, such as the introductions in excerpts 3 and 4, but edit out the vast majority of the footage to keep the episode to its required duration. This editing process is also used to change the pace; everyday interactions in real-time would eat up too much of the programme time limit, so fast-cut montages and intercutting with interviews are used to create the pace that audiences have become accustomed to within this genre. Both excerpts 3 and 4 use montages to quickly introduce a number of contestants. Some of the contestants in these excerpts who are vying for the lead/s attention are only allowed a few seconds of screen time. The research participants explained that the montage technique is an integral for the first episode of a competition-based romantic series, where the audience gets introduced to all the contestants.

“People aren't invested in the characters yet. So you need you need it to be snappy (...) So it has to be funny, or it has to be dramatic.” (Research Participant 4)

The characters must be instantly recognisable and adhere to the archetype the production has assigned them, which suits the narrative they are constructing within “Storyland”.

“So let's set her up as being nerdy and awkward. And then all of a sudden, that informs your editing process (...) You get rid of the stuff that doesn't tell that story, that doesn't agree with it.

And then, for me, that informs the decisions around what shots are used, what bits of dialogue are used, potentially even how the music is used. You know, I mean, if it's a serious contender, it might be romantic music. But if it's meant to be humorous, it's probably going to be twinkly, you know, different music.” (Research Participant 4)

Simplifying or even asserting a character type to contestants can make them feel alienated from their onscreen persona, sometimes with tragic consequences. The first ever contestant to be eliminated in Swedish *Expedition: Robinson* in 1997, Sinisa Savija committed suicide four weeks after being eliminated from the show. The programme was pre-recorded and had not been aired yet on Swedish screens, but his wife Nermina Savija stated that he was depressed and unlike himself when he returned from the filming in Malaysia and that he feared:

“They are going to cut away the good things I did and make me look like a fool, to show that I was the worst and that I was the one that had to go.” (Savija as cited in Addley, 2002).

Despite the tragedy, the format went on to become one of the most popular within the genre and continues to be made internationally; outside of Sweden, the format is known as *Survivor*.

Savija's fears about his portrayal highlight that contestants are savvy to the process of creating personas and the world-building that the television industry calls “Storyland”. However, not all audiences are clued up to the processes of the extent of the manipulation. In a report on relationship-based reality television in Australia, audiences admit to it being “hard to tell” what has been constructed by the production (ACMA, 2021, p.2). The Australian report also shows that 43% of the people surveyed felt that the productions exploit the contestants, and 76% wanted disclaimers stating that shows have structured and edited content (ACMA, 2021, p.2).

In contrast, a similar study of three New Zealand reality television shows, *Coastwatch*, *Piha Rescue* and *Target*, published by the Broadcasting Standard's Authority (BSA) in 2011, shows little or no concern for the manipulation of characters and content. The BSA report states that the New Zealanders surveyed “give little or no thought to the possible wider

consequences for some of the people who may be caught up in reality programmes” (2011, p. 37). Given the thematic nature of these reality television programmes, which can all be described as both entertaining and educative (BSA, 2011, p.8), may have influenced their response, and perhaps explains the nonchalant attitude towards the people appearing on the shows. Interestingly enough, the report also surveyed participants of the shows with people who had appeared in *Coastwatch*, stating that: “All felt that they had been fairly represented and were comfortable with the footage shown” (BSA, 2011, p.29). The BSA report suggests that New Zealanders are happy to take part in these types of reality television shows and are unconcerned with the editing and segment constructions.

4.18 Conclusion: Storyland

Ultimately, the production will create and embellish a canvas or “Storyland” that is easily understood and navigated by the audiences. Billinge clarifies that the most effective storytelling is making the content “clearest and most dramatic” (2017, p.164). Series like *The Bachelor* have run for four seasons in New Zealand, and multiple international versions mean that the audiences are familiar with the landscape created by the production. “Storyland” also dictates that events can unfold in quick succession, such as the introduction of groups of hopeful contestants in competition-based romantic shows. The motivation for these fast cuts, leaving limited screen time for certain contestants is to retain audience engagement. The editors and producers will manipulate the content to: “use all the bits that you can to tell the story that has been decided to tell” (Research Participant 4). The world-building of “Storyland” helps to simplify the context and the characters.

4.19 Introduction: Heterosexual script

Hall argues that reality television influences audience attitudes as it is perceived as ‘authentic’, showcasing ‘real’ people and its enormous popularity worldwide (2009). Other

studies have demonstrated that there is a prevalence of the heterosexual script in Western television content and that it enforces women into subordinate positions, with a focus on their physical attributes; their bodies, which are used to attract males (Kim et al., 2007). In romantic dating shows women are often portrayed in a passive capacity. The women are there to be looked at and chosen, while men are allowed to show physical prowess and actively seek and pursue love interests. A Belgian study of *The Bachelor*, amongst other cisgender dating reality television shows as well as other prime-time television content, asked research participants who were university students whether these shows presented themes and content that enforced heterosexual script through statements such as “Guys are always ready for sex” and “Girls should be more concerned about their appearance than guys” (Papp et al., 2022). The study found that these shows do reaffirm the heterosexual script, much more so than, for instance, sitcoms. Papp et al.’s study further looked into the consequences of normalising hegemonic masculinity and objectification of females as dictated by the heterosexual script and found that there was greater acceptance of sexual aggression and violence towards women. In addition, it found that “Through the endorsement of the heterosexual script, which is heavily promoted in reality television programming, varying forms of sexual violence may be further normalised for young women.” (Papp et al., 2007, p.7). Papp et al.’s study proves that endorsing the heterosexual script in reality television programming in Belgium and other Western countries does have adverse effects, but does the same apply in New Zealand?

4.20 Evidence of the heterosexual script in the research excerpts

Applying Papp et al.’s framework that reality television programmes normalise the heterosexual script, and that audiences who are subjected to this have a greater acceptance of sexual aggression. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Justice statistics state that more than one in five New Zealand adults experience sexual assault in their lifetime (HELP, 2023). Do our locally produced romantic reality television shows play a role in shaping attitudes and perceptions about what is considered acceptable? The heterosexual script dictates that men can pursue sexual interests, whereas women should be passive (Kim et al., 2007). To determine whether New Zealand made productions employ the heterosexual script was discussed with the research participants after watching excerpt 5, a one-on-one date scene in *FBoy Island*, where the lead Kiera and potential suitor Dalton are sat down next to each other,

talking about his choice of employment as a male entertainer:

Kiera: So how did you get into .. male entertaining, was it?

Dalton: Male entertaining, yeah, yeah, yeah, I know, I know (laughs), so...

Kiera: I can hear my dad right now (points to her head) just being like, what are you up to?
(laughs)

Dalton: I hear my mum right now being like, same thing. (Both laugh)

Dalton Formal IV: So the first thing that always comes up is the word red flag when I go on a date. And I can really like narrow down these red flags and bring more positive onto my green flags hopefully.

Dalton: Dating within, like, male entertaining and stripping, it makes it hard.

Kiera (off cam): Yeah.

Dalton: Because people think you want one thing when you want the other. I've been a dancer for four years and it'd be nice to find someone to take me out of the industry.

Kiera: Cool, yeah.

Close-up of Dalton poking his tongue out.

Kiera: Could you, could you show me a move? (Points to the grass). Could you give me a wee little taste?

Cuts to mid-shot of a group of other male contestants looking over.

Wide-shot of Dalton as he pulls Kiera up to dance while she giggles and throws her head back.

Kiera Formal IV: He starts like grinding on me and all I think of is like dad's face.

Cut to wide-shot of Dalton and Kiera dancing, she's giggling.

(Excerpt 5, *FBoy Island*)

The research participants' responses to the excerpt varied, some stating that it was empowering to see a woman lead the conversation.

“It's coming across as more feminine, it's more empowering from the feminine side because it's only three women competing, there's twenty guys competing for the three women's attention. So there, the guys are really like going all out to impress as much as they can and do crazy things to stick in, to be memorable and likable. I think it's so funny though, how this stripper is looking for a girl to get him out of the industry. He doesn't need a girlfriend to get out of the industry.”

(Research Participant 1)

“It's about her reaction to him being a stripper. Does she, what does she think about that? That's really what the whole agenda is, isn't it? What do you think about that? Is she, you know, slutty into it, or is she daddy's little girl? Oh, I'm shocked, a bit shocked by that.”

(Research Participant 2)

The response from Research Participant 1 suggests that this scene distances itself from the heterosexual script by letting Kiera have a choice and an opinion, therefore empowering her and making her the dominant force in this scene. In contrast, Research Participant 2's reaction to the same excerpt seems to align with the heterosexual script, in that they are perhaps looking for cues that suit the male dominated lens and making judgments on the female taking control of this scene, by saying “Is she, you know, slutty into it” (Research Participant 2). The reaction questions whether a woman should and can dominate a dating scene and suggests that a female who entertains the idea of pursuing a man who works as a stripper as negative, separating women to “good girls” or “sluts”. It confirms the research participant's viewpoint that women should adhere to the conventions as dictated by the heterosexual script. In further discussions about the culmination of the scene, when Kiera

asks Dalton to dance could arguably also be evidence of *FBoy Island* distancing itself from the heterosexual script.

“She's (Kiera) also goaded him into asking for the demos. So she wants a bit of the attention and that kind of thing as well. So she's sort of goading it out of him to get the display, the peacocking, I guess. And he's just laying, he's doing all he can to impress.”

(Research Participant 1)

Once again *FBoy Island* portraying a female as active and the instigator of interactions that could be deemed as sexualised. The excerpt proves that *FBoy Island* does challenge conventional storytelling techniques of cisgender dating shows, by allowing the females to be the dominant and active in their pursuit of a partner. This suggest that this format, or the New Zealand production studied here, at times at least, attempts to bring in more dynamic female-led storylines.

However, when comparing excerpts from the two programmes, research participants stated that in the scenes from *The Bachelor* the dynamics were always in the male's favour:

“The Bachelor. I mean, you know, he always comes up tops, you know, he's always got a smile, even for the silly, dumb ones, as it were, you know, or whatever, or however they're being, you know, portrayed” (Research Participant 2). In contrast to excerpt 5 from *FBoy Island* where Kiera leads the interaction with Dalton. “She's kind of in charge in that, they're much more on an even level. She's asking questions. He's answering her questions.”

(Research Participant 2).

Further evidence of gender portrayals following the heterosexual script in *The Bachelor* were noted by the research participants “not giving a woman a voice is quite a big one in reality TV” (Research Participant 2) and “The women are the objects to look at” (Research Participant 5).

The research participants agreed that the women on *The Bachelor* were reduced to merely their physical appearances, they were simply bodies to be gazed at. Despite *FBoy Island* allowing for female led storylines, the women are portrayed in revealing clothes and fully made up hair and faces: “It's all about looks, makeup, your body, and skimpy, skimpy clothes.” (Participant 2).

4.21 Conclusion: Heterosexual script

In conclusion, this chapter sought to determine whether New Zealand productions of cisgender dating shows follow the heterosexual script, as found in international studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2007; Papp et al., 2007). By discussing excerpts of locally produced *The Bachelor* and *FBoy Island* with industry experts, the findings suggest that *The Bachelor* adheres to the heterosexual script by enforcing heteronormative roles and stereotypes and driving the storylines from a male perspective. In contrast, *FBoy Island* has more female-led storylines and characters, showcasing more dynamic female gender portrayals and representation. It could be argued that there are elements in *FBoy Island* that also reinforce the heterosexual script, where women are portrayed in figure-hugging clothing with low necklines, which reduces them merely to their appearance. Papp et al.'s findings suggest that audiences that are subjected to content that follows heterosexual script as the New Zealand produced shows do can lead to normalising sexual aggression (2007). The prevalence of the heterosexual script is evident in the New Zealand programmes, but further research needs to be done to fully understand the effects these portrayals have on audiences.

Chapter Seven – Conclusion

5.0 Introduction: Conclusion

The aim of this study was to demystify and explain the processes and methods that producers and editors use to create reality television in New Zealand. The principal study focused on cisgender portrayals in the romantic reality television shows produced locally *The Bachelor* in 2021 and *FBoy Island* 2022. Mast explains that the purpose of romantic reality television is to entertain audiences, and productions simplify and reduce complexities within the characters of the cast and the storylines to create narrative content that the audiences can easily grasp and engage with (2016). Australian research has found that audiences of reality television are mostly aware of the construction and manipulation of the content that they are presented with but can struggle to differentiate what is ‘real’ or not (ACMA, 2021). Most viewers of this genre are young women who shape their world views on the representations they are subjected through the programmes (Ward et al., 2015). Given that the portrayals are often reduced to one-dimensional characterisations and not representative of the contestants’ true selves they can have a harmful effect for audiences (Trelease, 2019).

5.1 Reflections

Implications of research

The findings of this research give a valuable insight into New Zealand productions of cisgender dating shows of the early 2020s. This study found that both *The Bachelor* and *FBoy Island* portrayals of gender are presented through hypersexualisation and traditional gender roles are enforced. *The Bachelor* adheres more closely to the heterosexual script defines by Kim et al. (2007), as female participants being primarily characterised by their desirability and appeal to men. In addition, in *The Bachelor* events are portrayed from a male perspective, with women reduced to superficial roles dictated by appearance and their ability to conform to heteronormative ideals. This approach reinforces stereotypical portrayals of women as passive and subservient, underpinning patriarchal societal norms.

By contrast, *FBoy Island* introduces more progressive, female-led storylines, showcasing women as active participants in the narrative. However, this progress is undercut by

persistent elements of objectification, such as the emphasis on figure-hugging clothing and low necklines. While *FBoy Island* attempts to subvert certain stereotypes, it remains bound to the conventions of reality television, where women's appearances remain central to the storylines.

The construction of reality television narratives lies in the hands of producers and editors. The process sometimes referred to as "Storyland" involves the deliberate shaping of material into a cohesive and engaging storyline, which is often predetermined. Producers and editors wield significant power over every aspect of production, from casting, controlling interactions during filming to editing the footage to fit the pre-determined narratives or the stories the production wants to tell. One research participant described the process as "using all the bits that you can to tell the story that has been decided to tell," highlighting the intentional nature of this manipulation. This power ensures that the final product aligns with the expectations of both the format and the audience. As Billinge notes, effective storytelling in reality television requires content to be "clearest and most dramatic" (2017, p.164). This means simplifying complex individuals into digestible characters and amplifying conflict, attraction, comedy or other emotional elements to heighten viewer engagement. Long-running formats such as *The Bachelor* have established a recognisable framework for audiences, making their curated narratives easy to follow. The familiar storylines often prioritise traditional, heteronormative dynamics, ensuring their widespread appeal. More recent productions like *FBoy Island* aim to alter the existing audience expectations to appeal to younger audiences with changing attitudes. Although it attempts to present female characters as more dynamic, it still adheres to some of the genre's traditional constraints in the voyeuristic nature of the women's portrayals.

These productions use production techniques such as editing and casting to create storylines and characters that are simplified. The motivations behind the construction and manipulation of the content are commercially driven - the bigger the audience, in theory, the bigger the advertising revenue to the distributor. Despite the disputedly negative impacts of the portrayals, the New Zealand reality television industry shapes their content to fit international formats, often adhering to a blueprint of how the show should be made, dictated by the format owners. Unlike Australian audiences New Zealand viewers are accepting of the portrayals (BSA, 2011), although it needs to be acknowledged that the "fair representation" survey did not study romantic dating reality shows. With more recent Australian research indicating audience concern over the representation of characters (ACMA, 2021), the

findings of hypersexualising contestants in the New Zealand programmes needs further discussion and exploration. The presence of gender bias as evident in *The Bachelor* proves that the New Zealand productions studied also adhere to the heterosexual script. As a society it raises questions whether we want these representations on our screens influencing viewers, in particular younger audiences as it is unknown what the implications for society will be.

5.2 Limitations of research

There are several limitations to this study, one being the small selection of segments chosen for the study, as well as the programmes selected which narrows the research findings significantly. The research participants of this study were all industry experts, an audience perspective would have given the findings more depth and gravitas. Furthermore, the author's personal experiences and expertise in the field may have added some influence to the semi-structured interviews and discussions around gender representation and the techniques applied to achieve these. Even the selection process of the clips cannot be considered objective, as the author chose, albeit in good faith that these were truthful representations of the shows, the selection is indisputably subjective.

5.3 Future research

Suggested areas of further study to gain a deeper understanding into the findings of this research, would be to explore other formats of locally produced cisgender dating shows, such as homegrown *Heartbreak Island*, as well as international formats such as *Married At First Sight*. Another way of leveraging this study further would be to apply the same parameters of the study to conduct research within this field from comparative countries such as Australia. Further areas of interest from the author's perspective would be to compare audience experiences and outtakes versus the productions' intentions on how the gender portrayals are constructed and whether these align. Furthermore, gathering more recent evidence of New Zealand reality television audiences and their perceptions of the manipulation and construction of reality television shows. Ideally the author would also like to delve into further research into the duty of care of screen practitioners and contestants that take part in

these shows, how the participants and practitioners are impacted by partaking in these shows and what if any help is available should they need it. A study into the experience of the cast and crew could provide valuable information about the effects of the manipulation and construction of the material and how it impacts its participants on and off-screen.

5.4 Summary

In summary, the analysis of the research findings of *The Bachelor* and *FBoy Island* explain how and why producers and editors in New Zealand influence the portrayal of gendered identities in 'romance' sub-genres of reality television. The construction of the content starts in the casting process and continues throughout the filming and post-production phases. Material is manipulated to fit the premise or narrative that the production wants to portray. The shows reflect the influence of global formats, perpetuating gender stereotypes and hypersexualisation, but there are attempts to divert from the heterosexual script that has become normalised with the genre. In particular *FBoy Island* attempts to bring more female-centred narratives to the audience, but the efforts are undermined by adherence to the heterosexual script and the prioritisation of visual appeal.

Ultimately, reality television operates within the framework of “Storyland”, a constructed reality that prioritises storytelling over authenticity, by “reconstructing reality” editors and producers construct personas and storylines that suit the productions commercial interest. Producers and editors hold the power to shape narratives that cater to the expectations of both the genre and its audiences. The narratives and characterisation of cast are created to entertain audiences, but they often simplify complex realities and perpetuate stereotypes. However, New Zealand audiences are indifferent to the portrayals of contributors in the reality genre (BSA, 2011), but no study has yet been conducted about the perception of characters in locally made romantic dating shows.

In New Zealand local productions have taken a backstep in the last year, our screens are filled more and more with international content. Our domestic industry is currently suffering, but international productions are keeping the industry alive. With *Taskmaster NZ* being the only reality television, albeit a hybrid with comedy, to receive funding in the November 2024 funding round (NZ On Air, 2024), the future of locally produced reality television content is facing an uncertain future.

Appendix A:

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10 April 2024

Emma O'Connor
School of Arts
DALPSS
By email: eo299@students.waikato.ac.nz

Dear Emma

HREC(Health)2024#11 : Gender representation: investigating the encoding of New Zealand romantic reality television productions

Thank you for your responses to the Committee feedback.

We are now pleased to provide formal approval for your project.

Please contact the Committee by email (humanethics@waikato.ac.nz) if you wish to make changes to your project as it unfolds, quoting your application number with your future correspondence. Any minor changes or additions to the approved research activities can be handled outside the monthly application cycle.

We wish you all the best with your research.

Regards,



Emeritus Professor Roger Moltzen MNZM
Chairperson
University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix B: Questions

About you (the participant):

1. What is your professional role and tell me briefly about your work experience in reality television production in New Zealand?
2. What training did you undertake to become a professional screen practitioner?
3. Can you briefly explain the process, tasks of your daily work?
4. This research is based on the gender portrayal of cisgender participants in heterosexual romance reality television. Can you tell me about your experience in this genre without naming specific formats?

About the scenes:

I will ask you to look at the specifics of male and female portrayal using this screen example.

1. In your opinion how is gender represented in this scene?
2. Does it adhere to specific stereotypes?
3. What processes and methods have been used to portray gender in this scene?
4. Is there an agenda for this portrayal? If so, how is it constructed and why?
5. What are the factors that drive these decisions?
6. Is there anything that you would like to add about this scene?

Repeat for all the scenes, 6 in total.

In general:

1. Are the scenes selected typical samples of the genre?
2. Are there production protocols as to the construction of these? If so, can you explain what those are?
3. Do you have any opinions about the gender representation in the scenes?
4. Is there anything you would like to add to this discussion?

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