ABSTRACT

LIFE & LIFESTYLE MAKEOVERS:
THE PROMOTION OF MATERIALISM
IN EXTREME MAKEOVER: HOME EDITION

by Kari Ratliff

Each week on ABC’s Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, one family is selected to receive a surprise home makeover, including a new or entirely renovated home and the latest appliances and furnishings. However, these families, whose application videos are often dramatic accounts of great personal hardship, also seem to be hoping a new house and all of the trimmings will somehow make all of their problems simply disappear so they can once again be content. This thesis examines how, through its narrative of personal transformation, the show is promoting an ideology of materialism in which people feel driven to purchase material things in order to achieve personal happiness and fulfillment. It also examines how the show functions as an advertisement by way of product placement, further promoting materialism.
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1.1 Introduction

Since 2000, many “home makeover” shows have cropped up and fallen by the wayside on broadcast television networks and cable channels, each encouraging people to reorganize and remodel their homes to match the “ideal” homes they see on television. These homes usually feature expensive appliances and luxurious furnishings and amenities purported to bring happiness and harmony to the home and those who dwell within it. But do those pricey designs really accomplish the goal of making the homeowners happy? The producers of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition would like audiences to think so.

The series, which premiered in 2003 and has won two Emmy Awards for Best Reality Program, features families who have suffered some sort of hardship and rewards them by either renovating or completely rebuilding their homes in only seven days. The show’s official web site touts it as “broad appealing” and backs that statement up with ratings statistics, including that the show is rated “no. 1 in its hour” among all adult demographic age groups as well as teens and kids. Each episode is put together as a “race against time on a project that would ordinarily take four months to achieve” as the team of interior designers, carpenters, and landscapers work to feverishly create a work of design art that is sure to please (“About”). Ty Pennington, formerly of TLC’s Trading Spaces, is the team leader and host of the show, while the other designers working with him include builder and planner Constance Ramos; carpenters Paul DiMeo, Paige Hemmis, and Ed Sanders; exterior and large project designer Preston Sharp; landscaper Eduardo Xol; and interior designers Michael Maloney, Tanya McQueen and Daniel Kucan.

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, which airs on ABC Sunday nights at 8 p.m. EST, is considered to be a reality TV show because it is assumed to be an unscripted, unrehearsed chronicle of events taking place in real people’s lives. Rather than having a
script written beforehand, reality television shows depend on producers and directors to build their scripts in the editing rooms, after the footage is filmed. Although the biggest boom in reality television programming hit the airwaves in 2000, the genre has its roots in the early days of television, with shows such as *Queen for a Day*, which featured women who sent in sad stories detailing the reasons why they needed some material object in order to solve a personal problem. Reality television’s history and the roots of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* will be discussed in chapter two.

Each episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* opens with Pennington and his team of designers aboard a posh tour bus, on their way to surprise another “deserving” American family with the home makeover of their dreams. Aboard the bus, the design team views the family’s home-movie application video, usually recanting some tragic story that explains why they cannot renovate their house themselves and why they feel ABC and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* should renovate their home for them. These tales tend to involve a great deal of death, serious illness, natural disaster, and financial and personal hardship, interspersed with footage recorded by ABC of the candidates’ family and friends justifying the selected family’s need for a home makeover. Whatever the hardship, the show’s producers portray the victims as heroes of a sort who are being rewarded with the gift of a new or fully remodeled home. The family’s situation is often framed in the context of the “American dream” myth, in which all a family wants to be able to do is live a “successful” (read: upward social mobility) and comfortable life and provide their children with every possible opportunity for success. Their current home is portrayed to fill the role of the antagonist, keeping the family from achieving the “American dream.”

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1 I have chosen to place the word “deserving” in quotation marks here because of its widely varying meanings to different people. This is especially important in the context of this show, as some viewers may see the families selected by the show as very deserving, while others may not, but the show’s premise is always that the families deserve the home makeovers they receive, for one reason or another.

2 During the show’s first and part of the second season, the design team concentrated on remodeling the existing house. However, after a season two episode in which they built an entire house from scratch for a family whose house was destroyed by fire, they have built entirely new houses for every family since then, rather than just remodeling.
Once the audience has been familiarized with the applicants’ tale of woe, they ride along as Pennington and the design team—the heroes of the story ready to save one more family from the lack of upward mobility associated with their current dwelling—roll up to the family’s home at 7 a.m. to surprise them with the news that they have been selected for an extreme home makeover. As soon as the team steps off the bus, Pennington busts out the megaphone to yell, “Good morning [insert name here] family!” The family then stumbles sleepily out of their home, presumably unable to believe their eyes that they have been selected to receive the renovation of their dreams, with ABC and the show’s sponsors footing the bill. Once the initial disbelief subsides, the design team tours the existing home with the family, asking questions about what changes they would like to see in their home. Sometimes the recipients’ desires are necessities, such as modifications to make it easier for a disabled family member to move around within the home, and other times they are simply for convenience, such as a second laundry room on the first floor of the home. No matter the purpose, however, the Extreme Makeover: Home Edition design team always seems to make it happen.

Once the tour is completed, the family jets off on a weeklong vacation, all expenses paid (again by ABC and the show’s sponsors). As soon as the family leaves, the design team and a cavalry of volunteers and contractors from the family’s local area converge on the house and start demolition to make way for extensive renovations or, in later seasons, an entirely new home. By the end of the week, a new home (either virtually or literally) stands on the family’s property—full of appliances, furniture, and other amenities provided mostly by the show’s sponsors, whose names are featured prominently throughout the episode and sometimes even in special advertisements that air during the show.³

Once construction is completed and the house has been filled with new furnishings that are, by comparison, far more luxurious than what was in the family’s

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³ In most episodes, Sears, the show’s primary sponsor, has a customized ad that airs at the end of the show, welcoming the family home and counting down the number of Sears products used in the show.
previous abode, the family returns home. As their stretch limo pulls up, the family’s view of their new home is obscured by the design team’s tour bus while Ty asks them how their vacation was and if they’re ready to see their house. Ty then leads the crowd of spectators standing on each side of the street to yell, “Bus driver, move that bus!” and the home is finally revealed to the family, who usually are then overcome with jubilation and collapse in the street in tears. Once the initial shock subsides, Ty and the design team take the family on a tour of their new home, making sure to point out the new furniture, appliances, and other amenities that have been added to make their lives easier, and, assumedly, more blissful.

Each family is usually treated to top-of-the-line Kenmore appliances, a house full of designer furniture and decorations, and a host of various electronic devices including new computers and plasma-screen televisions. For many of the families, the show ultimately concludes with the receipt of a large check to cover the balance of the mortgage on their old home, and maybe even a few smaller checks for college scholarships for their children. At the end of each episode, viewers are invited to log onto the show’s official web site at ABC.com for more information about the products used on that night’s episode, a line that serves as one final advertisement for the show’s sponsors that have made it possible to build one more American family a “proper” middle-class home. Of course, at the same time, the sponsors are also portrayed as having aided yet another family in the achievement of the “American dream” by giving them a home that allows them to live in comfort and relieving them of some of the financial burdens associated with upward social mobility.

In just seven days, Pennington’s design team not only builds a house for the family and provides them with all new furnishings and appliances, but they also tend to be cultivating a “dream” for most of the families, who seem to believe that a new or renovated house will solve other personal problems they have, such as the death of a family member, serious illness, or permanent disability, and ultimately make them happy and contented with their lives. While some of the houses rebuilt on the show actually need rebuilding due to serious structural problems, mold growth, fire, or natural disaster, many of the families’ homes chosen for the show do not seem to need
much work at all. As each new room is revealed, the family is surprised again and again with more and more new material possessions. The show’s largest problem lies in the hopes and dreams the families seem to put into what the show can do for them, and their apparent belief that a new house, new furniture, and new appliances will supposedly improve the family’s overall satisfaction and self-actualization. It is in this way that *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* promotes the use of materialistic solutions to solve personal, non-material problems.

By promoting this ideal, the show is potentially exacerbating Americans’ already increasing use of extrinsic, material solutions to fill in intrinsic holes in their consciousness, such as a need for security, happiness, and belonging (De Graaf et al. 115). When they show families who are pinning all of their hopes and dreams for the future on a new house and new appliances, the producers of the show are validating the use of consumerism and materialism to solve problems that require internal work and validation and cannot be solved simply by having nice things. For the purpose of this analysis, the definition of “consumerism” should be taken to be the practice of consuming ever-increasing amounts of material goods, while “materialism” should be taken as referring to a preoccupation with material objects combined with a belief that those material goods will ultimately provide one with the greatest happiness and contentment in life (“Materialism”).

### 1.2 Research Questions

Through my research on this topic, I am seeking to answer the following central question: How does *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* promote the use of material things to solve problems of a non-materialistic nature, especially personal problems such as health issues, an unexpected death, or permanent disability? The sub-questions I am seeking to answer in this research include:

- What ideological values are the material goods presented to the families on the show presumed to have?
- In what ways does the show function as an advertisement for the products featured on the show?
• How does the show’s role as an advertisement give the products featured on the show ideological meaning beyond their basic use value?

1.3 Literature Review

In American society today, the pursuit of money and possessions is often equated with “the good life” (Kasser “High” 1). Ironically, “the good life at a great price” is the slogan used in many advertising campaigns for Sears, the primary sponsor of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. Put another way, the “good life” has become “the goods life,” according to John De Graaf and the co-authors of Affluenza, a book that treats Americans’ obsession with material goods as a sickness with causes, symptoms, and potential cures. People today often pursue material wealth in an attempt to create happiness for themselves, but neglect the fact that material wealth cannot do this—true satisfaction can only come from within and achieving “intrinsic goals such as giving and receiving love,” neither of which requires nice material things to be accomplished (De Graaf et al. 115).

Consumption has reached “an elevated and revered place in industrial and post-industrial life” in many western nations, including the United States, and this level of consumption has come to be labeled as “materialism” (Belk 265). Belk defines materialism as “the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions” (265). When a person reaches a high level of materialism, he or she may begin to see those possessions as central to his or her life and believe the acquisition of such possessions to “provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction” (Belk 265). In other words, people who are materialistic see the pursuit of material possessions as the best way to achieve happiness and fulfillment in their lives.

According to Tim Kasser, the author of several pieces on the problems associated with holding materialistic values, humans’ four groups of basic needs include the need for safety, security, and sustenance; competence, efficacy, and self-esteem; connectedness; and autonomy and authenticity (“High” 24). Instead of working to achieve these goals intrinsically, many people today in consumer-driven societies feel that “a high quality of life (i.e. need satisfaction) occurs when one has successfully attained material goods” (Kasser 26). However, studies have proven that instead of
raising one’s sense of well-being, strong materialistic values actually lead to a lower sense of well-being, an association that has been proven in several experiments all over the world (Kasser “High” 21).

Promoting a standard of materialism can have serious effects, because instead of providing fulfillment, the pursuit of material possessions often leaves people feeling empty inside (De Graaf et al. 74). Many people today employ the concept of “retail therapy” and go out to buy themselves things in order to feel better about themselves—a venture which may be somewhat successful in the short term but is always unsuccessful in the long term (De Graaf et al. 49). Furthermore, “human beings’ insatiable lust for money and consumption leads to a massively inequitable distribution of the world’s wealth and natural assets, fostering economic and political instability, and at present, the very real danger of self-imposed extinction of the human race by fatal depletion of natural resources” (Kasser “Psychology” 129).

Today Americans’ “egos are nourished” by the pursuit and purchase of luxury consumer goods, and television has been a major player in creating this epidemic of affluenza (De Graaf et al. 147, 150). Advertising and media images demonstrate endlessly to consumers how much happier they will be if they use a particular product or look a certain way, and this helps people to become predisposed to materialistic values (Kasser “High” 52). Subtexts of television shows often promote consumption because the shows are paid for by advertisers, whose goal is to convince viewers that they need to purchase their products or services (Kasser “Psychology” 16). Television, overall, is a “passive medium programmed … as a means of inserting commercials that manipulate the drowsy consumer into buying worthless stuff they certainly never desired, let alone needed” (Twitchell 40). Extreme Makeover: Home Edition fits this bill, as the show generally serves as an extended advertisement for the companies that provide the products used on the show, and in this case, the commercial cannot be eliminated by VCR or TiVo.

Nearly 100% of funding for electronic media such as television is gained through advertiser support, and programs just fill space between commercials (Kilbourne 35). Product placement such as what appears in every episode in Extreme Makeover: Home
Edition even makes it so the space between the commercials is filled with advertisements as well, although audiences often do not view product placement as advertising (Kilbourne 61). Since advertiser support is so important to television, it only makes sense that television programs in addition to advertisements show more affluent lifestyles, since according to Jean Kilbourne, humans’ impressions of what they should want or desire and how they should live are now influenced chiefly by advertising messages rather than the stories passed down by their ancestors (56). By limiting their scope to predominantly affluent and upper-middle-class lifestyles, television producers are aiding in this process of influencing consumers to desire more and “better” consumer goods, regardless of whether or not those goods are necessities.

Advertisers are now also beginning to exert an even greater influence on the form and content of the television shows they sponsor because they prefer to associate their products with “upbeat” shows that “leave people in the mood to buy” (Kilbourne 62). This description fits Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, which is focused on bringing a family out of the doldrums of unhappiness and lack of nice material goods and into a lavish lifestyle of new washers and dryers and designer homes and goods. By the end of the show, viewers should ideally have positive impressions of the products featured on the show and may even consider purchasing them for their own homes, because those are the products that brought such happiness to that week’s featured family. In this way, the show is functioning exactly as advertisers feel their ads should—it is not only selling a product, but also selling the concept of happiness, which is purported to go hand-in-hand with that particular product (Kilbourne 70). Because these products are featured as part of creating a “dream home,” the producers of the show are also creating “an aura for the product, so that other people will be impressed” (Kilbourne 70). This is not untrue for most of the living situations featured on television, most of which are quite affluent.

Media are “saturated with shows and ads exhibiting levels of attractiveness and wealth well above the norm, and thus beyond the level of attainment of the average viewer” (Kasser “High” 54), and Extreme Makeover: Home Edition is no exception. Television shows everyone “how the other half (the upper half) live[s]” (De Graaf et al.
Television viewing could possibly cause viewers to see the world as more affluent than it really is because the standard of American living on television is inflated. According to a recent study by Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch, television viewing is positively correlated to high levels of materialism, while no other forms of media were significantly related to materialism (Shrum et al. 13-14). According to a similar 1987 study by Richins, weekly hours of television viewing is positively related to personal materialism, or the belief that having more material possessions will increase personal happiness (Shrum et al. 4). One of the reasons for this relationship could be that most people portrayed on television are upper-middle or upper class, and as a result, viewers’ expectations of what possessions they should have have become inflated and they start to spend more money on “keeping up with the Joneses” (De Graaf et al. 29). However, this is an impossible goal, because “everything we watch is always promoting dissatisfaction” and our need for a new stereo, a new car, a new computer, or a bigger house (qtd. in De Graaf et al. 50). “No one wants to be middle class … you want to be cool, hip, with it, with the ‘in’ crowd, instead” (Twitchell 47). In fact, one of the chief roles of the media today is to “produce, circulate, and promote” ideas about taste and lifestyle while simultaneously promoting the products that can help viewers achieve that lifestyle for themselves (Bell and Hollows 9). At the same time, however, the media is also socializing viewers into a materialistic value orientation (MVO).

When people develop an MVO, it is because they have either had their fulfillment of psychological needs undermined, causing insecurity, so they become materialistic in order to compensate for their insecurity, or they have gained an MVO through socialization, internalization, and modeling of materialistic behaviors and values, perhaps through their parents and peers or through the media (Kasser “Psychology” 13). The individual act of consumption becomes equated with creating meaning and satisfaction in one’s life (Twitchell 51). Materialism is often used as a coping strategy for alleviating problems and satisfying needs (Kasser “High” 42), which is exactly what is happening on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. In this way, those who apply for an extreme home makeover are “pursuing false sources of happiness”
because they are dissatisfied with their lives and are turning to material possessions in an effort to find satisfaction (Belk 274).

This is not inconsistent with the fact that today’s advertisers, including those whose products are featured in each episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, are seeking to sell consumers far more than just a product—they are also seeking to sell them “values, images, and concepts of love, sexuality, romance, success, and perhaps most important, normalcy” (Kilbourne 74). Advertising’s primary purpose is to create false needs in consumers so they will purchase the advertisers’ products (Jhally 3). Through advertising, the abnormal become normal, and products are impregnated with almost magical properties and promises to make consumers happy, powerful, and everything they’ve ever dreamed possible (Jhally “Advertising”). People are even increasingly using brand names to form their own identities, and somehow feel inadequate or like less of a person if they aren’t able to afford a certain design clothing label, car, or even laundry detergent (Kilbourne 74).

As Sut Jhally states in his DVD *Advertising & the End of the World*, our culture has been created by the system of production and consumption, and commercial culture is now “inside our relationships, homes, heads, and identities.” The ways in which people use goods in modern Western society is largely influenced by advertising and the marketplace (Jhally 3). Products today now go beyond use value (what the product does for people) and exchange value (what it is worth) and delve more into what Jean Baudrillard referred to as “sign value,” or the luxury, prestige, and power signified by the products (Kellner 21). Goods now act as “markers” of one’s social standing (Jhally 7). Furthermore, wealth in capitalist societies is signified by the collection of material goods one possesses (Jhally 26; Baudillard, qtd. in Keller 12). Individuals often set themselves apart through the purchase and use of consumer goods through the social prestige and sign value associated with those goods (Kellner 15).

In Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, consumption is used as evidence of wealth, thus leading Veblen to call it “conspicuous consumption” (61). Veblen wrote that “luxuries and the comforts of life” ideally fall into the domain of the “leisure class,” while the “industrious” classes should consume only what is necessary for their
subsistence (61). However, Baudrillard argued that the concept of conspicuous consumption applies to everyone in consumer society. Now, all classes seem to desire to “put [their] opulence in evidence” and seemingly lead a life of leisure through the acquisition of consumer goods above and beyond those needed for basic subsistence (Veblen 64). By this token, the more prestigious commodities one owns, including houses, cars, and designer goods, the higher one’s social standing is, and members of consumer society are highly aware, at least subconsciously, of the system of sign values and can interpret others’ social standing through the sign values they exhibit (Kellner 21). “Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit” (Veblen 66). By applying to appear on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, home-makeover hopefuls are expressing their own desires to possess these “more excellent” goods and simultaneously rid themselves of any inferiority and demerit associated with their current collection of material goods and the home that holds them.

At the same time, these families are also seeking the happiness that is purported to come from acquiring a “proper” amount of material goods. According to advertisers, the true path to happiness is through the consumption of material objects, and this impression is being put forth via what Jhally refers to as the most intense propaganda effort of the last two centuries, as more thought, effort, and money go into advertising than has gone into any other campaign to change social consciousness (“Advertising”). Advertising has now become a cultural system that impacts how human beings make sense of the world (Jhally “Advertising”). People today often associate political freedom with one’s ability to accumulate large amounts of commodities, and if one does not have this “freedom” (such as in a socialist society), then there is something severely wrong with that society and situation (Jhally “Advertising”). On Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, the home presented to each family is portrayed as being deeply intertwined with their achievement of the mythic “American dream,” thus supporting the notion that “freedom,” a key component of this dream, is closely tied to the pursuit of material goods.
There are, however, several potential pitfalls associated with finding one’s freedom and happiness in a shopping bag, furniture truck, or a brand new house. Instead of finding personal bliss, people who exhibit materialistic tendencies often have shorter relationships with friends and lovers and more conflict in those relationships, feel disconnected from others in society, and often have dreams involving their own alienation from having intimate relationships and connections with others (Kasser “High” 64). People who are materialistic often feel controlled by their desire for material possessions, and thus their needs for autonomy and authenticity are sacrificed (Kasser “High” 75). They may display higher levels of envy, possessiveness, and lack of generosity because their own satisfaction and happiness in life are hinged on the pursuit and retention of material items (Belk 266). Materialistic persons also “place less value on freedom and self-expression, and thus decrease their likelihood of having experiences characterized by these qualities” (Kasser “High” 75). Teens with high MVOs are more self-conscious, and people of all ages who are more materialistic are very concerned with “appearing successful to others” in order to maintain their own sense of self-esteem, which is likely also hinged on their material possessions (Kasser “High” 81, 85).

Ever-increasing levels of materialism are also contributing to environmental problems as increased consumption leads to increased production, and, in turn, excessive use of resources (Jhally “Advertising”). Happiness is not positively correlated to the acquisition of material things—in fact, several research studies have been conducted on happiness and quality of life as they relate to income, and each one has found that although Americans are becoming steadily richer as the years progress, the number of “happy” people is actually remaining stable (Jhally “Advertising”). Furthermore, when people are asked “what they want out of life,” they give non-material answers such as autonomy and control, good self-esteem, warm family relationships, relaxing leisure time, romance and love, and close and meaningful relationships (Jhally “Advertising”). However, they continue to pursue happiness in the marketplace, perhaps because advertising in its various forms continues to link
these intrinsic social values to extrinsic material goods, and this false impression is deeply ingrained in American society. As Jean Kilbourne wrote:

Advertising constantly promotes the core belief of American culture: that we can re-create ourselves, transform ourselves, transcend our circumstances—but with a twist. For generations, Americans believed this could be achieved if we worked hard enough… Today the promise is that we can change our lives instantly, effortlessly—by winning the lottery, selecting the right mutual fund, having a fashion makeover, losing weight, having tighter abs, buying the right car or soft drink. … On one level, we know it won’t—after all, most of us have tried this approach many times before. But on another level, we continue to try, continue to believe that this time it will be different. This American belief that we can transform ourselves makes advertising images much more powerful than they otherwise would be (68-69).

*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is not the first show to try to solve Americans’ personal tragedies by giving them new material possessions. *Queen for a Day*, which aired in the late 1950s and early 1960s and billed itself as “the Cinderella show,” operated in much the same way (Watts 141). On *Queen for a Day*, four or five contestants whose sad stories had been previously selected from hundreds received by producers that week would reiterate their tales of woe to a live studio audience, who would vote based on applause for the “winner,” who would be crowned “Queen for a Day” (Watts 142). This crowning ceremony was complete with fanfare and roses, and concluded in the winner being presented with whatever she had wished for, usually some sort of appliance, along with a much larger prize package including clothing, a vacation, electronics, more appliances, furniture, gift certificates, and more (Watts 142). The overall point of the show was to make the contestants—and the audience—cry, and it was certainly successful in this venture. However, as sad as the contestants’ stories may have been, it is difficult to deny that their main reason for applying for and appearing on the show was to win prizes that they hoped would somehow improve their lives (Watts 144). The situation on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is exactly the same—families send in an application tape in hopes that they will be selected to receive
the house of their dreams with all of the trimmings, while at the same time hoping that being chosen will bring them a sense of happiness and fulfillment that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

1.4 Methodology & Scope of the Study

In this study, I examine how *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* employs the use of materialistic solutions to non-materialistic problems while simultaneously displaying an ideal home that viewers should strive to achieve if they, too, want to experience bliss and happiness in their home. To do this, I have performed a textual analysis of two separate episodes of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* that exemplify the situation described above and look for the ways in which the show promotes a materialistic lifestyle and the use of materialism to solve intrinsic personal problems. This textual analysis has been performed through ideological analysis, because the show’s narrative is promoting the myth of the American dream while simultaneously advancing ideals of consumerism that the show purports must be adopted and achieved in order to make that elusive dream a reality.

I selected two episodes of the show to analyze—one from season one (2003-2004) and one from season four (2006-2007). I selected the pilot episode from season one for analysis because this episode laid the foundation for the show, introducing viewers to the show’s mission of providing “deserving” families with extreme home makeovers. The pilot episode featured the Powers family, whose intentions to renovate their so-called “fixer-upper” home (which does not really seem to have any problems) were interrupted when their youngest daughter was diagnosed with cancer. As a result, the Powers’ family and friends nominated them to receive the first makeover of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* so that the “house [could] get some love too” (“Powers Family”).

I also selected one episode from season four, the current season, in order to demonstrate the ways in which the show has changed while still remaining true to its original task of providing selected families with new material possessions in hopes of solving intrinsic personal problems. From season four, I selected episode 22 for my analysis. In this episode, divorced single mother Marynoel Kilgallon and her four children receive a new home to replace their crumbling and uninhabitable “fixer-
upper.” I selected this episode because, in contrast to the pilot episode, the home being rebuilt in this show legitimately needs renovation. However, the design team still takes the renovation “over the top” with the addition of frivolous luxuries that go far above and beyond the family’s needs.

In each episode, I have examined several elements, including:

- how the family’s application video and back-story are used to demonstrate the family’s need for material possessions
- what material possessions the family is given
- how those possessions, including the house itself, are presented to the audience via image and narration
- how the designers’ and the families’ recorded dialogue throughout each episode support an ideology that equates the acquisition of material things with happiness or self-actualization
- what ultimate goal the presentation of a new house and new possessions is purported to achieve

To support my analysis, I employ existing scholarly research that bears the notion that this promotion of consumerism and materialism may have adverse effects on a society that is already becoming increasingly materialistic.

1.5 Chapter Organization

In my examination of the promotion of materialism on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, I will address several different issues in each of the subsequent chapters. The present chapter gives an introduction to Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, the intent of my research and analysis, and a literature review concerning current academic work on the topics of materialism, consumerism, and advertising. Chapter two focuses exclusively on reality television, with a brief history of the genre, descriptions of its subgenres, and a summary of current research on the recent emphasis on cosmetic changes and self-transformation on lifestyle reality television. Chapter three contains my analysis of two episodes of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition and how the episodes promote the use of materialism to solve problems of an intrinsic nature, how the episodes function as advertisements for the show’s various sponsors, and how this close
relationship to advertising gives the products featured on the show ideological meaning. The fourth chapter is comprised of my conclusions and a discussion of possible further research that could be conducted on this topic.

1.6 Conclusion

This is an important issue to study because, as has been outlined above, the use of materialism to solve problems involving insecurity and a general feeling of unhappiness has become an epidemic in American society and shows no signs of stopping anytime soon, especially so long as television—which has been said to create the mainstream of our culture—continues to promote this ideal. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is working to promote this ideal by showcasing families who apply for the show in hopes that a new house and new things will make them happy and whose wishes seem to be fulfilled in the dramatic reveal at the end of the show when they see all of the new, extravagant material possessions their new house contains. By promoting the development of such materialistic values, the show has the potential to contribute to an already severe problem in our society—the growth of consumerism and materialism as a means of self-satisfaction and fulfillment.
CHAPTER TWO
REALITY TELEVISION AND COSMETIC CHANGES

2.1 Introduction

*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is just one show in a sea of reality television programming that seems to have taken over much of prime-time television in the past seven years. While many modern reality shows follow the same game- and clip-show formats as earlier reality television shows featuring “ordinary” people in extraordinary situations, there has been a recent influx of reality shows that focus on cosmetic changes applied to both body and home. But regardless of whether the show focuses on improving a person’s face or rebuilding the façade on their house, they all seem to have the same central purpose—using superficial changes to purportedly wipe away personal problems that originate far below the surface. This chapter includes a brief history of reality television, including *Queen for a Day*, the 1950s and 60s game show that could perhaps be considered a direct ancestor of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, and outlining the various subgenres that exist in modern reality television. I will also be discussing in detail the lifestyle programming subgenre in which *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* falls and how that subgenre’s focus on cosmetic changes as “vehicles for self-transformation” that are assumed to fix much more than just surface blemishes (Turner).

2.2 A History of Reality Television

*The Reality Game Show: Queen for a Day*

The beginning of reality television can be traced back to several different decades, depending on one’s definition of the genre. Some feel the genre has its roots in *Candid Camera*, a series which began airing on television in 1948 and featured “ordinary Americans” caught in “surprise contrivances” and awkward situations set up without their knowledge. Each skit concluded in the revelation, “Smile! You’re on candid camera!” as participants realized the whole thing had been staged (O’Donnell 127). Another early television show which could easily be considered reality television is
Queen for a Day, which seems to be a direct ancestor of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, with its focus on rewarding the contestant who has the most heartrending story with truckloads of material goods (Watts). Game-based reality shows such as Queen for a Day and quiz shows like $64,000 Question and Twenty One, in which participants answered trivia questions in order to win prize money, were popular in the early days of television. However, the infamous “quiz show scandal,” wherein former contestants on television game shows accused the producers of rigging the results and coaching contestants, dealt a major blow to “reality” television’s perceived authenticity and, in turn, effectively wiped the genre off the air for a number of decades (“Quiz”; Simon 183).

Queen for a Day, a show which aired during daytime from 1955 to 1960 on NBC and 1960 to 1964 on ABC, may be the most significant predecessor to Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. The show was often derided by critics for focusing on raw emotion and display of misery for the sole purpose of winning prizes (Watts 141). Viewers, however, were rather fond of the show, which soon ended up being the number 1 rated show on daytime television (Scheiner 375). As was discussed briefly in chapter one, Queen for a Day was a game show in which five women essentially competed to see who had the most heart-wrenching story, with the “winner” coming away with a whole host of prizes. Before each day’s filming, members of the studio audience would fill out “wish cards” detailing some material object they wanted and why they wanted it. The objects they wished for had to be something that could be plugged on the show in exchange for advertising money from the company that makes the product (Scheiner 382). Once the audience had submitted their wish cards, staff members would narrow the list to 25 finalists, who were then called onstage a few minutes before airtime to be

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4 In 1960, the Mexican department of labor issued a statement demanding that the show be banned because it “accentuated the exhibition of human sorrow for commercial ends” and featured “excessive and inappropriate” prizes (Scheiner 141).
interviewed by Jack Bailey, the show’s host. Bailey would then choose the five contestants with the “best” stories to appear on the air (Scheiner 380).

The five contestants would then relay their stories to the studio audience and viewers at home, and in between each story there were plugs for three or four different products professed to make one’s life easier—after all, this was the theme of the show. Once all five women had appeared on-air, the studio audience would vote for the most deserving Queen via the “applause-o-meter,” while all five sat looking as dejected and pitiful as possible, as if even the slightest hint of happiness at having appeared on television might sabotage her chances to win. The woman who received the most applause would then be pronounced “Queen for a Day” by Bailey and draped in a velvet robe and led to sit on a throne while the remainder of her prizes were presented to her (and the audience) as “Pomp and Circumstance” played over the studio sound system (Scheiner 380). Each queen was usually presented with about $2,000 in prizes, often including a refrigerator, washer and dryer, furniture, a vacation, silver flatware, fine china, makeup, and all of the designer clothes that had been featured in the show’s intermission fashion show, plus, of course, the object she had wished for (Scheiner 382; Watts 150). The prizes were presented as an avenue to purportedly solve the problems she had recanted on the air as well as “secure her future happiness and ensure that her problems would not resurface” (Watts 151). In this way, the program also “showed viewers the security a middle-class consumer lifestyle could offer” and was intended to make them want the same lifestyle for themselves (Watts 152).

*Queen for a Day* served two functions: to showcase consumer goods and generate new consumer desires by creating an elevated standard of living (Scheiner 377). Ultimately, the show promoted the ideal that problems could be solved via consumption, and the products given away on the show were supposed to make life easier for the contestants (Scheiner 377; Watts 142). A direct correlation was present between the consumer goods presented on the show and the “alleviation of misery,”

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5 Scheiner describes Bailey as “the very personification of a snake oil salesman” and writes that he was once labeled by *TV Guide* as “the number one mesmerizer of middle-aged females and the most relentless dispenser of free washing machines” (380).
regardless of whether or not the contestant who won the prizes would even be able to use the goods given to her\(^6\) (Watts 141). As Amber Watts writes, “in the *Queen for a Day* narrative, commodities could solve all problems, no matter how severe, so the best way to avoid personal crisis was to buy more” (151).

The show also promoted the middle-class consumer lifestyle that had become increasingly prevalent in the post-World War II period, as modernization of factory production processes made mass production possible and, in turn, made mass consumption necessary in order to sustain the economy (Bell and Hollows 3). As workers’ wages increased, the dividing line between wage earners and salaried professionals became increasingly indistinguishable due to postwar economic upsurge in the United States (Scheiner 377; Bell and Hollows 3). Americans had more discretionary income available to them than ever, and thus, more class mobility was possible and the middle class began to grow (Watts 145). Suddenly, people were buying “what they wanted rather than solely what they needed to survive” (Watts 145). Americans were also increasingly acquiring new commodities to replace old ones that were not worn out or broken, but simply “out of fashion” or “aesthetically obsolete” (Bell and Hollows 4). As a result, consumerism was on the rise, and the companies that manufactured “luxury” consumer products relied on shows like *Queen for a Day* to put their names into the minds of consumers.

As was depicted on the show, consumer products had the miraculous ability to solve all of one’s problems. The material requests and needs of the contestants were always indicative of a larger, non-material issue at-hand, usually involving the contestant’s inability, for whatever reason, to fulfill “her proper social role as wife and mother” (Watts 145-146). By this token, the show provided a sort of “justice” to mitigate the perceived injustice of the situations the contestants found themselves in, and this justice was always found within material products (Watts 147). In effect, the show exposed the inequities of the class system then attempted to solve the problem by giving contestants large amounts of material goods (Scheiner 377).

\(^6\) After all, what good does a new refrigerator or washer and dryer do a woman who is so destitute that she has no electricity in her home?
In the early days of television, networks sold time to advertisers, and the advertisers themselves hired an agency to produce the shows, thus, their primary focus was on selling products to consumers (Scheiner 382). In fact, *Queen for a Day* was solely focused on selling material goods to consumers. Of the 45 minutes that each episode was on the air, only 15 minutes was actually spent on the contestants—the remainder of the time went to commercials and plugging advertisers who had provided the show’s prizes (Scheiner 380). By demonstrating on the show that these “pitiful” women’s problems were being solved by the consumer products they were given on the air, the show was sending a message to viewers that any problem could be fixed with the right product (Scheiner 382; Watts 141). Even if viewers themselves “did not require an economic transformation, new products could still make dreams come true, or prevent nightmares from happening” (Watts 152).

**Documenting Lifestyles**

In the 1970s and 1980s, the popularity of documentary television began to rise—a direct result of the advent of smaller, lighter-weight 16-mm film cameras that could go more places since they were less bulky than traditional 35-mm equipment (Simon 184). This newfound portability opened up “new arenas of human experience”—people’s private and domestic lifestyles—to being filmed, and subsequently led to the development of more reality-based documentary-style shows (Andrejevic 69). With on-scene documentary television now much easier to film, television producers turned their focus to “how to capture people and events as accurately as possible with a minimum of filmmaker interference or interpretation” (Simon 184). And thus, reality television as we know it was born. One of the first shows to employ this strategy of filming was a 12-part series aired by PBS in 1973 titled *An American Family*. At the time, documentary was one of PBS’s programming staples, so it seemed natural that the network was eager to explore the private lives of a contemporary American family in a documentary film style (Andrejevic 69). The series documented the lives of the Loud family and all of their trials and tribulations, including a divorce and a gay son’s coming out (Andrejevic 66; Simon 186; O’Donnell 127). The L ouds were promoted as “TV’s First Real Family” (Andrejevic 66). The show’s producers shot 300 hours of
footage between May 30 and December 31, 1971 to compile the 12 episodes, just as many of today’s reality television shows are put together from weeks of footage condensed into a one-hour episode (Andrejevic 66; Simon 186). The show was similar in format to a soap opera, with an episodic structure and a continuous week-to-week storyline, focusing on characters over plot (Simon 186). This structure is also similar to many of today’s popular reality television shows, which air continuing storylines from week-to-week and focus on building characters and drama-ridden relationships which can then drive the narrative.

Another form of documentary television is often referred to as “factual television” and encompasses infotainment, tabloid television, and crime-time television shows such as Cops, which began airing in the late 1980s and still runs new episodes on FOX and older episodes in syndication on CourtTV (Simon 186; O’Donnell 127). It has also been hypothesized that reality television flourished during this period of economic downfall because it is far cheaper to produce than traditional network dramas (Hill 6). Much of the reality television that aired in the 1980s was “dark and sinister” and focused on exposing “society’s underbelly” (Simon 189). Hard Copy and Inside Edition are two examples of such shows. The lighter side of 1980s reality television came in the form of America’s Funniest Home Videos, a show that is still airing new episodes on ABC. This particular show is comprised of camcorder video clips sent in by viewers, “grouped thematically and further embellished with music, sound effects, and wisecracks” (Simon 190).

One of television’s most familiar and long-running reality shows, Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray’s The Real World, got its start in 1992 on MTV (190). The show can perhaps best be described as a “weekly ‘hamsters in a box’ scenario—part American Family, part psychological experiment” (Simon 191). The show, as stated in its opening theme, chronicles the lives of “seven strangers, picked to live in a house and have their lives taped to see what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real.” According to Murray, their inspiration in creating The Real World was in fact An American Family, and the goal of the show was to “remake An American Family for the MTV generation” (Andrejevic 71). The show is filmed in an observational style,
allowing viewers to “interact” with the show because they feel as if they were there (Andrejevic 72). Currently in its 14th season, The Real World laid the foundation for many of today’s reality television conventions, the foremost of which being the first-person confessional, “reality TV’s equivalent to the Shakespearean soliloquy” (Simon 191). After scenes are aired, the camera then cuts to the involved cast members talking individually about that particular experience, thus blending “deed and reflection” into a singular action while simultaneously propelling the show’s narrative and “elevating an ordinary event into a privileged moment of thought and insight, with some pettiness thrown in” (Simon 191). This concept is referred to by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn as the “video diary,” whose chief purpose is to allow for at least a few moments of intimacy in a show normally dominated by fast-paced filming of complex group interaction (72).

Another cornerstone of The Real World still used in much of reality television today is the concept that casting is the most crucial element to success. During the casting process, specific character archetypes are sought in order to create drama and make the show more interesting (Simon 191). In doing this, producers of reality TV are trying to “do everything possible to blueprint contestant interaction before the actual taping to plan against the inchoate inertia of daily life” (Simon 192). However, this level of engagement with the narrative borders on staging of events and could potentially be perceived as such by viewers and cast members alike (Simon 192).

Contemporary Reality Television and Its Subgenres

The most recent wave of reality television, which we are still in the midst of today, began in 2000 with the development of several new competition-based reality shows, the foremost of which was CBS’s Survivor, a wilderness survival game focused

7 Extreme Makeover: Home Edition also employs the first-person confessional, as design team members and the families featured on the show spend some time alone with the camera, reflecting on the events that take place in the show.

8 For example, the producers might be looking for a Slacker, who doesn’t want to do anything, to clash with the Drill Sergeant, who expects everyone to do what is asked of them as quickly and efficiently as possible. This relationship will no doubt create a great deal of friction to (hopefully) keep viewers tuning in week after week to see what happens next.
on rewarding the “sole survivor” with $1 million and a host of other prizes for surviving a couple of months in a tropical location without the modern amenities they are accustomed to (O’Donnell 128). Romance-based competition shows cropped up next, with shows such as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* showing multiple women and men, respectively, vying for the affections of the Bachelor or Bachelorette and willing to do anything to prove he or she is a better suitor than the other contestants (O’Donnell 128). Competition-based reality formats are still popular, but perhaps more popular are the makeover format reality shows, including *The Biggest Loser, Trading Spaces, Extreme Makeover,* and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,* all of which focus on transforming an individual or his or her home into a pre-set “ideal” driven by deep-seated social ideologies (O’Donnell 128).

Although reality television could be considered a “fad” genre that many critics feel will soon fall by the wayside, it currently shows no signs of stopping, with at least 50 reality shows currently running on various television channels, both broadcast and cable (O’Donnell 128). Reality television is no longer considered an “off-season summer phenomenon” and has now transitioned into being a staple of prime-time programming, “easily dominating the ratings in many of the most coveted time slots” (Andrejevic 7). But why are they so popular? Victoria O’Donnell postulates that “reality shows encourage audience voyeurism as viewers watch people undergoing difficult tasks, competing with one another, and being humiliated, rejected, or victorious. … Viewers are also likely to feel superior to contestants and judge them as uncouth and disgusting” (128). Furthermore, she believes that the popularity of reality television speaks for audiences’ “urge for a sense of contact with what is real rather than what is fiction” (O’Donnell 128).

In the opinion of Ron Simon, reality television’s popularity is now beginning to challenge the future of production, with its relatively cheap production costs and relationship to the “commonplace world we experience and live in every day” and “how real people interact in undirected situations” (179). Viewers are able to identify with the people they see on the show and think that could be themselves, having their own 15 minutes of fame (Simon 199; Reiss and Wiltz 27). According to Annette Hill,
reality television presents information in a way that “lets people see for themselves” through the television, “witnessing real people’s stories and experiences, as well as critiquing the process of selecting these stories and experiences for television” (82). While many critics believe reality television is a fad that will eventually die out, Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture and media at Syracuse University, believes that this particular fad has a lot of staying power to remain on American television, so long as it retains its popularity and mass appeal (qtd. in Long 18).

Reality television is a broad genre that encompasses many different types of television shows, all of which center around putting “ordinary” people on camera in various situations, either real or contrived. In her book, Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television, Annette Hill divides this broad genre into six subgenres: infotainment, docu-soap, reality games, talent, clipshow, and lifestyle (Hill 7-8). The infotainment genre, which includes shows such as Rescue 911 and Hard Copy, involves presenting viewers with information merged with entertainment, as its name suggests. While shows in the infotainment genre present serious information to viewers, they do so in a way that keeps them entertained — whether that be through the re-enacted drama in each episode of Rescue 911, which featured survivors of horrific trauma sharing their stories of rescue, or the celebrity news and scandal aired on Hard Copy (Hill 7).

The second subgenre of reality television according to Hill is the docu-soap, which merges documentary television with soap-opera style drama (Hill 7). A&E’s Airline, which follows employees of Southwest Airlines through the inevitable drama that comes with their jobs and dealing with the at-times incorrigible public, falls into this category. As in documentary-style television, the cameras are simply “there,” capturing each event from the “fly-on-the-wall” point of view. The “soap” portion of the subgenre comes into play not only for its high level of drama but also for the cast of characters that remains the same from week-to-week, enabling viewers to get to know them and become interested in what adventures they will have on the next episode. This type of show is typically “rich with melodramatic moments, cliff hangers, hyperbole, and personality clashes,” much like a typical daytime soap opera (Biressi
The “documentary” portion of the subgenre comes from the fact that these shows use a combination commentary, observational filming, and direct address to deliver the drama (Biressi 64).

One subgenre of reality television with which contemporary viewers are likely very familiar is the reality games subgenre, which includes shows such as *Survivor* and *Fear Factor* (Hill 7). While *Fear Factor* encourages contestants to face their fears (and often eat bugs) in an effort to win prizes, *Survivor* leaves 16 “castaways” in a deserted, usually tropical, location to see what kind of drama is created when they are forced to live together with little food or water, knowing that every three days one more of them will be “voted out” of the tribe and sent home. Interspersed with this drama are several competition interludes in which the contestants compete for prizes or immunity from being voted out at the next tribal council. This particular subgenre is relatively straightforward in definition, as it simply involves “real” people engaged in competitions on television (Hill 7).

Another reality television subgenre that has soared in popularity lately is the talent show, which includes FOX’s blockbuster show *American Idol* and ABC’s *Dancing With the Stars* (Hill 8). Shows in this subgenre usually involve contestants performing for the cameras on live television and viewers calling in or using cell phones to text-message their votes for their favorites. Each week, one or two contestants who receive the least amount of votes are eliminated from the show, culminating in an ultimate “winner” at the end of the season.

One of the “original” subgenres of reality television—although no longer as prevalent as it once was—is the clip show format (Hill 8). Shows like *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, which combines camcorder footage sent in by viewers set to music with comedic voice-over, fall into this category (Hill 8). Although other reality subgenres certainly seem to overshadow this one, it is still classified as reality television because it involves ordinary people on television placed in an entertaining situation. The clip show format is also often employed on channels such as VH1 and Style Network for specials involving celebrity “top 10s” and other countdown-style shows.
Last but certainly not least is the lifestyle subgenre, which includes shows dedicated to encouraging contestants and viewers alike to take action to improve their personal lifestyles, whether it be through a physical makeover, a psychological one, or a complete home renovation (Hill 8). Lifestyle television, in a nutshell, offers “recurrent lessons and advice in the ever-more effective stylistic management and transformation of the body, health, fashion, cookery, gardening, house and home, DIY, cars, travel and holidays, and property” (O’Sullivan 30-31). Shows that fall into the lifestyle subgenre include Trading Spaces, Extreme Makeover, and Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. Lifestyle programming is popular with general audiences and involves “ordinary people and their ordinary leisure interests … with experts who transform the ordinary into the extraordinary” (Hill 23). Extreme Makeover: Home Edition certainly fits this bill. Lifestyle programming is also quite successful around the world, perhaps due to its broad audience appeal (39).

This broad audience appeal may be due in part to the tendency of reality television, and lifestyle reality in particular, to allow audiences to develop a high level of identification with the people featured on the show. According to Hill:

Makeover and infotainment programs often take the specific experiences of ordinary people and make these stories generalizable, so that the stories are about Mr. and Mrs. X and Y and their health or home improvements, and about you and your health or home improvements. When we respond to individual stories in makeover or infotainment reality programs, we often draw on our own experiences to make sense of these stories (89).

In effect, viewers internalize the stories they see on lifestyle programming and apply them to their own lives. TLC’s Trading Spaces, which shows viewers radical home-improvement transformations completed by neighbors (with a little help from professional designers, of course) and simultaneously shows them how to complete such a renovation themselves, is the highest-rated program on basic cable (Simon 196). Viewers are therefore encouraged to generalize the results they see on the show to potential results they could see in their own homes, given the time and the money to complete the project.
However, this generalization extends far beyond the cosmetic. Simply by watching the show, viewers are also invited to make character judgments about the people featured on the show as well as themselves, as they are shown “how one might live” and “how one shouldn’t live” (O’Sullivan 32). As a result, viewers also begin looking for “problem areas” in their own lives that might need to be “fixed” in a similar manner to that featured on the show (Biressi 101). In effect, lifestyle programming is demonstrating for viewers the “proper” and “acceptable” ways to live their lives, and this plays a key role in how lifestyle programming promotes materialism as a means to achieving adequacy in one’s life.

2.3 Cosmetic Changes on Reality Television

The concept of self-transformation is encouraged on nearly every show that falls into the lifestyle programming subgenre of reality television. Every aspect of life is viewed as a work in progress in this subgenre, and “nothing—identity, lifestyle, or relationships—is fixed; everything is a construct ripe for radical transformation” (Simon 199). Hill agrees that contemporary lifestyle programming is focused on a “narrative of transformation,” and feels that it does so by “subordinating the instructional address in order to foreground the responses of ‘real people’ to this transformation” when it comes time for the big “reveal” (23). This is what separates contemporary lifestyle programming from older lifestyle reality shows such as PBS’s *This Old House*, which focused primarily on showing viewers how to complete “do-it-yourself” renovations on older homes. Instead of just showing viewers how to complete the project, today’s lifestyle programming primarily concentrates on showing viewers the participants’ responses to the “reveal,” which provide the show’s drama as viewers anticipate how the participants will react to their new and completely transformed home. This shift in focal point seems to encourage viewers to consider what their own personal reaction would be to a similar transformation, and subsequently places more emphasis on the ideological values perceived as being wrapped up in the physical transformation wrought on the show.

The tendency of viewers to place themselves in the shoes of the people they see on the show supports what seems to be the overarching message of contemporary
lifestyle television in the United States: “Don’t just watch us, copy us” (Hill 92). Today’s makeover programming embodies the way in which television is purported to be instructing its viewers not only in how to achieve a radical external transformation but also an equally radical internal transformation “into happier, more satisfied, more up-to-date versions of their selves” (Bonner qtd. in Hill 93). Lifestyle shows such as Extreme Makeover and its Home Edition counterpart support the basic tenet of commercialism: that one’s life can and must be fixed or improved through consumption (Deery “Trading” 212). Makeover culture has become increasingly fetishized in western culture in recent years, as every media outlet seems to be displaying a plethora of ways to transform oneself and one’s home (Heyes 20). This transformation also seems to be rooted in the concept of the “American Dream,” since the acquisition of consumer products is the base for the upward social mobility associated with the elusive Dream (Deery “Interior” 161).

Lifestyle programming’s preoccupation with transformation via material means is not only present in shows that focus on how to transform one’s home but also in shows that help participants make changes to their bodies, such as plastic surgery shows. These types of programs often serve to normalize cosmetic surgery and make it seem as casual as putting on makeup (Turner). For participants in shows like the original Extreme Makeover, cosmetic surgery is the only way to “permit their new selves to emerge,” given their current dissatisfaction with their lives (Turner). In this way, cosmetic surgery is being used as a “vehicle for self-transformation” that allows people to “embody the kind of person they believe themselves to be,” according to Cressida J. Heyes (17-18). For many of the people who appear on makeover shows, being a “good person—a construction especially important perhaps to the contemporary American psyche—must be represented by a concomitantly attractive body” (Heyes 18).

A lot is perceived as being packed into this physical makeover as well—much more than just a corporeal transformation. The makeovers are often presented as having the ability to single-handedly elevate one’s class status while simultaneously “erasing the past and brightening the future” as surgery wipes away the visible signs of hard work, suffering, and poverty (Heyes 22). Furthermore, this change is ideally
intended to make it as if the events that led to those visible signs never even happened (Heyes 22). The participants, however, can likely not afford these types of radical makeovers on their own—that’s the reason why they apply for the show.

Participants in makeover shows allow themselves and their personal journeys of transformation to be featured on television in exchange for receiving free services, and are often selected because “their perceived need for transformation is so great and their ability to pay so restricted” (Deery “Trading” 212). By that token, participants become a walking advertisement for the products and services utilized on the show, just as in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Lifestyle transformation shows such as these sell products to viewers through personal testimony (Deery “Trading” 212-213). They identify the participants’ problem(s), offer the solution(s), then give proof of the desired transformation (Deery “Trading” 213). This, according to Deery, effectively joins two of contemporary culture’s perhaps most-important elements: commodity and image, because the participants become objects whose image (the commodity) is being sold to viewers via a rather non-traditional and often overlooked form of advertisement (213).

Participants on plastic-surgery-based makeover shows put their own trust in the “experts” on the show, who then proceed to transform their bodies into the resolution to their problems. Their bodies are the problem to be solved (Deery “Trading” 213). The same concept is also employed on home improvement shows, and especially on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, in which participants place all of their faith in Pennington and the design team to transform their existing house into an ideal living space that is purported to solve all of their problems. Instead of their bodies becoming advertisements for the products and services that led up to their transformation, their homes become the image and commodity that are intended to show viewers how to achieve the same type of radical change for themselves. Every episode of shows like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* “instructs viewers how to regard consumption as a form of production and how, through consuming goods and services, they can make their lifestyle or selves over into a new product” (Deery “Interior” 162).

Effectively, participants on makeover shows of any type have not only been transformed into their previously envisioned “ideals” via this makeover, but also have
been transformed into objects. Participants in plastic surgery shows are depicted as passive objects to be acted upon in the show as they undergo drastic changes that culminate in their internal image of themselves and the external image perceived by others becoming one and the same (Deery “Trading” 213). As Heyes states, it is through this process that the participant’s outer self is “brought in line with the inner truth” (21). The same concept could easily be applied to one’s home and, in turn, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Since viewers are assumed to have the same mismatches in internal versus external “truth” when it comes to either self or home, shows like these are demonstrating what viewers need to do in order to resolve their own similar disparities—use the same products and services featured on the show, ideally concluding in either a full-body or full-home renovation.

The same expected results are also present in both personal-makeover and home-makeover shows—the drastic change is assumed to lead not only to increased happiness with the outer state of the home but also, more generally, to happiness in life. The home itself and the consumer products given to the participants are portrayed as having led the show’s participants down a road that they have previously been unable to travel—one that leads to ultimate bliss and pleasure in one’s life and completely erases any problems that may have existed before the makeover. This is especially problematic because shows like these seem to function as advertisements, and the subsequent impression put forth by these undercover advertisements is that purchasing these products or performing the same type of renovation on one’s own home will lead to the same type of happiness, bliss, and total erasure of past trials and tribulations. This, however, is a lot of pressure to place on any home makeover, even an *Extreme* one.

### 2.5 Conclusion

Although reality television’s roots can be traced back to several different shows depending on which subgenre one wishes to examine, shows that focus on solving one’s personal problems via material possessions can be traced back to the early days of television via *Queen for a Day*. This show paved the way for contemporary lifestyle programming like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, which builds each week’s episode around taking a down-trodden family and giving them the home makeover of their
dreams. Although the families who appear on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* are not draped in velvet or sitting on thrones as their prizes are paraded in front of them, they are certainly being placed in the same situation as the contestants on *Queen for a Day*. First, they must tell a distressing enough story to justify being selected to receive a free “extreme” home makeover. Second, the home that is built for them and the plethora of consumer products placed within it are assumed to be the ultimate solution to all of the families’ problems, both material and non-material. Third, the show’s chief goal is actually not to provide one family each week with a new home and new furnishings—it is to advertise these products to consumers and make them want to purchase the same products and services for their own homes, in hopes of achieving the same “amazing transformation” they saw on television.

Just as *Queen for a Day* did in the 1950s and 60s, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is designed to promote consumerism by associating material goods with resolution for all of life’s troubles. However, as we have seen, the ideologies behind these makeover shows can be extremely problematic, as they usually equate ultimate intrinsic happiness in life with a favorable material or otherwise physical image—two concepts which ultimately are unrelated, for neither can be achieved as a result of the other. In the next chapter, I will analyze and discuss in-depth two episodes of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* in order to demonstrate how the show constructs the image of material objects as lining the path to bliss in one’s life.
CHAPTER THREE
ANALYSIS OF TWO SELECTED EPISODES
OF EXTREME MAKEOVER: HOME EDITION

3.1 Meet the Families, Meet Their Problems

As was discussed in chapter one, each episode of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition follows a similar formula. At the beginning of the every episode, one of the first things Ty Pennington does is familiarize the design team and the audience with each family and the story that ultimately won them an extreme home makeover. In these few minutes, viewers as well as the design team not only get to know the families but also get to know their problems—the same problems they aim to “fix” with the makeover process.

The two episodes chosen for analysis are similar in some respects and quite different in others. The first episode selected was the show’s pilot, which originally aired in February 2004, featuring the Powers family—mom and dad Rodney and Kristin along with kids Brittni, Reid, and Olivia. The youngest daughter Olivia was diagnosed with cancer when she was just a toddler. Because the family was so busy with Olivia’s treatment for three years, they did not have time to renovate their so-called “fixer-upper” house, so their family and friends nominated them for the show.9

The Powers’ house really doesn’t appear to be in bad shape at all, yet the people who nominated them and the design team both continually refer to it as “extremely run-down” and in need of love. Michael Maloney, one of the show’s interior designers, says the family is “design-wise challenged” and thus in need of their help. However, even Pennington admits at the beginning of the show that the family doesn’t really need the renovation when he states, “This family really deserves it. They don’t need it; they deserve it” (“Powers Family”). But this admission doesn’t stop the design team from

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9 Carpenter Paul DiMeo and Pennington also comment on how cute and sweet Olivia looks, potentially implying that the appeal of a show doing nice things for a little girl who beat cancer might have played a role in the family’s section for the show.
commenting on how “dilapidated” the house is—even though viewers looking at the house may find themselves wondering just what the designers’ definition of dilapidated is. The roof is in good condition, the paint isn’t peeling, and there are no real hazards inside the home (aside from a partially renovated bathroom, which will be addressed later). The family seems to be in good shape financially, and no mention is made of any money shortages or failure to be able to pay for a renovation—the only thing they seem to lack is the time to actually complete it. The Powers’ house may not be the most stylish home in the world, but it would be difficult for most people to deny that it was in good condition and perfectly livable—and not the least bit run-down.

Before embarking on their free vacation to Atlantis Paradise Island in The Bahamas, the Powers family gives the design team a tour of the house, just as all of the families who will subsequently be featured on the show will do. The living room is described as small, cramped, and tight, with a décor that is a “mixture of everything,” three words uttered by the design team as if they are something of a tragedy for such a nice family as the Powers. In the kitchen, mother Kristin sadly mentions that she can’t open the refrigerator and the cupboard at the same time. Although the house has two bathrooms, only one is usable because they had begun renovation on the second shortly before Olivia was diagnosed with cancer and did not have the time to complete it while she was going through her treatment. In the garage rests a broken down truck, and the entrance to the house features a large, stucco arch that designer Preston Sharp says “has got to go” because “it’s not cool” (“Powers Family”). These are the only real “problems” with the house mentioned on the show, and according to Pennington, the biggest issue is that the house, which was built in the 1960s, is outdated and the house and furnishings both need to be brought up to date.

The second episode selected for analysis is vastly different from the first because the house Marynoel Kilgallon owned was in serious need of much more than just an “update.” The Kilgallon family’s episode aired in May 2007 and told the story of single mother Marynoel and her four boys—David, Chris, Nicholas and Patrick. When she divorced her husband, Marynoel purchased a home for herself and her sons, but found out when embarking on a renovation project that it had extensive termite damage that
had not been revealed during the home’s inspection process. Termites had completely destroyed the house’s internal structure. The house was declared uninhabitable, and Marynoel and her sons had to move into her parents’ cramped dining room, where they lived for a year and a half. Pennington mentions that Marynoel “has done everything she can to give her kids a good life, but she’s run into a few struggles,” and thus needs the help of the Extreme Makeover: Home Edition design team to overcome her problems (“Kilgallon Family”).

Marynoel works at a coffee shop during the day and a dance studio at night, and working two jobs—coupled with her single parenthood—seems to illustrate a much greater need for the financial aid of an extreme home makeover. She ends up in tears while telling Pennington their story, stating that she has just been trying to “hold it together” for her sons. “I have nowhere to turn,” she says. “There’s nothing I can do about it, I just end up living here with [my parents]” (“Kilgallon Family”). Even her oldest son David recognizes that she is depressed, and attributes it to the fact that they have no house of their own. The Kilgallon family is told they will vacation at Disney World for seven days while the design team builds them a new house, but first they must take the team on a tour of their old home.

Unlike the Powers family’s house, the house the design team rolls up to in this episode is in shambles, with boarded-up windows, no siding, and exposed wall studs that were in the process of being replaced in order to repair the termite damage. The termites had chewed all the way to the second story of the house, and the entire interior had to be torn out so the frame could be replaced, little by little. Marynoel becomes very emotional while she and Ty are sitting in her shell of a house, discussing it and its future. The following quote from Marynoel perhaps best summarizes the emotion she and many of the families who apply for Extreme Makeover: Home Edition feel when they hit “rock bottom” and cry out to ABC for help:

In the last year and a half, there hasn’t been too much smiling and too much happiness. A lot of crying. Some days I didn’t even want to get out of bed, but I kept going because I have four boys, and I had to. For them. Little by little, I found hope. Praying. Trying to be grateful that I can turn it around...be grateful
for the things I do have—all of the people who love me and care about me and want to see good things happen to me. There was a point where I felt like it didn’t matter to anyone whether I was here or not. I was to the point where I didn’t feel like I was worth anything to anybody. I’m at the bottom. Rock bottom. The only direction to go now is up. (“Kilgallon Family”)

Obviously, Marynoel is wishing for much more than just a new house—what she’s asking for is an entirely new fresh start on her life as a single mother. Ty and the design team claim they can provide this for her, as they feel they do for many other families featured on the show, and send the family off on vacation feeling like good things are finally happening in their lives, all because they were selected to receive an extreme home makeover.

3.2 Goals of the Renovation

Another portion of the show closely intertwined with meeting the families and their problems concerns the design team’s justification for having selected this particular family for a renovation and the subsequent goals of that renovation. Each renovation or rebuild featured on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition has both primary and secondary goals. Primary goals include the actual, physical improvements to the house, both interior and exterior. While the physical work performed on each house is prominently featured on each episode, the primary goals usually seem to take a backseat to the secondary goals of each renovation, which include the psychological and social improvements assumed to come hand-in-hand with the physical ones.

This is very similar to the phenomenon discussed in chapter two associated with plastic surgery makeover shows—participants not only receive a new body but are also portrayed as feeling better and more confident about themselves as a person now that all of the bad things in their lives have been wiped away (Turner; Heyes 22). On Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, most the families featured seem to believe that a home renovation will provide them with happiness and harmony in their new home that they were unable to achieve in their old home, for whatever reason. These beliefs represent the secondary goals of the renovation.
In the case of the Powers family, it doesn’t seem like there is any real, concrete reason to renovate their home, other than the fact that they want to have it renovated. In fact, it seems that the only real reason the family receives the renovation is because “they deserve it” because their daughter had leukemia and was able to overcome it.\textsuperscript{10} The primary goals of the Powers’ home makeover are to update the home’s interior, exterior, furnishings, and appliances, and take what is purported to be a design disaster and remake it into a model home. According to the aforementioned comments made by the design team in the first few minutes of the show, the home desperately needs to be saved from the doldrums of bad design. Interior designer Michael Maloney declares the house a “total dump” and outlines the design team’s plan for “fixing” the house—including knocking down walls to create more open spaces, raising the ceiling and roof in the entryway of the home, and adding 300 to 500 square feet of additional living space (“Powers Family”).

The design team’s plan for the Powers home includes remodeling the bathrooms; turning the den, kitchen, dining, and living areas into one large, open space; redesigning all of the bedrooms to reflect each family member’s interests and, in the case of the kids, career aspirations; and building a pirate ship in the backyard beside the family’s existing pool. As Maloney is discussing this, the blueprint for the original house appears on the screen, then morphs into the redesigned blueprint for the renovated house. The old blueprint is shaded in reds and oranges—warm colors—while the new one appears in varying shades of blue. This seems to suggest that the current home is a stressful space that should be represented by “hot” colors, while the new home they are creating will be a much calmer, more pleasing space.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} While this is certainly a personal tragedy for the Powers family, I do not feel it is a valid reason to renovate their entire home, especially since the home does not seem to be in need of such a radical renovation.

\textsuperscript{11} Interestingly, the design team’s discussion of what they plan to do to the house is no longer present in later seasons, perhaps due to the fact that they no longer renovate existing homes but build from the ground up instead. Rather than discussing plans, now, the show jumps directly from demolition to construction and the viewer learns of the design team’s plan as the house takes shape.
On most episodes of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, family members state directly to the cameras and subsequently to viewers at home exactly what psychological and social improvements they hope to gain from the renovation. However, the secondary goal of the renovation to be completed on the Powers family’s home must be inferred because it is never directly mentioned. The family members and friends who nominated the Powers family for an extreme home makeover say they did it so the house could “get some love too.” Overall, Powers family being selected for the makeover seems to serve as a means for rewarding them for surviving such a great personal tragedy as having their daughter Olivia diagnosed with cancer at such a young age. Audiences are led to believe that since Olivia is now cured of her cancer, the family now deserves to have a nice home in which to enjoy being together as a family. Providing that “reward” seems to be the secondary goal of this renovation.

Both the primary and secondary goals of the Kilgallon family’s renovation are much more complex, due to the severity of the actual physical problems with the house and the familial problems that led to Marynoel becoming a single mother. The primary goal of the renovation in this case is rather obvious—to build the Kilgallon family a home that is not falling apart from termite damage and can be safely lived in. Therefore, their entire existing home will be torn down, and local contractor McGrath Homes will build them a brand new one. Of course, along with this new home will come new appliances and furnishings and a professional interior design job, as is the case with all of the homes renovated or rebuilt by the *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* design team.

In addition to the primary goals, there are several secondary goals of the Kilgallons’ home renovation, the first of which is to make the American dream of home ownership come true for a single mother who has tried to make it on her own but feels like the deck is stacked against her. When Marynoel bought the termite-infested house

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12 For example, Patricia Ginyard, whose family received an extreme home makeover during season three, verbalized her relief at having received a new home because she was now confident that her kids would be successful in life. However, success in life is not a direct result of a new home.
for herself and her sons, she was a first-time homebuyer, an attribute that increases the “heartstring-tugging” quotient of her story because she was attempting to achieve that dream on her own and was foiled by circumstances beyond her control. Therefore, the next secondary goal of the renovation is to relieve some of Marynoel’s stress by giving her the house she longs for and feels her family deserves. According to Pennington, “Marynoel went out on her own and she took a risk because she wanted a better life for her kids, and sometimes people just need a little help with that” (“Kilgallon Family”).

Perhaps the biggest secondary goal of this particular episode of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition is to give Marynoel a fresh start and make it easier for her to provide for her family as a single mother. Pennington promises her exactly that, adding that the design team is “going to be able to give her a home back for her kids, and maybe even give her some of her confidence back”\(^{13}\) (“Kilgallon Family”). While it seems counter-intuitive to expect a new home to serve as a sort of magic potion to re-instill confidence in a person who has been beaten down by the trials of life as a single parent, these types of renovation goals are quite common on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.

The overall message imparted by the show on a weekly basis seems to be that a home renovation can do much more for a family than just provide them with a new house and new furnishings. It can also provide them with a “new life,” so to speak—a life that they can enjoy and live to the fullest, free of worries about the condition of their home. It doesn’t matter what condition the home is actually in; all that matters is that the family applying for the show feels that an extreme home makeover would provide them with contentment in their lives. And, week after week, the show supposedly claims to provide that for the families selected to appear on the show. These aims—the secondary goals of the renovation—are what seemingly matter most to the show’s

\(^{13}\) One attempt the show made at restoring Marynoel’s confidence was giving her the opportunity to dance in “Beauty and the Beast,” one of the many shows at Disney World, during the family’s vacation, since it had always been her dream to dance professionally.
producers, who are demonstrating for viewers every Sunday that nice things happen to nice people who deserve to have their home-owning dreams come true.

3.3 Material Goods and Ideology

In truth, there is much more happening during each episode than simply providing these families with either a crucial or completely unnecessary home makeover. By making these families’ dreams come true, the show’s producers are also instilling ideological values in the products and services given to each family. These values are communicated to viewers primarily through the show’s dialogue, both in comments made by the design team and family during the actual filming and during the “reflection time” they all have at the end of the show, in which each member of the design team and family has a chance to directly address the camera (and speak to the audience) “one-on-one” about what the renovation means to them. This section of chapter three is divided into three subsections, which will address how television operates as an advocate of dominant ideologies, along with discussion of what material possessions each family is given on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition and how they are presented to viewers and the families, what ideological values those material goods are presumed to have, and how the dialogue in each episode supports those values.

Television and Promotion of Ideology

According to Karl Marx, ideology is expressed through cultural artifacts, which are designed by default to reflect and promote the interests of the dominant social class, due to that class’s ownership and control of the medium (White 164). This notion has its roots in the Marxist ideal that social structure gives rise to particular ways of thinking that will perpetuate that social structure by making it seem “natural, god-given, or ideal so that the subordinate classes accept it without question” (Cormack 13). Thus, the dominant or “ruling” classes uses the television medium to advance their own ideologies and encourage the subordinate class to accept them. In Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, as is the case with many television programs, the ideology being promoted is one of consumerism and materialism.

Television is considered to be a cultural artifact, promoting the values, beliefs, and ideas of the dominant social class through its programming as well as its
advertising (White 163). As was discussed further in chapter one, electronic media—
television included—get most of their money through advertising. The presence of
advertising in television is one of the two ways in which television advances the
ideology of the ruling class—in this case upper-class, wealthy Americans who become
even wealthier when lower-class individuals who strive for upward mobility buy their
products in an attempt to achieve that dream. This is also one of the ways in which
*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* endorses an ideology of materialism due to the
prevalence of product placement in the show.

Another way in which ideological messages can be disseminated through
television is through the narrative itself, as television brings dominant social and
material class interests to the forefront (White 172). To appeal to audiences, narratives
on television must first appeal to those audiences’ understanding of how society
operates. Since the dominant ideology in a society plays a significant role in the
formation of that understanding, television narratives are most often designed to reflect
that ideology in order to ensure that they make sense to audiences (White 172). The
ideology of upward social mobility and the yearning to acquire consumer goods as a
means of achieving that is clearly being promoted through the narrative of *Extreme
Makeover: Home Edition*.

Both the advertising and narrative aspects of television seek to promote
“aspirations and values” of the dominant class and promise viewers that “personal
fulfillment can come through the practices and products of current consumer society”
(White 165). This is precisely the ideal that *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is endorsing
as it attempts to sway consumers to purchase the products featured on each week’s
show for their own homes in order to achieve a level of happiness that is simply not
possible without owning or using those products. Both the renovated home as a whole
and each individual furnishing, decoration, or project given to the families featured on
the show possess ideological values outside of their basic use value. For example, a
swimming pool given to a family with a disabled child has a basic use value of
providing exercise and fun for the child, but may also be portrayed as having additional
ideological values such as an ability to improve the child’s life on a psychological level
and, as a result, increase the child’s ability to succeed. This may or may not be a true result of having the pool installed, but it is how the pool’s benefit is depicted on the show, and thus how the potential benefits of having a pool are relayed to audiences.


What ideological values are the objects given to the Powers and Kilgallon families on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* purported to have? In order to answer this question, one must examine the type of home and furnishings presented to the family and what their use value was intended to be, as either stated or implied on the show. Although each individual element of a home given to the families has its own use and ideological values, the number of material possessions given on each episode is far too great to outline and analyze each one individually. In this analysis, I will be looking at the material goods featured most prominently on the show and how they operate both individually and as a part of the “whole,” the completed dream home.

Regardless of what individual possessions each family is given, the sheer number that they receive delivers an important ideological meaning of its own—that in order to achieve happiness in your home (a secondary goal of all of the renovations), you must have a large number of material possessions. However, since many families who appear on the show already have a large number of belongings, there is another complication—that although they already have a good number of possessions, the ones they have aren’t “nice” or don’t “go together.” The beautiful designer furniture shown off at the end of each episode always fits perfectly into the professionally designed décor, delivering a message to viewers that an additional prerequisite for a harmonious home is having a perfect, “put-together” look, right down to the color-coordinated books placed strategically on the end tables, desks, and mantles.

As day seven of the renovation draws nearer, each newly built home begins to take shape as rooms are finished and decorated, and the impending extravagance becomes increasingly apparent. As designers are putting the finishing touches on the Powers family’s home, Michael Maloney and Tracy Hutson drag in Sears bag after Sears bag filled with furnishings as the other designers argue over what to put where. While
this is going on, viewers get their first glimpse of what the finished house will look like. As designer Preston Sharp is moving pictures from one place to another, we see the family’s new dining room table, which is already set with beautiful new china, placemats, and napkins. The dining room table is often a focal point in these renovations, likely due to the importance of family and togetherness being promoted by each episode of the show. Giving the Powers a beautiful dining area to enjoy while they are eating together as a family is an avenue to further promote an ideology that family relationships and eating together as a family are two important elements of a melodious home life.

When the Powers family comes home from vacation and the house is revealed to them, audiences are finally able to take a closer look at the rest of the newly created large, open living area, including a kitchen with marble countertops and shiny new appliances (Kenmore, of course, since Sears is a primary sponsor), and a living room with plush, appealing new seating and warm decorative lighting. As soon as the family sees their new kitchen, living, and dining rooms, they are shocked to see how much it has changed. Viewers also get to see the change through an on-screen juxtaposition of “before” and “after” shots, comparing a dark, dingy, closed-off living area (shot from outside the front door, which further accentuates the small, closed-off feeling of the room) to the new, vibrant, open living area where they will now be spending their family time. Since this living area is where the Powers family will likely spend much of their time together in their new home, and the warm, inviting décor lends itself to that while simultaneously promoting familial accord. The walls are a muted yellow-gold color and the furniture appears to be finished in oak or cherry together with chocolate leather—both upscale and attractive.

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14 This “preview” reveal is not the focal point of these few minutes of the show, which are centered on creating drama as the designers fight with each other concerning the final placement of wall decorations and other furnishings. The obviously staged and created drama is (curiously) no longer a part of the show, perhaps because drama is not the reason why people watch shows that are focused on doing good things for people who (assumedly) deserve it.
The look of luxury is also present in the kitchen, which features glass cabinet doors and all new, state-of-the-art appliances. Marble countertops grace every surface of the kitchen, and leather-upholstered barstools surround the island that divides the kitchen from the living room. Everything in the kitchen is new, including the coffee pot, blender, and pots and pans hanging from the ceiling. There is even a bowl of fruit placed in the middle of the island, which makes the kitchen look more “lived in.” In addition to having an inviting space in which to spend their family time, the Powers now also have the lavish furnishings that signify an upper-class lifestyle—much better than their previous jumble of mismatched furniture and various décor themes. A further testament to the upper-class nature of the new furnishings is the fact that mom Kristin Powers feels compelled to ask for permission to touch the countertops, which she apparently feels are far out of their league. At one point, she even caresses the cupboard doors, and then bends down to kiss the countertop. The upscale nature of the Powers family’s new home and every other home constructed or renovated on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition falls directly in line with television’s tendency to show more affluent lifestyles in order to influence consumers to want a similar lifestyle for themselves (Kilbourne 56).

Next, the family and viewers are taken to see the Brittni and Reid’s bedrooms. Brittni’s has gone from being a typically cluttered teenage room to a perfectly designed Hawaiian-themed bedroom that looks like part of a resort. The bedspread is covered in a tropical flower print, a bright yellow chair is situated in the corner, and a hula girl lamp sits atop the nightstand. A straw valance over the window, bamboo covered walls and surfboards as wall hangings complete the look. Reid’s bedroom has been decorated in a soccer and car theme, with hubcaps hanging on the wall, checkerboard curtains, and red and black walls—a definite change from the previous décor of plain blue walls and matching blue plaid bedspread. The bed of his dad’s old broken-down truck has been turned into a different kind of bed, which Reid will now be sleeping in every night. The kids’ bedrooms, as in each episode of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, have been decorated in themes that match their interests and future aspirations, which
promotes another portion of the American dream—that you can be anything you want to be, as long as you put your mind to it.

After that, the kids get to see their new bathroom, with triple sinks, new fixtures and tile, recessed lighting, and a huge bathtub—another example of newfound luxury in the new Powers home. The tour continues on to the laundry room, where the camera zooms in on Kristin crying with joy over her new Kenmore Elite washer and dryer, which she says are the “best washer and dryer in the world.” Then, mom and dad Rodney and Kristin get their first glimpse of their new bedroom, complete with a new bedroom suit, king-sized bed, and beautiful new bedding in red and sage to match the sage walls. The master bathroom has been transformed from a partially renovated space decorated in a dingy brown to new, modern bathroom colored in bold hunter green and beige, with the transformation shown clearly in “before” and “after” shots. They now have new tile and a new tub, and a posh wood-framed mirror.

Just when it seems like the tour is done, Pennington leads the family to their garage, where the other half of the truck and a big-screen TV have been put together to create the family’s very own “drive-in” theater, which son Reid declares the “coolest thing in the world.” There is even a mural painted on the wall of other cars and drive-in movie patrons to make it feel more like a “real” drive-in. (Rodney is also later presented with a new Ford Ranger pickup truck to replace his old one.) They then venture out to the back yard, where a giant pirate ship has been erected alongside the family’s existing in-ground swimming pool. There is a pool slide in the middle of the pirate ship, which is its only real useful function. Other than that, the pirate ship is a prime example of wholly useless extravagance on the part of the design team, and its only real function is to serve as a “cool,” yet extremely costly point of interest in the family’s back yard.  

15 Throughout the course of the show, the pirate ship was brought up repeatedly as an expensive and troublesome, time-consuming element of the design. Thus, one has to wonder why in the world they continued to build it if it was so much trouble? It can only be assumed that the pirate ship was important enough to remain because it was such an extravagant addition to the back yard and served to further the overall theme of luxurious excess in the home.
The grand finale for the Powers’ tour of their new home is Olivia’s room, Pennington’s secret project for the week\(^{16}\) and her ultimate “reward” for beating her cancer and becoming healthy again. It seems fitting that since Olivia is the reason the family is receiving the makeover, her room should be the last thing they (and viewers) see. As soon as they open the door, Olivia covers her mouth and tears start to well up as she gazes in disbelief at the giant dollhouse that has been set into one of her bedroom walls. The others are painted yellow and made to look like a flower garden, which coordinates with the dragonfly comforter set and artificial grass for carpet. There’s even a cubbyhole leading directly from Olivia’s room to the master bedroom, since sleeping in her parents’ room while she was undergoing treatment comforted Olivia. Now, the path to the “comfort zone” (as the door is marked) is even shorter. Pennington is proud of how Olivia’s room turned out and thrilled that she was happy with it. “To me,” he says, “that’s the most important thing after everything this family went through.” While the door to the “comfort zone” is admittedly a nice touch, the giant dollhouse and grass for carpet are undoubtedly a bit over the top and further carry the overall theme of extravagance and excess in the Powers home.

After the tour has concluded, family members and members of the design team have an opportunity to share their feelings directly with viewers in the one-on-one “confessional” environment, where they are able to sit alone in a room and reflect on the events that the viewers have just seen by directly addressing the camera. When family members and the design team address the camera directly, alone, during this time of reflection, they are assumed to be showing their “uninhibited and authentic emotional” selves, thus giving additional credence to anything that is said in this one-on-one environment (Biressi 72). This reflection time occurs in each episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, and is also a time when the secondary goals of the renovation and whether or not they were achieved become very clear. Apparently, in the Powers’

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\(^{16}\) Each week, Ty chooses one room in the house to make his “secret project,” and none of the other members of the design team nor the audience are allowed to see it before the big reveal. Usually, the room Ty picks is some sort of a haven of relaxation and rest for a particularly harried member of the family, and in this case, that family member is Olivia.
case, the secondary goals were successfully met, and the family will now be able to savor their time together as a healthy family in their new dream home, thanks to the work of the design team. This is evidenced by Pennington’s final thoughts on the renovation in his own reflection time. “It’s a great feeling to know you did this for those people, and they’re really going to enjoy it,” he says. “They deserve it more than any family I’ve ever met” (“Powers Family”).

Carpenter Paul DiMeo also feels all of the hard work he did fabricating new things for the family was worth it. “It’s exhausting doing this work,” he says, “but to see the reaction on mom and dad and those kids, I would do this again tomorrow.” Interior designer Michael Maloney knows what it’s like to do a good deed and feels the show is “an awesome thing to be involved in,” but his second statement is very revealing as to the true benefits of such an extreme home makeover: “Can you imagine what we’ve done to their property value? Hello? Thank you?” Planner and coordinator Constance Ramos sums up the family’s joy for viewers by saying, “Imagine the family being able to have their first morning in that new house, waking up and realizing that this is not a dream, this is really our home now” (“Powers Family”). Ramos’ statement supports the notion that one of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition’s chief purposes is to encourage viewers to place themselves in the family’s shoes and imagine what receiving a similar makeover would do for their lives.

The Powers family’s renovation also includes something later renovations do not—a short follow-up segment on how the family is doing in their new home a few months after receiving it. This also provides an opportunity for additional dialogue supporting the point that families featured on the show gain much more than just a new home and new furnishings from these makeovers—they are indoctrinated into a materialistic lifestyle in which their possessions make them happy and earn them favor with others. Mom Kristin is obviously happy with the new house and feels the design team did a “great job.” “We haven’t changed anything,” she says. “We love it. Everything in this kitchen is just wonderful. We love all of our appliances, we have a dishwasher that works, a stove, everything.” Dad Rodney then informs viewers that their new home has enabled them to host several recent family gatherings, including

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Easter and Thanksgiving dinners. “It’s nice to be able to entertain in a beautiful house,” he says. “That you’re not embarrassed about,” Kristin adds (“Powers Family”). These two statements, along with the assumption that the Powers’ previous home was unfit for hosting such family gatherings acts in this instance to further promote the ideal that in order to not be embarrassed of one’s living space, one must ensure that it is up-to-date, professionally decorated, and features a lavish interior and exterior. This also could encourage viewers whose homes are not “up to par” (in the show’s sense, anyway) to feel embarrassed about their own homes and want to renovate them in a similar manner.

The older kids’ new rooms have earned them favor and popularity among their friends, which is also in line with the ideology of materialism, in which material goods provide a path to true happiness and fulfillment in life. “It was just the best feeling, like the best rush to walk into this room,” Brittni says. “I love my hula lamp, she’s fun to show off. It’s really cool to have your friends come in and be like, ‘Wow, your room’s so cool!’” Reid is equally impressed. “This is my room; it’s an awesome room,” he says. “It’s been seven months and I still have people coming over to see everything. And that’s still cool. I’m very happy.” While Olivia’s room may not yet have brought her fame and fortune among friends, mom Kristin says it is now a much more comfortable space for her because it’s “pretty” and “[the design team] made it beautiful for her” (“Powers Family”).

According to mom Kristin, the home makeover has brought the family a lot more than just a new home and new furnishings. “We get a lot more family time, which is a very big deal,” she says. “Going through Olivia’s medical treatment, Rodney works two jobs, it’s hard. We didn’t have any time for anything. Something was broken; the plumbing was messed up…that took all of your extra time. Now we’re living our lives. … It’s a good feeling. It’s a warm feeling. We feel blessed.” This statement clearly advances the belief that owning a beautiful home with new furnishings (that aren’t likely to break) will bring familial harmony along with it and result in more contentedness and family time. Viewers and Kristin then relive the big reveal, accentuating its importance in the creation of their new, more fulfilled lives. “I want to
remember that moment over and over again, of coming up to the house and everything was perfect,” she says. “It was beautiful” (“Powers Family”). With this follow up, the secondary results of the renovation (closely related to the secondary goals) begin to overshadow the primary results, as increased attention is drawn to the materialistic results of the makeover. Now that viewers assumedly desire a similar miraculous transformation for their own homes and families, they are invited (as they are every week) to check out the Extreme Makeover: Home Edition web site for more information about the products used on the show.

Although the Kilgallon family’s extreme home makeover is much more necessary since their current house was declared uninhabitable, there are still problems with the secondary implications of the renovation. Like all of the families who appear on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, the Kilgallons are ultimately presented with a house full of excessively lavish furnishings, appliances, and décor. But before this occurs, the Kilgallons’ old home must first be demolished to make way for the new one that will be built for them from the ground up. Since Marynoel’s second-oldest son Chris is interested in magic, Pennington elects to make the old house “disappear” while the family watches via remote video during their Disney World vacation. To pull off this illusion, he simply shows the old house, then covers the camera with a cloth and changes the shot framing so it appears to be centered high above a smooth, empty lot. Although the house didn’t really “disappear,” the idea of making it disappear is similar to the notion of erasing the physical evidence of hard times in plastic surgery shows, as was discussed in chapter two (Heyes 22). By making the house seem to disappear, the design team is metaphorically making the Kilgallons’ problems disappear along with it, symbolizing the family’s fresh start that will come along with their new home. Marynoel further supports this point during her “reflection” time after the family comes home for the reveal, when she tearfully admits, “It’s not just a new house for me, it’s the start of a new life. A life that has hope and a light at the end of the tunnel” (“Kilgallon Family”).

When the Kilgallons return from Disney World, a two-and-a-half story home with a garage stands before them after the bus driver “moves that bus.” The
background music viewers hear is an upbeat, staccato violin piece, which replaces the mournful piano music heard at the beginning of the episode—this symbolizes the dawn of a new and brighter future for the Kilgallon family. The family, predictably, dissolves into tears, laughter, and hugs as they stare in disbelief at their new home, uttering the first of many, “Oh my God”s to come. At that point, John McGrath of McGrath homes, the contracting company that built the house, comes out to tell Marynoel that through community, volunteer, and sponsor donations, they were able to pay off her mortgage on the old house, lifting another weight off of her shoulders and enabling her to more easily live the American dream of home ownership. The contractors are all smiles, basking in the warm glow of doing a good deed for a family in need. Oldest son David reflects on this moment by thanking them for giving the family a “fresh start” and waking them up from a “terrible, terrible nightmare” (“Kilgallon Family”).

With their entire mortgage paid off, the Kilgallons are now ready to embark upon seeing the interior of their new home, which is vastly different from the empty, wood-framed shell it replaced. As soon as the door opens, the camera zooms through the entryway, making the reveal all the more dramatic as the Kilgallons see their new living area for the first time. Like the Powers, the Kilgallons now have a large, open living area consisting of kitchen, living, and dining areas. The room has hardwood floors, recessed lighting, and sage-colored walls with white panel molding along the bottom half of the walls. The kitchen has all-new appliances, granite cabinetry and countertops, and a colorful blown-glass light fixture hanging above a bar area with white upholstered barstools and glass countertops. The Kilgallons also now have a fully set dining room table and plush furniture, all of which would be assumed to contribute to enjoyable time together as a family.

These large, open living areas are always a main focal point of extreme home makeovers, once again likely due to the show’s focus on the importance of spending time together as a family. As is the case with all of the houses presented to families on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, every aspect of the Kilgallons’ new décor matches, right down to the books strategically placed on end tables and dressers to make the house look “lived in.” Although the Kilgallons didn’t seem to have a lot of possessions of
their own when the renovation started, they certainly don’t lack for them now, and many of them (like plasma-screen televisions and a Jacuzzi tub) are positively extravagant and over the top, communicating to audiences that what this family needed and deserved was luxurious furnishings and a look of affluence in their home.

Next, the Kilgallons and viewers go to see the kids’ rooms, the first of which is Chris’s. Since he is interested in magic, his room is decorated in a magic and wizardry theme, complete with castle-like lanterns and magical symbols controlled by the wave of a magic wand, along with a lighted LED panel above the bed displaying his name. There is even a plasma screen TV on one wall that plays host to a cartoon dragon of his very own, also controlled by the magic wand. Since Chris aspires to be a magician, this wizard-themed bedroom is right on the mark, as is obvious from his reaction. “Everything was in there,” he says. “Everything I could have wanted, ever” (“Kilgallon Family”).

When Marynoel and her 13-year-old son David enter his room for the first time, once again no more words come to mind other than, “Oh my God.” Since he is interested in becoming an astronomer, the design team has painted his room to look like a planetarium, complete with 3-D planets hanging from the ceiling, a telescope, and a globe of Mars. He has a new desk and a new computer, and the planets hanging from the ceiling double as light fixtures to complement the recessed lighting. David is thrilled at the idea of sleeping under the stars, and his dream of one day becoming an astronomer is buoyed. Four-year-old twins Patrick and Nicholas’s room, like David’s, stems from their young desires to be a firefighter and police officer, and feature fire truck and police car beds and a faux burning building and jail. There are tiny firefighter and police uniforms, along with huge police and firefighter badges hanging on the walls, which are finished in brick. “This place is awesome!” one of the twins declares as he climbs up in the fire truck bed. Although the twins are much too young to settle on a career as of yet, for now, their dreams of becoming a firefighter and police officer have been encouraged.

In the Kilgallons’ episode, Pennington’s special project was creating a haven of relaxation in Marynoel’s bedroom. This fits with his usual theme of making his special
project a reward for the person who is the “reason” for the makeover. As they enter it together, Marynoel sighs with relief, and the tranquility of the room is communicated through the camera as viewers see blue and white walls, artwork, and furnishings comprising a beautiful retreat from the stresses of life as a single mother. She now has a master bathroom with a Jacuzzi tub, complete with flowers and candles on the sides, ripe for a relaxing bubble bath. As she later reflected upon seeing her new bedroom for the first time, Marynoel says, “I felt this peaceful, calm feeling come over me, and I just started to cry because being so down and out and almost completely giving up all hope, it made me realize that no one should ever give up hope because all of these wonderful, wonderful people did this for me and my family, with nothing to gain for themselves, just out of the goodness of their hearts to help a family in need.”

Marynoel’s revelation reflects completion of both the primary and secondary goals of the renovation—building them a place of their own while simultaneously restoring her faith and confidence in herself and the world. The message being delivered here—be it truth or fiction—is that no matter what life throws at the Kilgallons now, they will be able to handle it because they have a beautiful, picturesque living in environment in which to handle it. “I think you’re going to have better days than what you had before,” Pennington tells her as they stand together in her bedroom, furthering the impression that the bedroom and the entire house are going to be the turning point in the Kilgallons’ lives, allowing them to live stress-free from now on (“Kilgallon Family”).

The role of the new home in the start of a new life for the Kilgallon family is further illustrated in the moments of reflection edited together at the end of the episode. “She just had faith that something would happen; something would change,” Pennington says. “And what’s so cool is we were able to make that change.” According to Marynoel’s mother Rosemary Kleinfelder, her daughter’s new life has been made even richer by all of the support she has received from “people who didn’t even know her.” Marynoel perhaps best sums up the entire experience when she says she has been “blown away” by it. “I felt so alone for so long,” she says. “And it just all came flying back, everything that everybody did to help me. I look forward to being
able to give my boys the life that they deserve. Thank you. Thank you for taking care of me.” And taking care of her is exactly what the design team has done, as they and the family gather in the warm glow of the brand new dining area at the conclusion of the show to toast their “brand new start.”

Although there was no pirate ship in the Kilgallons’ backyard (and in fact, the back yard was not talked about at all in the show), there were still a great deal of extravagant, over-the-top, and entirely unnecessary additions to the home, including the glass counter tops, blown-glass light fixture, and plasma televisions. None of these things are particularly necessary for a happy home, but since the show’s main purpose is to sell its sponsors’ products while at the same time building a new home (and perhaps a new life) for a “deserving” family, the impression put forth is one that these excessive furnishings are the best way for viewers to improve harmony in their own homes. Over and over again, this same ideology is brought to the forefront in Extreme Makeover: Home Edition—a happy, stress-free home is comprised of a perfect, professionally designed décor accompanied by posh furniture and luxurious rooms and amenities.

Opulent furnishings simply abound in the Powers’ and Kilgallons’ new homes, overwhelming them with joy while at the same time promoting the ideal that such lavish material goods are to be equated with achieving that same level of happiness for oneself. The homes featured on each episode serve as prime examples of upper-class living, and with each new room revealed, more and more luxurious furniture and fittings are showcased for the cameras and viewers at home, who are probably already dreaming of creating the same radical transformation in their own homes. This falls directly in line with Mimi White’s illustration of how television promotes the lifestyle of the dominant class by making audiences want the same for themselves—promoting the ideal that all problems can be solved with the purchase or receipt of new material goods. As soon as the family catches their first glimpse of their new dream home, they inevitably scream, cover their faces, start to cry, or simply collapse in the street, overwhelmed with the joy of seeing their dream home come to fruition. Because reality television encourages viewers to imagine themselves in the same position as the people
being featured on the show (Hill 82), it becomes even easier to disseminate these types of ideals because viewers can see and are pleased with the image of themselves being just as overwhelmed as their own living-space dreams come true.

3.4 The Show as an Advertisement

In the minds of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition’s advertisers, the best (and perhaps only) way for viewers to construct a similar environment of harmony for themselves and their families is to purchase the same products used and given to families on the show. Just as corporations and medical personnel donate their services to plastic surgery shows with the expectation that consumers will flock to their offices wanting the same services (Deery “Trading” 211), many of the products used and featured on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition are likely provided at no- or low-cost in exchange for a few clear camera shots of the company’s name on the side of a box, bag, or truck.

Since modern television-watching technology like DVR has taken away some of the effectiveness of traditional commercial advertising, corporations must find another way to create a desire for their product in consumers. So they turn to product placement, which takes away consumers’ ability to “zap” the commercial because it is imbedded directly into the show (Jhally “Advertising”). This is a throwback to the early days of television, in which advertisers’ names appeared in the titles of shows, and advertisers directly controlled the content. Although title sponsors have not yet returned to the airwaves, use of product placement is increasing in the media industry, and oftentimes audiences are unaware that money has changed hands between the network and the advertiser (Kilbourne 61). Shows like Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, which spends a great deal of each one-hour episode equating material goods with personal fulfillment, provide an excellent opportunity for advertisers looking to reach consumers through product placement. There are many product tie-ins featured on each episode of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, and consumers may not even be thinking of the continuous mentions of Sears, Kenmore, and Craftsman tools as advertisements at all.
When the show first got its start, Sears was just about the only advertiser given substantial space for product placement. In fact, in the pilot episode featuring the Powers family, there are no readily apparent instances of product placement for brands or wares not sold at Sears, the show’s primary sponsor. Throughout the course of the Powers family’s episode, interior designers Michael and Tracy are repeatedly shown shopping for various elements to put into the family’s new home. The longest of these shopping trips was, of course, a visit to Sears. When they go in the door, the camera pauses for a few seconds on the Sears sign outside the local department store, ensuring that viewers (and potential customers) see that Michael and Tracy are buying all of these great consumer goods at Sears. The next couple of minutes are spent airing a montage of their Sears shopping extravaganza, concluding in them carrying a large number of Sears bags, with the logos clearly visible, into the home, assumedly full of luxurious goods to help create the Powers’ posh new home.

After the family returns home from vacation, Sears is afforded additional opportunities for product placement during the “big reveal.” Kristin is thrilled with her new washer and dryer, which viewers can clearly see are the Kenmore Elite brand, and claims they are the “best washer and dryer in the world.” What could be better advertising for this product than a new recipient of a free set already singing their accolades before she has even used them? Showing Kristin reacting in this manner to the product serves as an extremely positive testimonial. The fact that they come from the “Elite” line also helps advance the impression that everything in the Powers’ new house is upscale and luxurious. Although the names on the remainder of the appliances in the house are not shown, one can assume that most of them are likely Kenmore as well. Craftsman toolboxes are clearly visible both in the garage and in son Reid’s room during the reveal, helping to promote another of Sears’ exclusive brands.

In early seasons, during the show’s final commercial break, Sears would air a commercial specifically tailored to the family featured on that week’s episode. In the ad, the various furnishings, appliances, and tools that contributed to that week’s home makeover were counted, as if they added up to some sort of equation for “the good life” (Sears’ then-slogan). At the end, Sears personally welcomed the family home to their
new surroundings, ripe for making “the good life” an easy thing to achieve. Although this commercial was a traditional television advertisement, it also supported the heavy Sears-related product placement featured during the show itself because it reminded audiences that the products that made the family’s new home into such luxurious living quarters came from Sears.

In later seasons, specific instances of Sears product placement have fallen by the wayside in favor of a much more diversified (and much more obvious) range of products used on and advertised within the show. The first occurrence featured in the Kilgallon family’s episode comes when a camera zooms in on a Terminix truck and the company’s “No bugs, no hassles” slogan. Since the Kilgallons’ old home was destroyed by termites, it seems fitting that the design team wants to prevent something similar from happening to their new home. As the Terminix employee is doing his work on the new house, Preston Sharp is narrating and simultaneously providing advertising for the various preventative services offered by Terminix. Usually this many details are not provided on services performed during the construction of the house, but in this case they are, and they function as an extended embedded advertisement for Terminix’s termite protection services. Since viewers likely do not want their own homes to suffer the same catastrophic damage the Kilgallons’ home did, they might be compelled to purchase these preventative services for themselves.

There are also several other companies advertised throughout the construction of the Kilgallons’ home, mostly via two- or three-second camera pauses on trucks and packaging containing various building materials and furnishings. A Daltile box is shown as contractors are putting tile in the bathroom, and piles of siding sitting on the ground are used to advertise the company that provided them, James Hardie Siding Products. The camera zooms in on a United Rentals logo emblazoned on the side of a John Deere Gator being used by contractors to transport materials and workers. A shot of a drawer closing in the kitchen includes a zoomed-in shot to ensure viewers see the KraftMaid logo on the inside of the drawer. When the furniture arrives, camera operators make sure viewers see the American Signature Furniture insignia on the side of the truck. There is even an example of product placement when they “move that
“bus” to reveal the house, as one camera zooms on the Diamond Coach name on the side of the bus. Curiously, Sears seems to have less involvement in the show now than they did in its first few seasons, although they are still listed on the *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* web site as a primary sponsor. While there are occasional in-show shopping excursions to Sears, they are much fewer and further between than they once were. As of season four, Sears also no longer purchases a special advertising spot at the end of the show welcoming the family home. This could potentially be due to the popularity developed by the show as each season progresses, and the subsequent additional sponsors brought on board as its audience grows.

In the Kilgallons’ episode, there is also a great deal of embedded advertising for Disney World. During the construction of their new home, the Kilgallons are vacationing there, and throughout the episode there are various montages of the family having fun at Disney World. While these video clips serve a primary purpose of showing the family enjoying themselves, they also serve another purpose—showing viewers how much fun they and their own families could have on a Disney World vacation. During each clip, the members of the Kilgallon family are shown wearing various Disney World gear and meeting Disney characters. Ty also manages to work in a plug for the park’s current promotion—the Year of a Million Dreams—when he informs Marynoel that she will be living her own dream of dancing in a professional production when she joins the members of the park’s *Beauty and the Beast* cast for a special performance.

At the end of each episode, viewers are told to visit the show’s official web site for additional information on the products featured on the show, further cultivating the notion that what matters most to this show is actually not doing something nice for someone with these products, but on selling those products to someone in the viewing audience. The start of the credits also features a long list of sponsors who have provided their products. Viewers who visit the show’s web site can click on the “As Featured On” link to see detailed descriptions of the products presented to each family, all the way back to season one, including web addresses and phone numbers for the company that provided each product. There is a clear distinction between two classes
of businesses featured on this web page—companies whose logos are pictured and web addresses are given, and others who are simply listed in plain text with a contact phone number alongside. One can only assume that the reason for this is that the companies whose logos appear on the page gave the show more products, more money, or both.

Each of these instances of product placement—both in the show and on the web—culminate in the creation of a “TiVo-proof commercial” that ensures advertisers’ messages get out to viewers of the show, even if they skip the traditional commercial breaks. This unconventional example of advertising promotes what Jean Kilbourne believes is the “core belief of American culture: that we can re-create ourselves, transform ourselves, transcend our circumstances” simply by purchasing a particular material item (68). On Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, the focus is on giving each product additional ideological connotations to tell consumers in the audience that they need these products in order to make their lives complete, just as the families featured on the show needed them to fix their own personal problems. By doing this, the show is “creating an aura” for each consumer product shown, and telling audiences that if they purchase this item, they aren’t just purchasing material goods, but also an image that goes along with it (Kilbourne 70). In the case of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, this image is one of luxury and stress-free living.

While promoting these images of luxury, makeover shows have simultaneously become “prime-time infomercials” selling products to viewers by personal testimony (Deery “Trading” 213). This concept is also at the root of how the show promotes materialism as a solution to non-material problems—each product is presented as a solution to such problems. In the advertising world, human desires for love, family, friendship, and adventure are connected to the world of commodities and, at the same time, translated into desires for those commodities (Jhally “Advertising”). Makeover shows like Extreme Makeover: Home Edition do this by identifying a problem, offering a solution in the form of a particular product or service, and giving proof of the desired transformation. The product placement in this particular show performs these three tasks just as well if not better than traditional advertising or infomercials because the show starts off presenting viewers with a family in despair and ends with the same
family shown in jubilation. Although in most cases they have only received a new home and new furnishings, this is presented as solving all of the family’s problems that had previously left them depressed and despondent—thus encouraging viewers to equate such a transformation with the acquisition of material products. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* should certainly be seen primarily as an advertisement, with this role helping to further the ideology of “luxury equals bliss” disseminated throughout the show.
4.1 Then and Now: How the Show Has Changed

In the four seasons that Extreme Makeover: Home Edition has been on the air, the show has changed somewhat in its structure and how various elements are presented during each one-hour episode. Some elements, like the overall extremity and extravagance of the renovation (or rebuild) have increased as the years have passed, while others, such as the contrived drama associated with arguing designers, have lessened or even disappeared. Regardless, these changes have affected how the ideology of materialism is imparted on the show—some by lessening its noticeability, while others make it all the more obvious.

One way in which the show has changed is in the overall extravagance of the kids’ rooms. Whereas the younger members of the Powers family were treated to renovated bedrooms with new furnishings that matched their interests or career aspirations, the mix of items in the room was not nearly as over-the-top or extravagant as those present in the bedrooms of Marynoel Kilgallon’s sons. While David’s space-themed room and the twins’ police-and-firefighter bedroom are not too terribly excessive, Chris’s wizard bedroom, complete with functioning magic wand, personal dragon, and plasma screen television, is a prime example of unnecessary extravagance. This has recently become rather common in kids’ bedrooms on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. One season-three episode even featured a teenage boy’s room that had been “transformed” by the addition of seven plasma-screen televisions and a full video-editing suite, since he aspired to be a film director. While the design team’s eagerness to support the kids’ career aspirations by making their rooms match up with those desires could be taken as admirable, their tendency to accomplish this through giving them thousands of dollars in material goods only serves to contribute to the show’s already problematic focus on using consumerism as a means to achieve ultimate happiness in life.
Another way in which the show has changed in the past four years is more moments of insertion of vignettes featuring the designers’ and families’ “reflection” time. These brief moments in which members of the family or design team sit alone against a plain backdrop and directly address the camera give them an opportunity to express their own deeper feelings about the material transformation of each home. In early episodes, this reflection time was predominantly present at the end of the episode, after the “big reveal.” This enabled the family and designers to reflect chiefly on the reveal and its impact in changing the family’s life, assumedly forever. However, in recent seasons, the reflection time has been more evenly interspersed throughout each episode, allowing the family and design team to reflect on more aspects of the renovation, thus giving the earlier stages of the renovation equal importance to the public unveiling at the conclusion of the show. This helps to move some of the focus away from the “big reveal” and place it more equally on the entire process, in which each task completed, no matter how small, eventually culminates in the creation of a better, happier life for each selected family. By focusing equally on both the end result and the process required to create that result, the show is making it clearer to audience members how to create a similar transformation in their own homes. This shift in focus also aids in the show’s function as an advertisement, because it allows the designers to further accentuate the ideological values of each individual element of the makeover, rather than the completed home as a whole, thus giving audiences a clearer impression of what material goods they should hope to acquire in order to achieve similar bliss.

Lastly, the show no longer gives a short follow-up on how the family is doing in their home, as they did with the Powers family. In that particular episode, the few minutes of follow-up presented at the end serves to make the materialistic values adopted by the family through the makeover process even more apparent, as they discuss the positive attention and subsequent happiness their newly renovated home has brought them. The kids are enjoying showing their new, “cool” bedrooms off to their friends, while Rodney and Kristin are no longer ashamed to invite family over to their home, now that it is filled with nice furnishings and perfectly in order. This element of the show made its materialistic nature painfully obvious. One reason why it
is no longer present could potentially be that each family may not have such a “happy” follow-up. Many viewers are often left wondering how families who were already in financial trouble will be able to pay property taxes and utility bills for an extravagant new home that is twice the size of their old dwelling. In the case of the Powers, no existing financial problems were apparent at the beginning of the episode, but in the case of the Kilgallons, it was obvious that Marynoel was having trouble making ends meet for herself and her four sons. Showing a family in financial trouble even after their extreme home makeover would undermine the show’s ability to portray materialism as the ultimate problem solver, and, in turn, harm its capability to perform effectively as an advertisement for the companies whose donated products comprise each “happy home.” Instead, audiences are left to assume that each family continues to lead a blissful existence in their new home, free from their previous problems.

All three of these changes are united by one common thread— their close relationship to the show’s depiction of materialism as an effective means to solve personal problems. This theme is the main focus of each episode of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, and each individual element of the show, no matter how small, serves to demonstrate that ideology. In the following section, I will offer my reflections on how the show promotes materialism, along with how those impressions are supported by the research discussed in earlier chapters.

4.2 Conclusion & Implications for Future Scholarship

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition equates “the good life” with one containing a large number of fancy possessions, and it demonstrates this by presenting one family each week with an extravagant new or renovated home and designer furnishings to match. Since these families are selected because they have suffered personal hardship, regardless of whether or not that hardship was truly financial in nature, an overall impression is given that any sort of personal problem can be solved through the acquisition of luxurious material possessions. The Powers family suffered a medical hardship when their youngest daughter was diagnosed with cancer, thus, their house took on the role as a “reward” to the family for sticking together through such a rough time and also as an incentive and help to remain a strong family in the future.
Although the Kilgallon family’s hardship was indeed of a financial nature, in the end, their new home still seems to serve as a sort of “security blanket” for single mother Marynoel, who we are told has worked hard to ensure her four sons will have a good life but has still been unable to provide that due to circumstances beyond her control.

Although the Powers and Kilgallon families’ stories are quite different, they do share one thing in common—theyir stories show that they are fundamentally “good” at heart, meaning that either their problems may be defined as having occurred through no fault of their own or they are making an effort to turn their lives around. In fact, it could be said that all of the families featured on the show, different as their stories may be, are ultimately interchangeable because they all are victims of circumstances beyond their control. Be it a family member with a serious illness or a single mother down on her luck, all of the featured families are “good” people that audiences will easily be able to sympathize with and see as being deserving of an extreme home makeover. It would be more difficult to feel these sorts of emotions for people who are viewed as falling on hard times through their own actions, such as developing a drug or alcohol addiction, and making no effort to improve their situation themselves. Another common thread shared by nearly all of the families featured on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition is the notion of the heterosexual nuclear family, which allows the show to ultimately define a “deserving” American family by way of this characteristic in addition to the perception of being “good” at-heart. While blended families are featured on occasion, along with extended families living together in one home, to date no alternative family situations—such as gay, lesbian, or transgendered parents—have been featured on the show. Thus, families must meet two prerequisite characteristics—being fundamentally “good” and meeting the show’s definition of “family”—in order to be seen as “deserving” of having one’s life turned around through an extreme home makeover.

Cressida Heyes writes that cosmetic surgery makeover television shows give an impression that the physical makeover can suddenly erase years of life’s struggles, and the home transformations featured on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition appear to be doing the exact same thing. Even though nearly everything which is gained by the families is some sort of material possession (with the exception of the occasional college
scholarship, which is expected to lead to material gain), those goods are purported to do much more than simply give the families additional net worth. They are instead presented as direct paths to fulfillment and happiness because of their ability to simply erase the struggles of the past. This association directly promotes materialism—the belief that possessions are central to one’s life and a primary source of satisfaction (Belk 265).

However, it is possible to build homes for families in need without simultaneously promoting a materialistic lifestyle. One organization whose mission is relatively similar to that of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition is Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit organization whose primary goal is to help alleviate poverty (“Why Habitat for Humanity is Needed”). Habitat for Humanity is able to complete this mission without simultaneously promoting materialism for three key reasons. First, the families who receive homes from Habitat for Humanity must make a down payment and pay the mortgage on the property (“Habitat for Humanity Fact Sheet”). Second, they must spend a minimum number of hours participating in the actual building of the home (“Habitat for Humanity Fact Sheet”). Third, the homes they receive are basic and not at all extravagant. If there were to be a reality show featuring Habitat for Humanity, it likely would focus on showcasing community efforts to address social problems, not individual attainment of products, and would not suffer from the same materialistic faults as Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.

On Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, audiences are shown elaborate, ideal homes that are difficult if not impossible for the average American family to acquire for themselves. In fact, the homes presented to the Powers and Kilgalloons could easily be seen as “mansions.” These homes are then made to seem like a necessary part of a happy and contented life. Before the show, the families are unhappy with their lives as they are and are hoping that an extreme home makeover will help. After the show, all of their worries seem to have simply dissolved, and they are suddenly completely happy with their lives. This is another example of Belk’s definition of materialism. When audiences see these fancy homes and the families’ reactions, are they driven to desire a similar home for themselves in hopes of achieving the same effect of happiness.
and contentment with simultaneous erasure of any past struggles, thus leading them to develop materialistic values? Does the show sell the concept of happiness while at the same time promoting the use of material means to achieve it, just as is the case with many television advertisements (Kilbourne 70)?

Most television shows promote consumption because they are advertiser-supported, and in order for advertisers to want to buy time or space for their ads, it must be a profitable venture for them. Therefore, one of television’s foremost roles in American society is to encourage audiences to purchase consumer goods. As was discussed in earlier chapters, one of the most effective ways of doing this is to create a false need or desire for a product in consumers (Kasser “Psychology” 16). By associating the homes and furnishings given away on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* with happiness, fulfillment, and relief of personal hardship, the show is also cultivating audiences’ desires for similar products by appealing to their yearning for similar contentment. In the end, the show can potentially lead to the development of what Kasser referred to as the materialistic value orientation, or the overall belief that the acquisition of material goods is the most direct way to happiness. Thus, audiences are being socialized through the media into holding more materialistic desires (Kasser “Psychology” 13). The families featured on the show are seeking to use materialism as a coping strategy to deal with problems and unsatisfied needs (Kasser “High” 42). This has the potential to encourage audiences to do the same.

*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* also demonstrates Kilbourne’s idea that television focuses on more affluent lifestyles in order to show consumers what they should desire (56). By engaging in what Veblen referred to as conspicuous consumption, the families featured on the show are making themselves appear more affluent, even if they are not, thus giving the illusion that any previous financial problems have vanished. This simultaneously solidifies the myth of the American dream by showing another family in high spirits because they were able to achieve that dream, while also promoting audiences’ desires for similar feelings (and similar consumer products). *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is able to be even more effective at the promotion of such ideals because it is a reality television show, and thus allows
viewers to more easily imagine themselves in the role of the people being featured on the show (Hill 82). This could possibly contribute to the development of materialistic value orientation among audiences, because the show is encouraging them to believe that their own lives can be “fixed” through consumption, much like the families featured on the show (Deery “Trading” 212).

The same impression was also put forth on Queen for a Day, the show in which four women with sad stories of personal hardship competed against one another to see whose tale was the most heart-rending. Although Queen for a Day predated Extreme Makeover: Home Edition by about 50 years, the overarching message of both shows is nearly identical—any personal problem can be overcome with material goods. The prizes awarded to less fortunate women on Queen for a Day were assumed to “secure [their] future happiness and ensure that [their] problems would not resurface” (Watts 151). The same assumption seems to be true for the houses presented to families on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. Both Queen for a Day and Extreme Makeover: Home Edition promote consumerism and the avoidance of personal crisis through the acquisition of consumer goods. Just as Queen for a Day showed women who were sad and desperate at the beginning of the episode and, by the end, were smiling and jubilant as they were presented with a wealth of prizes, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition associates material goods with happiness by showing what an emotional transformation each family goes through during the course of each one-hour episode. Both shows also expose socioeconomic inequity and then “solve” it by giving away goods (Scheiner 377). Many of the families featured on Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, like the women who appeared on Queen for a Day, have found themselves in a position of hardship because of the social inequalities that come along with the capitalist economic system. However, rather than getting to the root of the problem and ensuring these families will have the ability to provide for themselves in the future, these shows “fix” the problem by covering it with a Band-Aid of nice consumer goods.

Although it seems logical that simply presenting someone with luxury items will not solve their personal problems, shows like Extreme Makeover: Home Edition continue to promote this notion when they show the glorious emotional transformations families
experience when they receive an extreme home makeover. These families are indoctrinated into the world of materialism when they are presented with a wealth of consumer goods as a means to solve all of their personal problems, and, just as was the case with *Queen for a Day*, it is assumed that these goods will guarantee their future happiness and ensure that those problems will never return. It seems like an impractical promise, and it is, but that is the pledge being delivered by *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, and it is that unrealistic undertaking that makes this show’s message incredibly problematic. At the same time, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is also promoting a “disposable” lifestyle in which the only way to achieve such a complete life turnaround is to simply throw away everything that related to one’s previous, unhappy, un-blissful life and replace it with something new—further feeding into the ideology of consumerism. At its roots, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* promotes an ideology of materialism by showing the drastic emotional makeover each family featured on the show experiences along with their home makeover. The show accomplishes this through promoting notions of happiness, family, and togetherness purported to go along with their nice, new homes and also by acting as an unconventional advertisement for the companies whose products have played a starring role in the transformation.

It may be worthwhile in future research to investigate the ultimate economic effects of the show, both on the featured families and their communities as a whole. Since gift taxes likely must be paid on the home and furnishings each family receives, in addition to increased property taxes and utility bills, the extreme home makeover could potentially become very expensive to recipients. And the families themselves aren’t the only ones who may find themselves with a sudden increase in property taxes, since the addition of a new mansion in any area is likely to augment the entire neighborhood’s assessed property values, and, in turn, their taxes. The building of large, new homes in lower-class economic areas could also potentially be seen as an avenue to begin gentrification of “problem” areas. Currently, no statistics are available on the economic changes that come about as a result of each home makeover, but this information is vital in assessing the broader social issues surrounding the show.
As shows like this become more popular and proliferate on American television, further study on how these shows affect audiences’ impressions of materialism may at the same time become more necessary. One possible angle of further study on this issue is empirical research on whether or not audiences’ levels of materialism are affected by viewing shows like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Further studies might focus on how viewers watching these types of shows interpret adequacies and inadequacies in relation to the idea of the self. The role of the home in the construction of the self, along with the part that the home plays in the family’s personal happiness, may also be integral to understanding the broader implications that home makeover shows have for the future.
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