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### Does Reality TV Promotes Dangerous Stereotypes?

Everyday, millions of people around the globe turn on their television sets and tune in to their favorite program. The interests of so many people vary greatly, with some preferring dramas, others comedies, some even forgoing the serials in favor of movies. But one genre that more and more people flock to is “Reality” television, comprised of programs that supposedly show “real life” situations. These shows are often advertised as unscripted, meaning the episodes are never written out before hand, and leads to the assumption that whatever happens on the show is not acting and therefore ‘real’. However, many of the characters seen on these shows are just that--characters. The people hired for the show, as real as they may be, are acting as exaggerated portraits of themselves for the sake of entertainment. And while the episodes are unscripted, the situations can be provoked, and edited in order to increase the drama. The problem lies in the building blocks of society: it is built on group structure. Humans all belong to groups, whether they are groups based on ethnicity or nationality, or groups that are based on interests or hobbies. These groups can have certain positive or negative traits associated with them over time, often based on the actions of only one or two fringe members of the groups.

Such associations are called stereotypes, and unfortunately, reality television programming has a habit of encouraging the belief of such associations. The exaggerated characters bring in more viewers, and associate the questionable behavior with those specific groups. The viewers, however, fail to consider the non-reality of the situation, leading them to believe that these people are honest, non-exaggerated examples of the chosen group of people. While most in the industry would call these tactics harmless attempts to improve ratings, these ploys can cause real harm to those watching, and to those the characters represent. This paper will consider just how dangerous the stereotypes and habits of advertising non-reality as reality can be.

Of the many reality programs that exist on television, it was far easier to find examples of horrible human behavior and negative stereotypes than it was to find examples of positive effects. Popular programming, such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *The Real Housewives* series, and *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* create negative stereotypes about women. Other shows, such as *Jersey Shore*, create false impressions of specific races, while shows such as *Teen Mom*, and *Buckwild* encourage reckless and even dangerous behavior.

Initially, *Keeping up with the Kardashians* was created following Kim's scandal to suggest to audiences that famous celebrities are ordinary people in who lead completely normal lives; in this effort, however, it completely failed. Instead, because of the fashion in which the women on the show were over-sexualized, people who watching the show are left with the harmful stereotypes of women. Some ideas drawn from the show include the idea that given the chance, women would obsess over shopping, makeup and physical beauty rather than intelligence, or the idea that sexy women are only ever dramatic, opportunistic, over emotional, and power-hungry. The majority of the scenes are shot inside the Kardashian's house, which leads to a powerful demonstration that women are able to make money by their physical

appearance, not by their talent, any education, nor prior work experiences. This fact also illustrates the gender stereotype, as women lack the ability to handle actual jobs that would be beneficial to society, seeing the Kardashian sisters only chase after feminine ideals, such as modeling and acting.

Similarly, although *The Bachelorette* features a wider variation of women than *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, they still have a common ground: the destructive assumption about women. In the show, women are shown as highly emotional, quick to fall in love, in some cases, seem to become insane under random circumstances. Furthermore, women are dependent on the men - whenever there is a successful couple, the woman tends to relocate to the man's place: when Andy proposed to Tessa, Tessa relocated to Andy's city, when Jason engaged to Molly, Molly settled down in Seattle, Jason's hometown. *The Real Housewives* series has done a similarly terrible job at bashing stereotypes of women: the name alone already can be seen as debasing women: housewives are the women who are stuck at home, doing the house chores and raising the children while the husband earns the money. The show portrays housewives of the rich and famous, often identified by heavy make-up and an overabundance of jewelry, who are vapid, are content to stay at home, have no job but gossiping around, and live upon the wealth of their husbands. Are they the 'real housewives'? Within the improvement of gender balance, the answer should certainly be 'no'.

The false stereotype about a race is clearly shown in the reality television *Jersey Shore*. The Italian-Americans in the show are described with tanned skin, full-of-gel hair, a lot of muscles, violent and vulgar behavior. This show has given the community a bad rap, since the people in this show do not have a job, they are not working but they party, drink, and have sex every day. Following the end of *Jersey Shore*, the show "Buckwild" threatened to have a similar

effect on the image of young people who live in the mountainous regions of West Virginia.

Almost immediately when the show was announced, many expressed their concern that those living in rural areas of West Virginia would be seen as wild, irresponsible hillbillies. The show was cancelled shortly after it started its first season.

In that same breath, there are a few strong examples of reality television having positive effects. When viewers tune into watch reality television, the majority of people are watching for sheer entertainment. It is a popular “guilty pleasure” among people all over the world. The average American comes home from a busy day at work or school to unwind and give their minds a rest by watching senseless television. Most people that watch reality shows like *The Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *The Real World*, and much more; view them with the mindfulness that most of the scenes are fabricated. These reality stars are paid to entertain their audiences so exaggerating certain situations is expected. Reality television is not harmful as long as what is portrayed on screen is not taken entirely serious.

People also find watching and analyzing the conflicts to be fascinating. Shows like *Big Brother* or *Dr. Drew's Rehab* are examples of programs people find themselves absorbed into because they teach us something about human nature and broaden our ideas of the human mind. Viewers enjoy seeing if the people on these shows overcome their differences or adversities. It gives a sense of familiar emotions that viewers can relate to. Reality television additionally expands viewer's interpretations of minority groups. In a sense, it is almost relieving these social groups of judgemental stereotypes. An example is the show, *Little People Big World*. This show is about a family of “little people” who carry on normal lives dealing with the hardships of being a dwarf trying to blend into average American culture. It changes the audience's understanding of these people and encourages an acceptance of people no matter how different they may be.

Reality television is also used to watch and admire other people's talents. For instance, shows like *MasterChef* and *Face Off* inspire their audiences to get out in the world and go for their dreams. Whether it be cooking shows, makeup competitions, or dance competitions, it teaches its viewers that all dreams no matter how big are obtainable. Lastly, it can be watched as inspiration. Programs such as *Extreme Home Makeover* motivates their viewers to help people in need and maybe even join a local charity. There are many positive aspects of reality television that go way beyond the reputation for harmful stereotypes. As long as the viewer is mindful and uses common sense to differentiate the fabrications from reality, the result from watching reality television should be harmless.

There are other perspectives to consider as well. From a production standpoint, reality television generally costs a fraction of the price of scripted series. You could do a couple Reality T.V. series for what one scripted show would cost. In addition, Reality television consistently touches on hot-button cultural issues such as class, sex, sexual orientation and race. These are issues that "respectable" television shows rarely touch. Reality shows also showcase real, working-class people on shows such as *Deadliest Catch* and *Ice Road Truckers*. These types of people and situations "used to be routine" on scripted network television but since the 2000s have become a rarity. Now scripted series are full of upscale yuppies and wealthy people that the average person may not/cannot relate to. Another positive of Reality television is that it has the potential to turn its participants into national celebrities. Many participants in reality shows have gone on to do other things, such as Elisabeth Hasselbeck, who was originally on *Survivor*, has made it in TV. She is now one of the hosts on the popular television talk show *The View*. Bethenny Frankel, one of the original "Real Housewives", has launched a successful brand called

Skinnygirl Cocktails. And Mike "The Miz" Mizanin has become professional wrestlers for the WWE since his time on *The Real World*.

In 2006, four of the ten most popular television programs among viewers 17 years old and under were reality shows. Since then one can assume they have only become more popular but at the same time becoming a guilty pleasure to most viewer. A number of studies have tried to pinpoint the appeal of reality television. From personal identification with the onscreen participants, to pure entertainment, to a vicarious feeling of participation, the reasons cited for watching reality television are diverse. Reality television appeals to the voyeur in everyone. When you are watching things that take place in private settings, that contain nudity and/or that include gossip, you feel like you are a part of it. Many reality shows feature a competition aspect which allows spectators to “participate” in a sport or activity they otherwise might never have the chance to do.

These good aspects, however, are outweighed by the negative. While watching reality TV shows can be fun and relaxing, it is important to remember the falsehoods of advertising. Namely, it is important to recall that the term ‘unscripted’ is a fallacy. Within these shows, such as *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, and *The Jersey Shore*, dialogue and formats are created to alter the true sense and reactions of the people being filmed. These senses are edited to tell a powerful, yet intriguing tale related to the show being watched by the individual. These TV shows promote a false perception of reality and misrepresents that truth behind the actions and scenarios being shown by the individuals within the show, or some may consider them, actors.

These shows are, in that sense, very similar to sitcoms: they show what can be possible. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* portrays life if the viewers belonged to a well-off family and had the time and freedom to explore whatever interested them, and changed their interests on

whatever whim they found. *Jersey Shore* imagines a life where twenty-something aged friends are able to do whatever they want, whenever they want, without worrying for financial security. While these fantasies are fun to consider, they are merely fantasies.

Some individuals watching reality TV programs such as the previously mentioned shows believe that this is the true form of how to act and what to do, therefore one might model their behavior after those who are in the shows. This can be a hazard to mature development and decision making. An average person is not as wealthy nor have the same time and capabilities those in the TV shows have. The reason those on the shows have those abilities is because the reality is altered and is nothing but a fallacy. If one were to act like those in the shows; they risk themselves getting in trouble, going into financial debt, and living a fake life and representing a fake person.

With all sides considered, we are able to come to two conclusions: firstly, it is acceptable that reality television does not show actual reality, as the heightened drama is what pulls people in and encourages a sort of mental 'escape' while watching the show. However, advertising these shows, characters, and situations as real can have incredibly negative effects on the people who are connected with the groups portrayed, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Secondly, it is up to the viewer to learn to discern what are real and unreal related to the situations portrayed on reality television. While a disclaimer added in front of the show probably would not harm the ratings too much, it would ruin the illusion for those attempting to 'escape' from their real life with it. As of right now, the only way to combat the negative effects of reality television is through thorough education regarding the fallacies that allow such stereotypes to exist.