

Is reality television damaging younger viewers' perceptions of themselves and others in society? Are the female population being exploited through the representation of women in reality TV?

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INTRODUCTION

‘There are life lessons that can be learned from reality TV.’ - Mike White

Reality Television (TV) is a hugely controversial topic in the television industry and has generated many differing opinions over the past few years. The quote above highlights that reality TV may provide important learning experiences, however it is a heavily criticised genre of television and some people argue that it promotes negative behaviours, morals and views to those watching. Reality television is a genre which has expanded greatly within the past decade and it is essential that any underlying effects upon viewers in society are discussed and monitored. Women are seen to be portrayed in a negative way in the majority of reality television, increasing the stigma surrounding gender equality. This essay will critically analyse the genre of reality television. Chapter I will define reality television and provide general criticisms surrounding the genre, looking into the key filming styles used. Chapter II will give a history of reality television and analyse the reasons for watching before addressing the issue of representation of women in reality TV. Chapter III will then look at a case study of ITV2's Love Island in depth to establish potential effects upon society.

CHAPTER I

The term 'reality' is defined as something which is real and also if something represents real life situations or scenarios.

Firstly, it is important to define what reality TV actually is. Officially, reality television is described as a situation in which 'ordinary' people are filmed in an un-interrupted cycle. There are an immense amount of critics who argue that reality TV does not have any sense of realism and cannot accurately portray true reality. Verisimilitude is the standard of realism within a film or television setting. Realism in regard to film or television production refers to how convincing the storyline would be to the audience. Pozner (2010) conducted research in this field and found that there are many reality television shows that are scripted. She also discovered there are many others where there is a given plot and participants must act in a way that enhances this. This highlights that a large amount of reality shows do not accurately portray 'reality' as the participants cannot have natural conversations and relationships. Ventre (2009) suggested that these scripted scenarios can often be produced so well that most viewers assume it is real. This provokes an argument that the audience of these shows are being manipulated and deceived as much of the 'normal footage' will be edited out and producers will air episodes of drama, fighting and arguing. It also highlights that many reality television shows may have a high measure of verisimilitude but this does not necessarily mean that the shows are portraying true reality. It is evident that there is a significant risk to participants and viewers of reality television shows. Reality TV exploits the volatile and venerable nature of a younger audience that may not be present in older generations (Bignell & Orlebar, 2005).

There are other criticisms of reality television which include that they provide fame to unworthy candidates and that they promote offensive and shameful behaviour to viewers. Some people believe that these types of programmes only have a negative influence on people watching and encourage adverse behaviours such as using offensive language and being aggressive towards other people. Nick Clarke (2003) argues that the rising popularity of reality tv has produced a hazardous blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction. This may lead to a detrimental effect

upon society and its values as it is difficult to distinguish between what is acceptable and unacceptable, leading to a change in behaviour.

Reality TV is known to be similar to a documentary format as it is based on factual evidence investigating participants relationships and life style in an ostensible manner. This is typically done using a 'fly-on-the-wall' camera set up. This is when the cameras are obscured from the participants view and so they tend to forget they being filmed 24/7 (Bignell & Orlebar, 2005). Direct cinema is known to capture the reality of a situation with little intervention. The cameras are set up to be a passive agent, with the production team reducing or removing even eye contact with the participants of these shows. When using direct cinema, the cameras are used discreetly to record the participants within their natural habitat (Brenton and Cohen, 2003, p. 23). Cinema-vérité contrasts with direct cinema in that it interrupts film subjects through interaction of the camera crew who sometimes even allow participants to watch edited footage back in order to film their response to this (Biressi and Nunn, 2005, p. 40). Free cinema, therefore, works outside of the traditional methods of capturing film and takes place in real locations outside of a studio. Direct cinema provides more unique opportunities to capture film in ways that do not disturb the natural habitat of the contestants and this is the reason it is the method most opted for by producers of reality television.

It becomes difficult to accurately define reality TV because of the range of different subjects it has dealt with throughout its history. Joniak (2001) suggests that reality TV gained its structure from mainly documentary style film. "The first cinema artists had the intention to record reality; their cameras turn to what they called documentary views of ordinary subjects" (Barsam, 1992, p. 15-16). This supports the theory that most reality TV shows use a format similar to the typical documentary style. Documentary is the representation of events and issues that occur within real society. As such, many argue that documentaries can be particularly and powerfully persuasive. However, Kilborn and Izod (1997) refute this theory, stating that reality TV does not have any substantial connection with this documentary style of film as reality TV programmes use a range of film techniques to enhance the entertainment value. They believe that reality television uses too many different techniques to be defined under one style, disagreeing with the proposal that it reflects documentary style. However, Brenton and Cohen (2003) acknowledge that documentary

style techniques such as direct cinema and cinema-vérité had a significant role in the development of reality TV. The development of technology allowed for the placement of hidden cameras and capturing of sound using less invasive techniques, ensuring a more subtle set environment. Biressi and Nunn (2005) support the theory that direct cinema was a key factor in the development of this genre of television.

CHAPTER II

The roots of the genre of reality television can be placed in the early 1940s where the ideas of filming shows with unscripted events and scenarios began. Examples of the first reality television shows are *Candid Camera*, *Queen for a Day* and *Confessions* which were all broadcast between the 1940s-1950s. The development of reality television continued through the 1960s and the first major break through programme in this genre named 'An American Family' was broadcast on January 11, 1973. However, the popularity of this genre was not entirely present until a major increase within the late 1990s to early 2000s. The reality TV show perceived to have induced the rising popularity of this genre was *Big Brother* which first aired in the UK on 18 July 2000. This is believed to be due to the fact it was unlike any other reality programme and there were an excessive amounts of arguing and confrontation shown. There were a variety of reality television shows that arose in quick succession after the premiere of *Big Brother*, such as *Geordie Shore*, *The Only Way is Essex* and more recently *Love Island* which will be discussed in more depth later. There is an extensive range of reality shows that have achieved global success since the early 2000s and this genre appears to be a popular and successful branch of television. An estimated 39% of people in the United Kingdom watch the reality television genre in some form, according to a survey by Tiley (2016). The most popular age category to watch this genre of television was found to be 25-34 year olds who make up 50% of the viewing population. Also, women were found to be more interested than men in watching reality television.

Reiss & Wiltz (2009) conducted a study in which they asked 239 adults to rate themselves using the Reiss Profile instrument on each of the 16 basic motives. They also asked participants to rate how much reality television they watch and their enjoyment levels of particular reality TV shows. The results highlighted that those participants who watched more reality television possessed an above-average sense of self-importance and feel more vindicated, friendly and romantic in comparison to samples of participants watching little or no reality television. This supports the production and showing of reality television as it appears to highlight positive emotions that may be lacking in those who watch less reality TV shows. This research allows an insight into the effects of reality television and provides an argument as to why this genre should remain popular and in production.

Hill (2005) describes potential reasons why the genre of reality television has such high levels of popularity. It is suggested that many audience members identify with the characters being portrayed on these shows and that they feel internally connected with the personalities of the participants on these shows. Also, they argue that audiences enjoy this genre as it is a much more interactive experience for them with options to vote and there are opportunities for their online comments and interactions to be shown to the participants. This is encouraging to potential viewers as it appears to be more engaging than more traditional genres such as TV soap operas or documentaries as they involve no communication with the audience.

A quality that is perceived to describe many participants of reality television shows is narcissism. This is when a person is overly interested and obsessive with themselves. However, why would it matter if some reality television stars are seen to be out of control? It appears to older viewers as simply laughable, however for younger viewers it may have a real effect upon their lives. As younger viewers are usually still exploring society and developing their personalities, the portrayal of narcissism as being popular will shape and impact their actions. Lull & Dickinson (2016) found a significant correlation between levels of narcissism and viewing of reality television. This indicates that narcissism may be transferred from participants to the audiences of these shows. Narcissism begins to appear as normal and accepted behaviour and encourages younger viewers to act in this way, negatively shaping society. Younger viewers may be more susceptible to the transference of behaviours through reality television and so they may become more self interested, reducing their opportunities to connect with others.

Another quality that is perceived to be possessed by the audiences of reality television is voyeurism. This is gaining a feeling of enjoyment from the pain or discomfort of others. Baruh (2010) discovered that reality television offers an inside view that is unlike any other genre of television where the audience feel they are being given an exclusive look into the lives of other people. It is important to note that Baruh (2010) also establishes the difference between this type of voyeurism and 'pathological' voyeurism. Pathological voyeurism is described as gaining pleasure from watching other people engage in sexual activity or viewing other's bodies in a sexual manner. This demonstrates potential reasoning for the viewing of reality television as a lot of shows in this genre contain nudity, sexual references and themes of an adult nature. Again, the content of

reality television shows can often be damaging to society as it normalises dangerous and unwanted behaviours.

Sperry et al. (2009) uncovered the possibility of a connection between viewing of reality television and body image. It was found that there was more attention placed upon appearance by those who regularly watch reality television shows. This establishes a clear link between appearance and viewing of reality television and proves that this genre can make audience members more aware of how others perceive them in society. Another study found that watching reality television can increase interest in plastic surgery to alter body image (Markey et al. 2010). Also, many first-time patients in plastic surgery admitted that they watched reality television regularly and that this had impacted their decision to alter their bodies through surgery (Crockett et al. 2007). This research provides valuable insight into the potential dangerous nature of this genre. Many viewers have unnecessarily skewed perceptions of themselves and of the nature of reality after watching this genre of television despite the fact they are watching a small minority of people who have been hand-selected for participation in an unrealistic environment. Reality TV shows can have a significant influence on the body image and mind-set of young viewers and it is critical that this issue is addressed during the production of these shows. A further study found that audiences moral views and attitudes may be altered by the reality television after conducting a study on viewers of 'The Biggest Loser' (Dornoff et al. 2012). Viewers of this show, featuring obese and overweight people competing to lose the most weight, were found to be more biased against overweight people after watching just one episode. It is evident that the genre of reality television significantly influences the formation of opinions within today's society. There is a possibility of damaging perspectives being transferred to vulnerable viewers which may make them feel uncomfortable in their own bodies.

The contestants of many of these television shows (particularly females) are seen to be visually appealing and look after their bodies well. Manwaring (2011) argues that this increases the stigma surrounding body image and would encourage their female viewers to compare themselves to these TV participants, resulting in a negative opinion of self being formed. The representation of women in reality television is an important issue to address. Representation is the portrayal of the participants' personalities and morals to the viewing audience, which is important as many people

go from being normal members of the public to celebrities through reality shows. This means that women will suddenly be under pressure to maintain stereotypes such as looking a certain way or acting in certain manners to be considered 'lady-like'. Reality television could be an excellent way to break the gender stereotypes which have been implemented within society for many years, however many producers do not maximise this opportunity and continue to portray women in a way which is degrading to the female population.

Mulvey (1975) is a successful feminist film theorist who developed an explanation for the phenomenon she calls the 'Male Gaze'. This theory refers to the sexual objectification of women in TV and Film and is applicable to a range of reality television programmes. This occurs when the audience would watch the show or film from the perspective of a heterosexual male - for example when the camera focuses on the curves of a woman's body which draws attention to these areas. The editors of these shows also use special effects such as slow motion and cutaways to exaggerate these features and induce the audience into this perspective. Throughout the history of Western culture, the use of specific binaries of women have been present and represent a simplistic vision of femininity. These stereotypes also reinforce structures of gender differences and power imbalance. These depictions are often linked with religion, attempting to place women into 'good' VS 'bad' categories or 'sinners' VS 'saints', with these categorical placements being determined by that woman's sexual behaviour.

However, surely this theory would be no longer relevant with regards to the portrayal of women in 21st Century television? Unfortunately, much of Mulvey's theories still remain largely true in describing the representation of women and this alarming discovery highlights how almost no progress has been made with regards to equality for women in this industry. This theory argues that women are seen as objects for pleasure rather than as human beings and that many are exploited for their appearance. It suggests that women are dehumanised by producers and editors of many television shows and films. There are a variety of television shows and films that portray female characters as weak and insignificant on their own - it is only how they make the male act or feel that is of importance. Mulvey argues that there are only two distinct roles of female characters within these settings. The first is that female characters are a sexual object for other characters within the narrative to view and judge as such, and the second is that they are a sexual object to

the audience and spectators of the narrative. Mulvey's proposal of this theory has provided an insight into the way women's purpose is portrayed as solely being for the pleasure of the male characters. This illustrates that there are extreme gender biases when it comes to reality television and this provides a deeply damaging message to the viewing public that it is acceptable to view women in this way. A study conducted on the representation of women in film discovered that over 75% of women believe that the on-screen sexualisation of female actresses sends a negative message to the viewers that if they are not visually attractive then they are not important. This evidence confirms Mulvey's theory that women are only portrayed as sexual objects for the pleasure of characters within and also for the audience watching. Women are aware of the damaging effects of this portrayal, however little has changed over the past 50 years in this scenario, supporting the need for change in the industry. A change on how women are represented in film and television making would reduce the gender stereotypes and halt the degradation of women's identity and self-worth. Producers of reality television shows have a significant role to play in providing an equal representation of gender for their audiences however do not seize this opportunity and many continue to reduce women to 'sexual objects' with no real purpose or opinion.

CHAPTER III

It is important to analyse the representations of femininity and sexuality within reality television and its impact upon society. Shows such as ITV2's Love Island exist within this genre and draw in large audiences. Therefore, conversations surrounding gender and sexuality can be heightened through this show in a way that is current and engaging to young viewers. Thus, it is essential that Love Island and other shows among the reality television genre are analysed and monitored. They must not be referred to as being a pointless research topic as it is clear that reality television can have a major impact upon the behaviours and morals of young viewers as well as have a negative impact upon their view of themselves and society. It is critical that this area be analysed in depth in order to avoid long-term negative effects on viewers.

Over the summer of 2017, ITV2's reality TV show Love Island became the most popular show of this genre within the UK. This programme requires 12 participants who are not in any romantic relationships to travel to a luxury villa in Majorca, Spain and live with one another while trying to create romantic relationships with another person in the villa. Each week, they all must choose to 'couple-up' either with the person they are already with if they feel a love interest or connection with or else change to a different person in the villa. They are also given challenges to do in the villa for small prizes and are given the opportunity to go on a 'date' with their chosen partner at various points throughout the series. The viewing public votes on who they would like to keep in the villa each week and the couple or person with the least votes leaves. When it comes to the final week, the viewing public will choose their favourite couple of the show and they will then win the prize money of £50,000.

In 2017, Love Island had 70 cameras in total which were placed in subtle places around the villa to capture footage discreetly. There was an estimated 1300 hours of footage captured in this series, highlighting the amount of footage that is edited out of these shows, with only one hour of footage aired six days a week. The use of so many cameras allowed for various angles for the editors to choose from and ensured there were no areas in which the participants would be unmonitored.

Commissioning Editor of Love Island 2017, Amanda Stavri provides an insight into the production of the TV show behind the scenes. She argues that it's the constant dramatic nature which makes viewers commit to watching the series every night. She feels that Love Island was able to meet the audience expectations of levels of entertainment and this is why the show's popularity remained throughout the seven weeks. Stavri claims that the show is not scripted or planned out beyond twelve hours ahead due to the continuously changing nature of reality television. The crew react to the events taking place in the villa to provide relevant challenges and tasks for the participants to complete. Stavri also admitted that the producers of the show are there to put the relationships to the test and to cause arguments and confrontations for the enjoyment of the viewing public, supporting the theory that reality television does not accurately portray real situations.

The third series of Love Island running throughout the summer of 2017 was a major success for ITV2. The number of people who watched the series finale totalled 2.6 million viewers, becoming ITV 2's most watched programme ever and succeeding the previous year's series views by 1.3 million. The highest number viewing Love Island at any one time peaked at 2.9 million, with more than half of this audience in the 16-34 demographic. Due to the overwhelming success of Love Island's third series, averaging at 1.7 million viewers which was an increase on the 2016 run by 700,00, ITV2 had already confirmed a fourth series of the reality show to air in the summer of 2018.

Social Comparison Theory (SCT) initially proposed by Festinger (1954) may provide a scientific explanation as to why so much of the human population enjoy watching reality television. This theory argues that human beings compare themselves to others in order to to define themselves. Applying this theory to the situation of reality television, it helps to explain the attraction of this genre. Many people watching these shows will be comparing themselves and their situation to that of the participants within the shows. Therefore, it is clear that while watching these participants in difficult situations such as confrontations or embarrassing challenges, viewers are using this to find comfort in their own situations and lives. Statistics from a survey by Tiley (2016) verify this to be true to some extent as more than a quarter of people said they watch reality television to escape their own lives and situations.

There are major controversies surrounding this TV series and the messages it provides to those watching at home, particularly younger viewers. One of these derives from the casting team following typical stereotyping of what is 'attractive' and visually appealing. All contestants selected have a body image seen to be aesthetically pleasing in the eyes of society and many critics may argue this increases the stigma surrounding body image and would encourage their viewers to compare themselves to these TV participants. English (2014) found a significant association between viewing of reality television and decreased satisfaction in body image. This highlights that watching reality television shows where body image is a main focus such as Love Island can impact upon a person's body confidence. Also, female contestants on Love Island wear only bikinis throughout the day with the males only wearing swimming trunks. This may be a contributory factor in the decrease of the body confidence of viewers as particularly younger viewers may believe they need to show their body in this way in order to fit in to society. This would increase pressure on those who are already not confident in displaying their body and they may feel excluded from society if their bodies do not match those of the contestants they are seeing on this reality television show. This trend may be damaging to younger viewers perception of themselves and may shape their view of society in a negative way, causing psychological distress to those members who are not happy with their body.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Laura Mulvey's research into the 'Male Gaze' is applicable within this television series. In this TV show, there is a major focus upon body image and confidence of participants (particularly female). There are recognisable traits of the Male Gaze in the production of Love Island as the show is centred around the idea of sexual attractiveness. The camera angles regularly focus on body image as with every new entrant in the villa there is an introductory video that moves from the bottom of their body up to their head while they are wearing a bikini or swimming trunks (female or male respectively). This type of camera usage is mainly to focus on body image of each contestant and to represent them to the viewing public as sexually appealing and attractive. Also, the use of this as an introduction sets the scene for the rest of the show and encourages the audience to judge the participants with regards to their physical appearance rather than for their personality.

Another negative issue surrounding the airing of reality TV show Love Island is that it encourages unwanted behaviours among the audience. On Love Island 2017, almost every contestant was seen smoking mass amounts of cigarettes, raising many questions among the viewing public. The Guardian (2017) pointed out that the cigarettes provided to contestants are splayed out across the tables where the audience can clearly see them with up to eight packets at one time. The packaging on the cigarettes is plain white with the mandatory health warnings being covered. This glamourises the use of smoking to younger viewers as they may believe it is popular to take part in this activity and the hidden warnings are not effective in preventing their interest in smoking. This is extremely dangerous behaviour to be displayed on a regular reality television show as it can have a serious negative impact on health. According to the World Health Organisation (2017), smoking tobacco kills half of its users worldwide, a frightening statistic to contemplate. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that the promotion of smoking to vulnerable viewers is monitored and kept to a minimum. A charitable organisation known as Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) argued against the Love Island producers' showing cigarette smoking as their main audience age is the 16-34 bracket. However, ITV were successful in avoiding any action being taken as they claimed that as it is shown after the 9pm 'watershed' mark, it is considered an adult programme. This charity was not the only one to recognise this issue after it was discussed and debated in the House of Lords. Although this was a short exchange, it does highlight the importance of the nature of this issue and that many officials are taking the negative impact upon vulnerable younger viewers seriously.

There are debates surrounding the treatment of males and females in Love Island and how this is perceived within society. Morris (2017) argues that there are major double standards within Love Island. They use the example of Zara Holland (Former Miss Great Britain) as she was degraded for engaging in sexual activities on her first night with her partner in the villa on the 2016 series. This is in direct contrast with treatment of Marcel who in the 2017 series received approval and praise for his admission of sleeping with over 300 women in the past. This difference is divisive in nature and may be seen as a step backward for those who campaign for gender equality as this show is broadcasting a biased nature to the viewing public, who may be influenced by this representation.

Also, class divisions can be seen among the contestants and are recognised by the audience. Camilla Thurlow, educated at Loughborough University, was immediately recognised at a different level from all of the other female contestants in the villa. Camilla was seen to be too 'upper-class'

to appear on a reality television show such as Love Island which Morris (2017) argues degraded the status of the other women in the show at the time as they were recognised to be 'trashy'. There was a major controversy surrounding her relationship with another contestant as he moved away from her following the entry of new participants in the show. This created tension among viewers as they felt Camilla was intertwined with classism and should have been treated like royalty following rumours that she had previous romantic experiences with Prince Harry. These views create a stigma surrounding a person's background and status, causing separations between the participants and also within the viewing public.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that reality television is a genre which is expanding greatly in popularity among younger generations. It is also clear that many reality television programmes show a tainted version of reality due to heavy editing and participants being told how to behave or act.

Although there are benefits of reality television such as entertainment value and enjoyment, there are also many issues with this genre that must be addressed to ensure the safety and morality of its audiences. Exploring the representation of women through reality television has revealed issues with gender stereotyping and exploitation of female participants. Reality television can have a damaging impact upon body image and self-confidence as shown by examining a case-study of ITV2's Love Island. Although reality television is growing rapidly in popularity, the extent of its effects are still widely unknown. Therefore, it is critical that further research on this topic is conducted to fully illuminate the effects of reality television upon participants and viewers.

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