

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF REALITY TELEVISION

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What are the social consequences of reality television viewing in adolescents?

Introduction

The popularity of reality television viewing has grown increasingly for the past several years, surpassing other television programs views. The increase in popularity of the genre is no surprise- it allures viewers with high stakes and cash prizes, unscripted lines, and shocking behavior. Reality television is notably different from regular television programs as it features individuals who are not celebrities or “A-listers.” These individuals, who are portrayed to be just like the viewers at home, make the viewers feel empathetic. Viewers take on characteristics of these contestants from afar. We are just like them -- or so we think. The feelings and mannerisms that we watch contestants portray on camera are what we believe to be real (Aslama & Pantti, 2006).

Reality TV has been associated with behavioral and health choices. Only recently has literature begun to focus on the influence that reality television has on adolescents during their most pivotal years of growth. It has been suggested in past research that there is a link between reality television viewing in adolescents and perceptiveness to alcohol and drug use, increase in portrayals of social aggression, sexuality and dating topics, and change in opinion of social issues. Current studies take qualitative and experimental research and psychological approaches to understanding how reality television may contribute to changes in adolescents’ personalities, behavior, health choices, and their overall sociality. This paper will specifically focus on the reality television viewing of adolescents and the ways in which this viewing may create social consequences within their lives.

Reality TV and Drug Use

Television watching habits may influence drinking and other addictive behaviors. In a study of 200 college students, it was said that “televised portrayals of alcohol use and its effects may greatly inform students' beliefs and attitudes about the substance.”(Kean and Albada, 2002) Research has been done in the past about how media ultimately affect how adolescents respond to drug and alcohol use, but it is also seen in more recent research that particular types of television programs are associated with more positive attitudes of alcohol and substance use. Reality television is the main contender when it comes to television programs who positively portray substance use. A study that surveyed 197 young adults found a relationship between watching reality television dating shows and alcohol usage on dates. This link suggests a positive attitude about alcohol in the use of media and its use on dates to appear more confident and endorse the attitudes that contestants seemed to have on the shows they viewed (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, and Smith 2007).

With regard to drug use, reality TV programs can sometimes depict behavior that is reminiscent of encouraging illegal drug use. Take for example the infamous *Jersey Shore*. One anecdotal scene shows the suggestive behavior of Mike “The Situation” Sorrentino sniffing cocaine, as well as spending a whole season acting “erratic throughout...appears extremely paranoid and agitated, even breaking into a sweat though he is not physically exerting himself. Other episodes feature Mike’s heavy alcohol consumption.”(Psychological Care and Treatment Center, 2012).

Also, throughout the years the show has talked about steroids and rehabilitation with Ronnie using steroids, Snooki going to jail for public intoxication and on *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, Mike continues to struggle with his sobriety. Another popular show in the early 2000’s

also portrayed the use of drugs in a household setting in *The Osbournes*. With these scenes depicting incidents of drug use in mind, during its first season, this study found that 46% of depicted incidents endorsed drug use while 54% of depicted incidents rejected drug use (Blair et al., 2005). The use of alcohol and drugs in reality television and the culture surrounding it may suggest an increase in substance abuse in adolescents.

Reality TV and Social Aggression

Past research has shown a link between adolescents' television consumption and their social aggression, but less is known about that same contribution of reality television within that exposure. Some researchers hypothesize that reality television may be even more influential compared to other genres due to the "realness" and empathy viewers have towards contestants on their beloved television programs.

There are many types of aggression portrayed in television programming, physical aggression which is the easiest to spot, indirect aggression, and relational aggression. In "We're Not Friends Anymore! Unless..." a study on aggressive behavior, indirect aggression is referred to as incidents where people harm each other secretly, whether that is through rumors or breaking trust or ending alliances. Relational aggression focuses on incidences where people harm each other by hurting their own relationships, their relationships with others or making them feel unaccepted or unappreciated. This type of aggression is often seen when breaking confidences to or excluding someone from a group. Last but not least, social aggression is a combination of both indirect and relational aggression, as it makes the antagonist engage in indirect and direct aggressive behavior that is meant to damage another's feelings, reputation or chances of winning in order to receive personal gain. (Coyne et al. , 2006)

It is shown that youth are likely to be exposed to nearly 10 times more acts of relational, social, and indirect aggression on television than in real life (Coyne et al. , 2006). In fact due to this exposure of social aggression, youth who regularly view television programming with socially aggressive features or youth who express preferences for such content are also more likely to express engage in and support socially aggressive behaviors. This includes exhibiting a higher level of verbal and social aggression, romantic relational aggression and be seen as socially aggressive amongst their peers (Linder & Werner, 2012).

Furthermore, adolescent females bare the most lucrative effects of social aggression thanks to reality television. A survey of 1,141 U.S. adolescent girls revealed that regular reality TV viewing was associated with the belief that other girls were untrustworthy, that social aggression like gossiping is a normal part of girls' relationships with each other, and that it is necessary to be mean or lie to get ahead in life (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2011).

Findings such as the research I have previously mentioned exemplify the potential link between reality TV and the social consequences that may be subconsciously happening in the minds of adolescents. Reality television is the genre of television that is the most likely to capture incidents of socially aggressive behavior. Commonly these incidents are executed by physically attractive adults that adolescents look up to. Adolescents who watch these reality television programs are likely to mimic the attractive adults they see on television, in hopes to be more like them, and subsequently becoming more socially aggressive. Social aggression is clearly seen throughout the television industry at a high and consistent rate, making the behavior easily seen and accessible to our youth.

Reality TV, Sexuality and Dating

In the past research has revealed positive associations between television viewing and sexual behavior. With reality television programming becoming one of the popular genres of the television industries, it is important to investigate how these shows shape adolescents attitudes toward sex, dating, relationships and sexual behavior.

Typically, when it comes to reality TV shows that focus on relationships or dating there are two primary reasons for viewing, either for learning purposes or pure entertainment. Through this programming there has been a correlation between increase in reality dating programs and adversarial sexual beliefs, endorsement of a sexual double standard, and the beliefs that men are sex-driven, that appearance is important in dating, and that dating is a game (Zurbriggen and Morgan, 2006). According to this same research, it was clear that both the men and women who watched the reality dating programs tended to be less sexually experienced.

Although in some research viewers have tended to be less sexually experienced, other research has shown increased attitudes of sexual permissiveness. For example, watching reality TV sexual relationship shows was associated with increased sexual one-night stands (Fogel & Kovalenko, 2013).

Data has also suggested that female adolescents who have viewed reality dating shows have somewhat progressive gender role beliefs compared to their peers (Ferris et al., 2007). Similarly, these same romance narratives seen in reality shows increases perceptibility to gendered sexual stereotypes (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Research such as this indicates that stereotypical gender representations, including the representation of women as sex objects, are a staple of reality show programs.

Heavier viewing of reality television programs has created a link between sexual perceptiveness and change in gender role beliefs, despite popular beliefs.

Reality TV and Social Issues

Reality television has a way of making abnormal behavior seem like the exact opposite--normal. We have talked previously about ways in which reality programs grab viewers attention; physically attractive contestants, massive amounts of social aggression and huge rewards. These high risks and high rewards is anything but 'real,' which is exactly how the bizarre behavior captures viewers. This deviance from societal norms distorts viewers' perceptions of society.

Take for example, talk shows and 'a day in the life,' programming. These shows such as *Dr.Drew* and *Teen Mom* focus on a set of individuals who are supposed to depict real people but really just prioritizes glamourising their dysfunctional relationships and irregular behavior. Due to the appearance of these characters being "normal," viewers come to believe these people are representative of society as a whole.

As the perception of society changes over time so does the standard of normal or "acceptable" behavior. Reports on reality television talk shows have shown "extensive coverage of sex, abuse, drug addiction, and criminal activity." (Greenberg and Smith, 1995). Another argument set forth by Greenberg and Smith is that talk shows "oversimplify complex issues by using personal exemplars, and by offering idealistic advice." (Greenberg and Smith, 1995). Take for example, "aftershow," or the episodes that follow a season ending. During these aftershow, opinions and trivial matters are discussed by contestants and are then judged by audience members. The best way to handle real problems is through rational discussion, not cheering, booing and viral tweets. The conclusion is that viewers will begin believing that problems are

easily solved and that all the information they could possibly need to handle an issue is right before them (e.g., Abt & Seesholtz, 1994; Tomasulo, 1984).

Overall, viewers tend to observe which behaviors and opinions are rewarded and which are punished. Rewarded behaviors and opinions are more likely to be replicated, while rejected behavior will be stopped. Researchers speculate that talk shows encourage viewers to think that there are simple solutions for social issues and that there is a negative correlation between viewing talk shows and judgments about the severity and complexity of issues often covered on talk shows (i.e., drug abuse, teen pregnancy) (Davis and Mares, 1998).

Conclusion

Through my knowledge and research, I cannot say that other researchers and I are fully aware of any studies on watching reality television programs and their direct link to prominent social consequences including drug use, social aggression, perception of sexuality and dating or perception of social issues. What I can say is that there are plenty of strong associations and assumptions that we can make about watching reality TV programs that has been measured with research and variables of both the qualitative and quantitative type, surveying and questionnaires and experimental work across the board. These associations have been developed and documented thanks to three theory based approaches; the social cognitive theory, the parasocial interaction theory and cultivation theory.

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