

WHEN IS REALITY REAL?: YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF MTV REALITY
PROGRAMS

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Abstract

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WHEN IS REALITY REAL?: YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF MTV REALITY

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This thesis examines how college freshmen relate to the personalities and content on MTV reality programs. Drawing from current theories about how viewers relate to television such as realism perceptions, identification, wishful identification, and parasocial interaction, this project looks takes a qualitative approach to understanding the particular relationships that exist between young viewers and the content and young casts of MTV reality programs.

Eight college freshmen at a Midwestern university were interviewed about their perceptions of MTV reality programs, particularly *Real World*, *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. Additionally, a survey of 78 students was conducted in an introductory telecommunications course. It was found that judgments about the realism were based primarily on the students' use of comparisons with their own lives and experiences. Additionally, knowledge of production processes played a role in realism perceptions. It was also found that students engaged in parasocial interaction and used reality television to learn about the world. Real life experiences, however, were shown to override learning from television.

Approved: _____

Norma Pecora

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Introduction

One cannot deny that the MTV network has, in the nearly thirty decades that it has been on the air, become far more than an entertainment outlet. MTV has defined a generation, hence, the term “MTV Generation”, and for many teens, tweens, and college students defined what it is to be young and cool. Yet, we have seldom stopped to examine how this network has influenced its young audiences. In the past MTV reached viewers with larger-than-life rock personalities, but more recently the network explicates the teenage experience to viewers using their own peers. Through reality television programs such as *Laguna Beach*, and the long running fixture, *Real World*, MTV has showcased the every day activities of “average” youth, setting their friendships, heartbreaks, squabbles and shopping exploits to music to define what it is to be young and cool.

My first experiences with the high school reality drama, *Laguna Beach*, sparked the beginnings of this project. Having long since graduated from high school, I found myself fascinated at the glamour and sophistication of the young personalities, and wondering how so much could have changed since I had walked the halls of my high school. Is this really the life of the average teenager today? Are these really just normal high school students, or are they highly polished and sexualized products of MTV? I wondered if this really was representative of the reality of MTV viewers, and how they perceived these unlikely television personalities.

In this project I examine MTV, reality television, and how viewers interpret programs that claim to be real and bear resemblance to their lives. Much of this study

focuses on viewers' determinations of what is real and the factors that affect that determination, including perceived similarity, and how television realism may affect their world view. Additionally, I address ways in which viewers may relate to the on-air personalities, including the phenomena of identification and para-social interaction, both of which have the potential to affect behavior and beliefs.

As there has been little done to understand young viewers' relationships with MTV reality programming, I was not looking to test a theory, but rather to gain a better understanding of how individuals perceived these programs. This project was designed as a qualitative inquiry, with the intent to allow my subjects, freshmen in college, to explain in their own words their experiences with MTV reality programming, their opinions on the content, and how they developed their perceptions of the personalities. The study was conducted as eight hour-long interviews with a selection of college freshmen, all fans of various MTV reality programs. The students were not asked about any specific program or season, but rather, were allowed to talk about their favorite programs in general terms. As it turned out, the majority of my viewers focused on *Laguna Beach*, its predecessor *The Hills*, and *Real World*. Their descriptions of their perceptions differed decidedly between programs, as did the ways in which they related to the personalities.

The first chapter of this thesis examines how academic scholars have discussed perceptions of television realism, and various ways that viewers may relate to television personalities, including identification, wishful identification and para-social interaction. The second chapter is an overview of MTV as a powerful media and social influence and the emergence of reality television as a popular program genre. Chapter three details my

research process, including the recruitment of interview subjects and analysis. In chapter four I present my viewers' perceptions of MTV reality program as they relate to how they view the personalities and content and what the programs make them think about the world. Finally, chapter five is a discussion of the emerging themes, including the notion that much of the reality in reality television is hinged on the personal experiences of the viewer.

Chapter 1: Realism, Identification and Parasocial Interaction

From the 1970's researchers have been concerned with the impact that television realism may have on audiences. The notion of realism is related to identification and parasocial interaction because it has been shown to be a factor in how strongly identification and parasocial phenomena occur. In this section I discuss how academics have discussed the concept of television realism, as well as identification, parasocial interaction, cultivation theory and how each of these phenomena may intersect in relation to MTV reality programs.

Realism

Cowen & Pouliot (2007) identify a number of empirical studies (Atkins, 1983; Feshbach, 1972; Greenberg, 1972; Gunter & Furnham, 1984; Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, & Fischer, 1983; Huston, Wright, Fitch, Wroblewski, & Piemyat, 1997; Murray & Dacin, 1996; Noble, 1975; Reeves, 1978) that have concluded that viewer's perception of television realism dictates the level of influence of a program.

As delineated by Busselle and Greenberg (2001), the research on the perceived realism of television focused on four areas:

- “perceived realism's mediation of the relation between violent content and aggressive behavior
- its role in the construction of social reality
- children's perceptions of television realism and
- definitions of perceived realism and it's conceptual structure” (p. 250).

Because the MTV programs of interest here are primarily focused on personal interactions, I am primarily concerned with realism's role in social reality construction and how it is defined. According to Cowen & Pouliot (2007), the perception of realism has two major dimensions: factuality and perception. Factuality is concerned with whether or not the characters and situations in the show are made up or not. The second dimension, perception, relates to the psychological realism: whether or not the events, though they may be fiction, are actually possible in real life. There are various factors that contribute to the perceived realism of a program. Busselle and Greenburg (2000) propose that television realism is based off of six criteria: "the Magic Window," social realism, plausibility, probability, identity and utility. The magic window "appears to represent the belief that television provides the opportunity to observe people and events that exist independent of the medium. By this definition, events seen on television occur while viewers happen to be watching, and those events would occur regardless of the presence of television or the viewer" (p. 252). This concept has been used primarily to describe children's evaluations of the realism of television. The concepts of social realism, plausibility, probability and identity are connected to how well what a viewer sees on the screen correlates with his or her personal experiences. The idea follows that viewers make judgments about the realism of a show based off of their current knowledge of the world and how well what they are seeing on television fits into that image. The result is that characters with whom a viewer identifies may be judged as more real. Furthermore, a situation on television which resembles something in the viewer's personal experience is more likely to be judged as real. Viewers may realize

that the content is fictional, but if it resembles things they have seen around them, and the characters are similar to people they knew, it may be judged as “real.” It has also been suggested that even if content is only representative of reality, rather than reality itself, it is still likely to be judged as real (Dorr & Kovaric, 1990). Contained somewhat within the category of lived experience, *possibility*, whether or not the events could happen and *probability*, how likely they are to occur, are also criteria used to judge the realism of a program. Reeves (1978) indicated that the *possibility* and *plausibility* judgments become more defined with age: older persons have more life-experiences to draw from and against which to compare various characters and situations on television. Additionally, he states that viewers who have a larger set of real-life experiences, regardless of age, against which to compare television content may be able to better judge the realism of television content. Conversely, Elliott & Slater (1980) note that a lack of knowledge about a certain subject may also contribute to realism judgments: the more access is restricted to a certain aspect of life, the more that media depiction of that aspect are likely to be accepted as real. For example, the images of police activities on *CSI* (CBS) are more likely to be accepted as “real” by viewers who do not have access to a real crime scene investigation team. Any situation to which viewers have limited access and information may be more readily accepted as real on television because viewers find themselves with a limited set of information options. This may have interesting implications for how young adults, as opposed to children, perceive the realism of MTV reality television.

Specific content is perceived to be more real than general content (Dorr & Kovaric, 1990). While the overall realism of a show may be judged as low, viewers tend to rate

specific situations within a program as more real. Much of these general realism judgments were related to age in a 1983 study (Pingree, 1983) that examined perceived realism of family television shows: 10th graders judged the overall realism of the programs to be much lower than actions, feelings and demographics in the shows. In contrast, 6th graders judged general realism, and realism of actions, feelings and demographics to be the same. However, Reeves (1978) noted that the effects of television are certainly not limited to young viewers: even adults have been shown to believe that television is an accurate reflection reality.

There has been some indication that programs that are judged to be realistic have more influence on viewer's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors than those which appear to be less real (Elliott & Slater, 1980). It has been noted that the acceptance of media images as "real" may increase learning, and potentially corresponding behavior, from these images. Literature on the subject has suggested that the level of perceived realism increases the prediction of television effects. "The most general expectation about the likely role of perceived reality is that children's attitudes and behaviors are more likely to be consistent with the content of their television experiences to the extent TV content is perceived to be real-to-life" (Reeves, 1978 p. 682). Perceived realism has been shown by Reeves (1978) to be an "intervening variable" in the television viewing effects process. His experimental studies on the topic revealed that viewers exposed to "real" television violence were significantly more aggressive than those who were shown content said to be fictional. Similarly, other studies have shown that the perceived realism of the events or behaviors on a television program have an amplifying effect on the degree to which viewers learn from them. These effects have been shown in experiments to be present for

both adolescents and college students. In a 1980 study, surveys of undergraduate college students were used to identify any possible correlation between perceived realism of sexual television content and attitudes towards sexual issues. Results supported the notion that perceived realism of permissive sexual content had a positive relationship with permissive sexual attitudes. It is unclear, however, if this relationship was causal in one direction or whether it was reciprocal (Elliott & Slater, 1980). A later study (Taylor, 2005) found that sexual content that was perceived to be more real was more likely to have an effect on viewers attitudes towards sex.

While there is support for the effect realism has on attitudes, there is controversy surrounding the impacts of realism on social behavior: a study conducted to examine the perceived reality of television as a predictor of pro-social and anti-social behavior, found little supportive evidence of a positive relationship. Only verbal aggression and deceitful behavior was shown to be affected by perceived realism of television content.

Additionally, despite significant support for the effects of realism, Cowen and Pouliot (2007) note a degree of contradiction within the field, as later studies (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Dorr, Graves, & Phelps, 1980; Huston et al., 1995; Klapper, 1981; Pingree, 1983; Potter, 1986) have indicated little or no difference in influences on viewers from real or unreal media.

Effects of Realism: Cultivation Theory

Researchers have attempted to use cultivation theory to explain some of the effects of realism, such as altered perceptions of social reality. Cultivation theory was first introduced by Gerbner in the 1970's, and, as discussed by Hetsroni and Tukachinsky (2006) has been used to show that television viewing is correlated with a distorted view of reality. These distortions range from perceptions of sexuality, to violent behavior, to the prevalence of crime and the acceptability of substance use.

As noted by Shrum (1995) the area of cultivation research has attempted to establish a link between television viewing and viewers' perceptions of reality. These studies have been concerned, primarily, with establishing generalizable effects of various forms of content such as violence, sexuality and alcohol use, and understanding the mediating factors such as demographics, and exposure. He goes on to say that much of cultivation research is concerned with the judgments that viewers make about the content they view and its implications for the real world. The types of judgments can be summarized as those concerning a person's perceptions of the prevalence of things in the real world (first order judgments) and those concerning the development of a person's attitudes and beliefs (second order judgments). According to Hetsroni and Tukashinsky (2006) cultivation effects have been shown to hold for first order judgments. For example, television viewers have been shown to have higher estimates of the likelihood of being a victim of a crime, being struck by lightning, of women in the professional workforce, and of affluence prevalence. When asked to estimate the prevalence of such things in the real world, people's estimates were consistent with portrayals on television

(Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). However, Shrum (1995) pointed out that the evidence for second order effects seems to be somewhat weaker.

As described by Collins, Berry, Elliot, Kanouse, Kunkel, Hunter and Miu (2004) first order judgments have been shown to manifest in young viewer's perceptions of the prevalence of sexual behavior.

High-dose exposure to portrayals of sex may affect adolescents' developing beliefs about cultural norms. TV may create the illusion that sex is more central to daily life than it truly is and may promote sexual initiation as a result, a process known as media cultivation. Exposure to the social models provided by TV also may alter beliefs about the likely outcome of engaging in sexual activity. Social learning theory predicts that teens who see characters having casual sex without experiencing negative consequences will be more likely to adopt the behaviors portrayed (p. 281).

Similar effects have been shown for the portrayal of substance abuse. In a 2001 study of the effects of portrayals of tobacco use on adolescents it was found that exposure to tobacco use on films predicted a higher risk that young viewers would use tobacco themselves (Ahrens, Beach, Dalton, Heatherton, Mott, Sargent & Tickle, 2001). Studies have also been done on the perceptions of violent behavior in respect to viewing of television violence. Hawkins, Pingree & Adler (1987) and Potter (1991) found that there was a correlation between viewing violence on television and estimates of real world violence.

The degree to which viewers cultivate a sense of reality through media does not seem to be the same and is dependent on a variety of different personal and individual

factors. (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli (1994) This inconsistency is one factor of the controversy surrounding the cultivation effects of television. Additionally, Hetsroni and Tukachinsky (2006) noted that viewer's pre-developed biases were never addressed in many of these studies, a variable that should be considered when examining the cultivating effects of media. However, there is evidence that television viewing is a mediating variable in audiences' perceptions of the world. Given that realism may play a role in viewer's reality constructions, and the growing prevalence of reality television, the effects of the genre on audiences is a viable and valuable topic for examination.

Identification

The extent to which viewers form relationships with television characters and personalities has been shown to have an influence to the degree that they learn from and even mimic characters they have seen on television. Of particular interest in this study are the concepts of identification, the closely-related wishful identification, and parasocial relationships.

Identification has long been a topic of research in media studies, although, according to Cohen (2001) it has not been rigorously tested or defined in the academic environment. While there is no single accepted definition, he provides a detailed description of the phenomenon:

Identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them. Identification is tied to the social effects of media in genera, to

the learning of violence from violent films and television and is a central mechanism for explaining such effects (p.2).

Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005) described identification as “the process by which media consumers imagine themselves to be in the place of the performer so that they experience the events from his or her perspective and share the performer’s feelings and responses” (p. 183). Identification has also been described as the viewer writing another part for themselves (Wollheim, 1974). Central to the concept of identification is that the viewer takes on another identity, if only for the short duration of the viewing time, in which they adopt the views, hopes, dreams and even attitudes of the characters they are watching. This is different from simple imitation because it requires that the viewer “forget themselves and become the other—that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification” (Cohen, 2001, p. 3).

According to Cohen’s (2001) review of the research on identity, the concept of identification has been linked to aggressive behavior and learning of violence from violent television in Huesmann (1984). Basil in 1996 argued better reception and adoption of health messages were delivered by celebrities with which viewers’ positively identified. In Maccoby and Wilson (1957) it was claimed that identification resulted in improved information retention. Additionally, identification has been said to mediate socialization, increase motivation and extend emotional capacities and social perspectives, and is likely to lead to imitation of performers (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005). Finally, and of particular importance to this study, Erikson (1968) noted the role that identification plays in developing personal identity by allowing viewers to

experience social reality from other perspectives, which may include those of media characters.

According to Cohen (2001) identification can be traced conceptually back to Freudian theory. In his comprehensive discussion of identification theory and its conceptualization, Cohen notes that identification was considered by Freudians to be part of the process of socialization and that identification with parents was the primary avenue by which children assumed many of their parents' attributes such as identity and values, and would be imprinted on the children's superego. It has been noted that, at least in the formative years of identification theory, the phenomenon was thought to be not entirely an active process of taking on another's identity, but involves "sharing their (another person) perspective and internalizing their view of the world" (p. 3).

Later ideas about identification have stressed the importance of identification in the socialization process and its strong ties to the development of personal identity.

The link between identification and identity is most crucial during adolescence when identification shifts from parents to peers and a more stable personal identity is formed. By identifying with others and imitating certain characteristics of others, the adolescent builds his or her identity (p. 4).

In 2003 Eyal and Ruben examined the viewer relationships with violent media characters and the effects on the viewers' own aggressive behavior. The study of 200 some college students revealed that identification with aggressive characters, such as "The Rock" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer", were positive predictors of the viewer's own aggressive behavior. Eyal and Ruben noted that the internalization factor of

identification likely played a role in the positive correlation between that and the aggressive behavior.

As noted by Erikson (1968) children were often influenced in their younger years by their parents or other adults on whom they are dependent. However, as children mature into young adults, much of their identity is formed by “new identifications” with peers. This idea makes a case for the potential for reality television characters being influential on the behavior and development of young viewers. Cohen (2001) points out:

It is easy to understand the concerns of parents and educators when adolescents are surrounded by virtual ‘peers’ from MTV or the FOX network serials. If identification involves internalization, it is likely that repetitive characters may have some long-term effects. This is especially true for adolescents who are in the process of forming their own identity and are susceptible to influence by media characters. Even if this internalization for adolescents is merely temporary—a ‘trying on’ of alternative roles—it may include some extreme behaviors that have grave impact on the social environment (p. 4).

Despite these apparent consequences of identification with media characters and its frequent discussion in academics, there is no clear standard or measure for the phenomenon (Cohen, 2001; Eyal & Ruben, 2003).

Wishful Identification

Closely related to the concept of identification is wishful identification. While identification involves mentally, and usually temporarily, taking on the identity of a media character, wishful identification also deemed “long term identification” is based on

the viewer's desire to be or be like the television performer (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005). Wishful identification is distinguished from identification by the way it is generally experienced outside of actual viewing. Buchanan and Hoffner (2005) describe it as "a psychological process through which an individual desires or attempts to become like another person" (p.327). Consequences of such wishful identification include viewer's making changes in appearances, attitudes, values and even the adoption or rejection of specific behaviors or life goals. Perhaps more concerning and relevant to this study is that wishful identification has been shown to alter children's attitudes and expectancies about alcohol use, which has been shown to affect their actual use of alcohol (Austin & Meili, 1994). Equally concerning are positive links between wishful identification and eating disorders (Harrison, 1997).

In 2005 Hoffner and Buchanan found that young adults were more likely to wishfully identify with characters who they perceived were similar to them. Similarities in gender and attitudes were shown to be linked to wishful identification with characters on television. Additionally, both men and women tended to identify with successful and admired characters of the same gender. Among attributes that seemed to be related to wishful identification were success, admiration, intelligence, attractiveness (only for women) and violence (only for men; p. 344).

In terms of MTV reality programming, perceived similarity and wishful identification are significant for several reasons: the majority of the personalities on MTV reality shows are of similar age to their viewers (high school or college) and there is an overabundance of alcohol use and illicit sexual behavior (Smith, 2005), making the social implications of particular concern. Because "real people" on television are

inherently more similar to their viewers than actors, it is highly probable that young viewers are more likely to identify with characters on television that they presume to be real, rather than actors. Given the links between perceived similarity and wishful identification and the shown results of wishful identification, the social consequences of heavy viewing of MTV reality are of concern.

Parasocial Interaction

Unlike identification, parasocial identification is not internalized, but is external to the viewer. As discussed by Shiappa, Hewes and Gregg (2005) the idea was introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956, who posited that interaction with media could have the same socialization effects as face-to-face personal interactions. "Because the human brain processes media experiences similarly to how it processes 'direct experience,' people typically react to televised characters as they would real people ... the idea that 'mediated life' is equivalent to 'real life'" (p. 95).

Eyal and Rubin (2003) describe parasocial interaction as "a relationship of friendship with a media personality based on felt affective ties with that persona ... it may be experienced as seeking guidance from a media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, and imagining being part of a program's social world" (p. 81). Cohen (2001) explains that in such a case, viewers do not necessarily lose an awareness of self as with the case of identification, but rather interact with media characters as if they had a relationship of some sort with the character. "Identification requires extreme absorption in the text and involves an intense emotional experience, whereas parasocial interaction is a concept model to be similar to friendship and is increased by a direct

address of the audience by the character” (p. 7-8). According to Giles (2002) parasocial interaction differs from wishful identification in that those engaging in such interaction do not necessarily wish to imitate their favorite character, but rather develop an imagined relationship.

Parasocial interaction is powerful in the sense that these relationships with television characters can mimic relationships with real people.

Just as people form positive or negative attitudes toward other people in “real life,” television viewers develop positive or negative attitudes about the characters they watch on television. And, just as interpersonal interaction can lead to various sorts of interpersonal responses and relationships, parasocial interaction can lead to various sorts of parasocial responses and (one-sided) relationships (Schiappa et al., 2005, p. 96).

This suggests that relationships with characters on a television may be influential on one’s ideas, beliefs and behaviors in the same way that one’s own friends would be. Schiappa et al. (2005) demonstrated this phenomenon in their study of biases toward homosexuals and media exposure to homosexual characters. It was found that frequent exposure to the characters developed stronger parasocial relationships with them and that these relationships were linked with decreased prejudice toward homosexuals in general. Additionally, it was shown that those who already had personal contact with homosexuals were not impacted by their parasocial interaction with homosexual characters. Parasocial interaction seems to be ineffective at overriding opinions or an impression developed by real, existing relationships, but is effective at generating ideas about people or issues with which viewers have no contact otherwise.

There appears to be a link between perceived realism and the development of parasocial relationships. People have been shown to be more likely to develop such a relationship with characters that they perceive to be similar to them in attitudes, appearance and background (Giles, 2002).

Summary

In summary, it has been shown that realism, identification, wishful identification and parasocial interaction are all related to the impacts that television may have on viewers. High levels of realism have been shown to have an impact on how programs may influence viewer's attitudes. The correlation between television realism and behavior are not as strong however, although high levels of perceived realism have been linked to verbal aggression and increased sexual activity. Viewers are more likely to perceive television content as real if it centers on a subject with which they are unfamiliar. Realism perceptions are closely tied to cultivation theory, which posits that viewers cultivate perceptions of social reality through television viewing. They are more likely to use television to develop their world view if they perceive the content to be real or representative of reality.

The terms identification and wishful identification describe ways in which viewers may relate to television personalities. While identification is exhibited when a viewer mentally takes on the role of television personalities, wishful identification occurs when viewers take on attitudes, behaviors and alter appearances to become more like their admired characters. It has been suggested that there viewers are more likely to identify with characters that they see as real and/or similar to themselves.

Parasocial interaction describes the process by which viewers learn about the world and/or develop “relationships” with television characters. Some scholars have suggested that it is possible for viewers to learn about the real world by watching television. For example, viewers who watched gay characters on television reported that they increased levels of tolerance for those with different sexual preferences (Schiappa et al., 2005) Contact with television characters has been posited to have the similar socialization effects as face to face interaction. Higher levels of perceived realism increase the likelihood that such parasocial interaction will occur (Schiappa, Allen & Gregg, 2006).

There is a clear overlap in the ways that realism, identification, wishful identification and parasocial relationships are posited to affect viewers. As Busselle and Greenburg (2000) noted, perception of realism is influenced, at least in part, by the degree to which a viewer identifies with a character. The strength of identification, wishful identification and parasocial relationships and their effects on viewers are, in turn, shown to be related to the level of perceived realism of a program or character (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005; Giles, 2002). Additionally, these phenomena seem to be strengthened by perceived levels of similarity between viewers and television personalities. MTV reality television programs present an excellent opportunity for all of these phenomena to emerge, given the programs’ claims to the “real” (Stern, 2007) and the fact that most, if not all, are potential peers to the viewing audience.

Chapter 2: MTV and Reality Television

MTV

Since 1981 MTV has served not only as one of the primary media outlets aimed at youth, but has been a symbol of a rebellious youth culture (McGrath, 1996). As acknowledged by political parties and public service organizations (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003), MTV has a powerful influence on youth, and has been a major dictator of popular culture, fashion, music, and social trends. In addition, MTV has been acknowledged as one of the nation's most recognizable brands (Ebenkamp, 2003) and, while its popularity with youth has not been completely overlooked by academia, the body of research available on the network is limited (Jones, 2005).

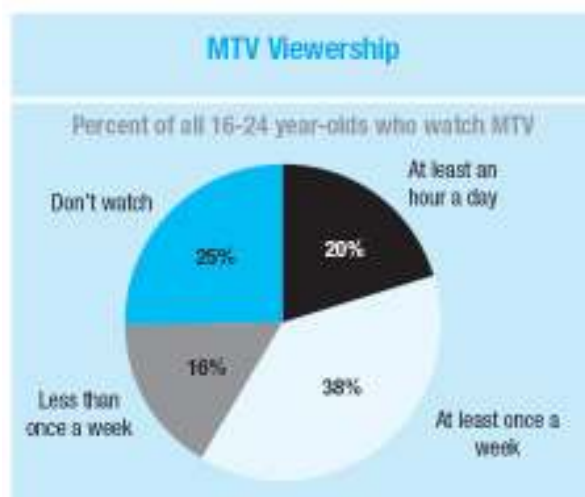
In terms of both reach and influence, MTV is widely distributed and has a strong global presence. "According to Viacom, MTV, the world's most widely distributed television network, reaches more than 394 million subscribers in 166 countries and territories. The target audience of MTV is 12- to 34-year-olds, who comprise 33% of the United States population. Within this demographic, MTV viewers hold a purchasing power of \$250 billion, which is projected to grow to \$350 billion by 2010" (Smith, 2005; p 89).

MTV has, more or less, shaped the way that youth look and talk, both in the United States and abroad (Smith, 2005). Cheskin Research principal Christopher Ireland said in 2003 that MTV has been the foremost influence on youth in terms of fashion, sexuality, music and visual style (Ebenkamp, 2003). Because of its extensive reach, both in the US and abroad, MTV has often served as a platform to reach youth with pro-social messages on everything from voting to sexual health. For example, the Kaiser Family

Foundation developed a partnership with MTV Networks since 1997, working to produce public service announcements and encourage awareness of HIV AIDS and other sexual health issues as part of the “Fight for Your Rights Campaign” (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). In their report on the campaign, *Reaching the MTV Generation*, the Kaiser Family Foundation explained its decision to partner with MTV, describing it as “the media outlet that had become nearly synonymous with youth: MTV, the number-one cable network among 12- to 24-year-olds.” The same study showed the enormous reach of the network as is shown in figure 2.1. According to the report, 75% of 16-24 year – olds watch MTV, 58% of those watch at least once per week and 20% watch for at least an hour everyday (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). The same report stated that six out of ten teenagers recognized the “Fight For Your Rights” campaign brand, which is a strong indication of the reach and influence of the network.

Figure 2.1

MTV Viewership Among Youth According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2003)



Source: <http://www.kff.org/> (Retrieved Sept. 2007)

Shifting Strategies: Programming and Branding

Over the course of two and a half decades on the air, MTV has been a pioneer in the media world according to Ebenkamp (2003); MTV has anticipated and influenced TV programming trends like no other network. But, perhaps more relevant to the current state of the television industry is a discussion of how MTV has developed and maintained one of the most powerful brands in the world and its reciprocal relationship to programming. MTV is not really in show business, according to Tom Freston, former CEO of MTV Networks. He claims, “We’re in the networking business. All these networks are marketing machines” (Gunther, 1997, p. 174). It is, perhaps, appropriate that MTV has become one of the most powerful marketers and brands in the world (Badenhausen & Roney, 2005): The network started on the premise of marketing promotional music videos for record labels. Economically speaking, the idea was brilliant, the content was free for MTV, and the labels and artists were more than happy to have the publicity. From this beginning, MTV was created to be a marketer. It is “a network of commercials, interrupted only by more commercials and an occasional promotion” (Gunther, 1997). Were the music video genre smooth jazz, the idea may not have taken off. But music videos proved to be a direct connection with American youth, a formerly unreachable, but highly desirable group of consumers (McGrath, 1996). MTV quickly became a brand that symbolized youth, and a direct pipeline to advertisers’ most coveted demographic.

However, holding onto the audience proved to be difficult. The MTV programmers, struggling against competitors wanting to break into the lucrative youth

entertainment market, decided instead to market MTV itself (Gunther, 1997). This decision triggered the decline of music programming on MTV and the rise of a brand that merely symbolized music and youth. While cable and broadcast networks have only recently begun to develop identifiable brands (Chunovic, 2001), MTV was selling its rock and roll brand image decades ago.

When MTV was conceptualized, programmer Bob Pittman envisioned a television channel that broke all the rules, including the idea of scheduled shows (McGrath, 1996). The idea of programming that followed no schedule, at least to Pittman, seemed to exemplify the sort of irreverent spirit that he hoped would possess MTV; this has, more or less, remain the essence of the network, despite changes in formats and programming. Early programming consisted of an endless stream of music videos, hosted by a VJ. In the few years following MTV's debut, programmers added reruns of *The Monkees* and *The Young Ones* to the schedule. But, while the music channel initially experienced overwhelmingly high ratings, by 1986 viewership had started to decline (McGrath, 1996). Programmers tried altering the playlists and music, but by 1987 the only ratings boosts came from a few sitcom reruns. Freston noted that it was difficult to keep channel surfing audiences with videos that lasted only three and a half minutes each, and he decided to create half hour original programming (Gunther, 1997). The results were an *American Bandstand* –esque program called *Club MTV*, *The Week in Rock*, a news program, and *Remote Control*, an entertainment quiz show, which ended up being the most successful of the three. Original programming turned out to be the solution for MTV. Ratings began to climb. Within the next year MTV continued to create a collection of programs, some music-related and others not. (McGrath, 1996)

By 1990 program schedules at MTV had taken on a whole new look. Rather than an uninterrupted stream of music videos, air time was organized into blocks, either by the genre of music or the hosting VJ. While there were a few outliers such as *Remote Control* and *Mouth to Mouth*, which related more to pop culture than music, the majority of the programming was music based. Videos during the daytime and evening hours were organized into shows such as *Mellencamp Videos* and *Yo! MTV Raps*, while live performances were cut into half-hour programs such as *Unplugged*. The new programming strategy proved to be effective and ratings improved. Programmers regularized the schedules, keeping the shows throughout the week days relatively the same. One could expect, in 1990, to watch *Prime with Martha Quinn*, *Half-hour Comedy*, *Dial MTV*, *Club MTV*, *Turn It Up* and *Hot Seat* every weeknight without fail. (TV Guide, 1990)

During the early 1990's MTV also made investments in more serious programming, including a documentary series, *Decade*, produced by the news department which explored issues from music to sex to politics over the course of the 1980's (McGrath, 1996). Contrary to expectations, the series was very popular and inspired news staff members Linda Corradina and Dave Sirulnick to continue production of documentaries on pop culture and social issues. In 1992 the news department decided to tackle the presidential election, hoping to improve the network's image with pro-social programming and, additionally, to make political issues relevant to their young audience. MTV news reporters launched a series of "*Choose or Lose*" special reports on the campaigns. Recognizing MTV's direct connection to youth, Bill Clinton made an appearance on an election forum hosted by the network, a decision that proved to be a

turning point in his campaign. The *Choose or Lose* coverage received such a positive response that MTV has continued to cover presidential elections ever since.

The year 1992 also marked the first year of *Real World*. The documentary-style drama was a first of its kind and, true to MTV style, was inexpensive and showcased youth culture (Stern, 2007). It also indicated the beginning of a change in programming. By 1995 MTV was no longer focused primarily on music. Program schedules indicated an increasing number of shows addressing pop culture: everything from fashion to relationships. A program line-up on a typical Saturday evening (beginning at 6 p.m.) consisted of *The Week in Rock*/news, *Real World*/reality, *Road Rules*/reality, *Sand Blast*/game show, *Jams Countdown*, *My So-called Life*/drama, *Singled Out*/game show, *House of Style*/show about models, *Beavis and Butthead*/cartoon and *Oddities Marathon*/cartoon. Of the six hours of programming, only the one hour of *Jams Countdown* was music videos, which was a far cry from the endless stream of videos envisioned by Pittman over a decade earlier (TV Guide, 1995).

By the year 2000 music videos had nearly disappeared during the daytime and evening hours on MTV. A typical Saturday schedule now was composed of *Real World* (reality), *2Gether* (boy band spoof), *Making the Video*, *Cribs* (reality), *Jackass* (reality), *Say What Karaoke*, *Fear* (reality) and a *Charlie's Angels* movie feature. Those looking for music videos needed to wait until the early morning hours. It wasn't difficult, however, to catch any number of reality-based programs. Placing itself firmly at the front end of the trend, MTV created a number of reality or documentary style programs, including *Real World*, *Road Rules*, *Jackass*, *Fear*, *Making the Video*, *Diary*, and *Cribs*.

In addition to the decline in music videos the year 2000 also marked a new trend on MTV: varied programming throughout the week. The network began to air back-to-back episodes of programs such as *Jackass* and *Say What Karaoke* in blocks that ranged from one to three hours long. In further efforts to maximize the value of programs, MTV also made liberal use of its music awards show, airing the two and a half hour program twice during the evening hours in one week. By 2007 MTV had further simplified its program schedule and increased the number of reality shows. Music programs, however, were still scarce, (see Appendix A for a complete list of programs.)

The MTV Brand Image

Throughout the past two decades MTV has gradually evolved into a youth lifestyle channel, but the changes are not entirely surprising, given its creators' initial visions for the network. In 1981, Pittman was not so interested in the music video content, as he was in selling the youth experience. In his musings on how to structure the programming Pittman decided that "if this rock and roll channel was going to be successful it would have to be part of youth's culture in the same way the music itself was. It would have to speak to the audience in the same way the music did. It would have to break the rules the way rock and roll itself always had" (McGrath, 1996, p. 47). It became the rule breaking attitude of rock and roll that defined the brand of MTV. The goal of MTV was to mirror the issues facing youth. Two decades later, MTV has enacted significant changes in its programming line up, but through a branding strategy that includes staying at the front edge of what is cool and using marketing techniques other than programs to maintain a connection with music, MTV has managed to maintain its

rebellious brand. (Ebenkamp, 2003) In terms of power to earn advertising revenues, MTV's brand image has been instrumental. While Nielsen ratings have never been traditionally high, MTV can offer a direct line to young consumers and mere association with the brand is desirable for many advertisers. Freston explained, "Advertisers want to be on here for association, not absolute number of eyeballs"(Gunther, 1997).

Much of the programming, although it is completely unrelated to music, still harbors the spirit of rock and roll, the crazy behavior and defiant attitude. For example, *Beavis and Butthead*, *Jackass*, or *Punk'd*, which were overtly mischievous and unruly and in keeping with the rock and roll spirit, served to hold up MTV's brand as young and irreverent. Despite lack of music programming, MTV has still tried to have music be an integral part of the brand (Garrity, 2005). As noted by Pittman in 1981, music is a major part of youth's lives and MTV was aware that its programming was creating a wider gap between its brand and the music that had made it so popular in the first place. However, MTV executives had to come up with a creative solution that addressed the need for ratings and the need to keep music in the brand image. The result was a marketing campaign in 2005 that included concert promotions and extravagant contests that put fans in contact with musicians. The strategy, in the eyes of the executives, differentiated MTV from other music providers: "You can get a music video online at Yahoo or a million other places, but you can't get the full experience that you can get with an MTV off-air experience. Being able to put the viewer in touch with the artist is one of the advantages MTV brings to the table" (Garrity, 2005, p.35) Additionally, MTV sponsored 16 major concert tours and increased the number of special events, including a branded music/car festival that tied in the *Pimp My Ride* reality show with music.

MTV has also cultivated its image through direct promotions (McMains, 1999). Over the years MTV has created brand ads with the help of directors such as Michael Moore and celebrities like as Jimmy Fallon and REM's Michael Stipe. In the 1999 ad directors attempted to capture the spontaneity and rebelliousness of the MTV image all while putting in a less than subtle plug for the network. According to executive director Jamie Barrett "the idea was to do something that was out there, but was anchored by this message of, 'If you watch MTV, you stay in touch with what's cool'" (McMains, 1999, p. 12). Much of what defines the MTV brand is its place at the head of the pop culture curve. In order to keep a constantly fresh brand image, marketers have a mantra that goes something along the lines of "don't do it the way it's been done before" (Ebenkamp, 2003). Marketers have resorted to tactics that fall into the category of simply outlandish in an effort to avoid the sin of being predictable and cliché. Case and point, MTV chose to use what were described as "bizarre" Britney (Spears) and Beyoncé heads as centerpieces for the 2003 Video Music Awards. The MTV brand is undeniably valuable for its connection to a sought after demographic of consumers. However the young population isn't an easy one to keep up with. "The channel must be constantly refreshed to stay current because pop music devours its young at a fearful pace" (Gunther, 1997). The result is that MTV is constantly undergoing makeovers, retooling and keeping a close eye on the balance between financial goals and becoming so commercial that young viewers are aware that they're being sold.

MTV has been vigilant about market research, going into the homes of 18 to 24 year olds, rummaging through their closets, conducting interviews, and following them through their daily routines. The aim is to position the network at the front end of the

trends, but not so far ahead that young viewers can't identify with the images on their screens. The ultimate goal is to capture the essence of what it means to be young, right now. "It's about looking for new ways to articulate those rites of passage young adults go through," according to Todd Cunningham, MTV's senior vice president of brand strategy and planning (Gunther, 1997).

Past Research

Yet, despite MTV's heavy influence on youth and trends both within and outside the media industry, the majority of work that has been published on MTV relates to the content of music videos. (Smith, 2005; Greeson & Williams, 1986; Middleton, 2001) As early as 1986, only five years after the music video channel was launched, *Youth and Society* published a content analysis of a sample of the music videos on the air which attempted to measure the effects that viewing the content would have on young audiences. The study, *Social Implications of Music Videos For Youth; An Analysis of the Content and Effects of MTV* (Greeson & Williams, 1986) was one of the first to address how viewers of MTV may be affected by its messages. Research on the impact of television done prior to this particular study indicated that television was "a powerful socialization agent that it should be considered on a level with parents and teachers as a model of values, beliefs and concerns" (Greeson & Williams, 1986; p. 177). The survey of some 60 middle school and high school students in southwestern Ohio, and a content analysis of a set of music videos, sought to isolate the effects of viewing certain types of videos. Videos were analyzed for controversial content, including sex, violence, drug use, parent/adolescent conflict, and feelings/attitudes. One group of students was shown

a collection of videos that were deemed to be “high impact” content and the other videos that were a “random” selection. Students were given a survey prior to viewing the videos with questions regarding attitudes toward a number of subjects. Questions included things such as “I agree with my parents on most issues,” and “teenagers should be allowed to use drugs if they wish.” A similar survey was given after viewing the music videos to observe changes in attitudes. Among other things, researchers observed marked differences in attitudes towards sex, violence and consumer habits after viewing the “high impact” videos (Greeson & Williams, 1986).

In the decade that followed Greeson and William’s study, MTV made significant changes to its programming. The result was a number of programs related less to music than to youth culture in general (McGrath, 1996). In 2005, Smith published a content analysis of the updated variety of programming offered on MTV in relation to the substance abuse, sex and violence present in the programs. The results of this study were revealing in terms of the content of the shows airing on MTV, including the increasing amount of reality television. Smith’s work, *From Dr. Dre to “Dismissed”: Assessing Violence, Sex, and Substance Use on MTV,*” provides a comprehensive look at the offerings in terms of content that some have deemed to be “irreverent, indecent and potentially harmful ...” (Smith, 2005; p. 89). Sexual content was found to be far more of a staple than violence in both reality programming and music videos. The most commonly coded sexual content included seductive or sexually provocative dress, lyrics and affection. Smith noted that reality shows, because they often focus on dating, provide ample opportunity for sexual comments, clothing and behavior. Other reality shows, including, but not limited to *The Osbournes*, *Real World*, and *Road Rules*, were shown to

be constant offenders in terms of graphic sexual content. “In sum, sexual talk and some forms of behavior seem to be commonplace on MTV ... MTV is one network that appeals not only to young adults’ entertainment needs but also to their desire to know about sexual and emotional health” (Smith, 2005). According to Smith’s analysis, only a few studies have been conducted on the appearances of alcohol in music videos or other program formats on MTV. However, there was criticism that much of the reality programming, specifically *MTV Spring Break*, is “saturated with alcohol, which may contribute to the amount of sex in such programs” (Smith, 2005; p. 95).

As of 2007, a large portion of the programming on MTV falls into the category of “reality television.” The visual fare ranges from the MTV staple, *Real World*, to *The Hills*, a polished look at the lives of young twenty-something’s in Los Angeles, to *Scarred*, a home video-esque mélange of extreme-sporting accidents, to dating/reality show hybrids like *Parental Control*, the *Ex Effect*, and *Next*. While the programs vary in subject material and style, they all share a common thread: the personalities are presented as young, ordinary people, just like their audience. Much of the move to reality was sparked by tighter budgets and, according to Brian Graden, MTV president of entertainment, the network looks for ways to produce hits for as little as \$50,000 per episode: reality has enabled them to do it (Whitney, 2002).

Reality Television Defined

Reality programs have become one of the dominant television formats in the past ten years (Deery, 2004; Hall, 2006; Nabi, Biely, Morgan & Stitt, 2003; Stern, 2007). Since the success of the genre’s first big network hit, *Survivor* (CBS), the number of

reality shows on television has multiplied, both on broadcast and cable networks.

Although it became immensely popular in the years prior, it was first recognized as an official genre of television in 2004 (Seibel & Kerschbaumer, 2004). As noted by Hall (2006) the research on these programs has only just begun. While it seems that the programming trend towards reality television may have leveled (Friedman, 2004), it still remains a staple for American and European audiences (Nabi, Finnerty, Halford, & Stitt., 2006), making it a relevant subject for study.

Reality programs or, as they are alternatively known, “unscripted” dramas have been somewhat difficult to define, due to rapid growth has caused the genre has expanded into various forms (Bagley, 2001; Hall, 2006; Nabi et al., 2003). While they are all considerably different, *Survivor*, *Real World*, *Cops*, *The Bachelor*, *Intervention*, *Jackass*, *Blind Date*, and *Laguna Beach*, have all been considered to be reality programs, although each is structured in a slightly different form. To describe reality television simply as programming that represents reality would force the inclusion of news programs and talk shows, which, are generally not considered as part of the genre. In an attempt to clearly establish the confines of reality television, Nabi et al (2003) described it as “programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur” (p. 304). This definition assumes that the events on the screen are chronological, that the participants are not working from a script, the show is filmed in a non-studio environment and that the purpose of the program be entertainment. While it leaves room for a wide range of programming, this definition excludes talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer* show, which, in some ways, draw upon some of the same appeals and strategies to attract viewers, and have been considered precursors to the current form of

reality TV (“Reality Television”, 2004). However, Hall, (2004) notes that the popular press has considered programs, such as *American Idol* and *Shocking Behavior Caught on Tape*, to be reality fare, even though they do not meet these criteria. Other more general definitions have focused on the common person and the lived experience. Deery (2004) posits that reality TV does not necessarily have to be “realistic”, nor does it have to depict common or everyday experiences:

What we can say is that the *reality* of Reality TV is usually translated as the experience of real or ordinary people (i.e., unknown non-actors) in an actual and unscripted environment. It does not require that the situation be ordinary, but that there be a particular kind of viewer access; in fact, reality TV is selling access as much as any particular subject matter (p. 5, emphasis in original).

The definition of reality television to audiences seems to be as inconsistent as it is in academia, although slightly more inclusive. In her study of the public perception of reality programs, Hall (2006) noted that some programs such as *Real World* and *Cops* were unanimously considered by most respondents to be of the reality genre. According to most of the respondents in her study, the presence of non-actors behaving independently from any sort of script was mandatory criteria for reality television. Additionally, for some, a competition element helped define a show in the reality category, although Hall noted that this was not necessarily because the competition was realistic, but rather that it seemed to be a central element for a large number of shows that have been labeled as “reality.” The most defining characteristic for these research participants was the realism factor:

Perhaps the most central element in determining the strength of a particular program's membership in the programming category, however, was the nature of the show's relationship to the real world. The understanding that the program was non-scripted, which carries the implication that the behavior of the cast members is self-determined and a true expression of their own personalities and wills, was repeatedly implied to be a determining factor of whether a show should be considered a reality program (Hall, 2006, p. 198).

It seems, however, that a viewer's task of determining whether or not the content of a program is real may not be a simple task. Stern (2007) points out that the reality element of reality television is, at best, only a claim. The desire of producers to create an entertaining program often leads them to distort events to make them more dramatic. The result is a program that dances on the line between truth and fiction, often leaving viewers confused about what is real and what is not. Furthermore, Stern notes that manipulation of reality can manifest as producers' interference with the cast, in addition to "creative" editing techniques. This discrepancy will be further discussed later in this chapter.

History of Reality TV

While the programming schedules on MTV have only recently been saturated with reality television, the genre has its roots as far back as 1947, when *Candid Camera* began playing practical jokes on unsuspecting victims (Murray, 2006). More than two decades later *An American Family* debuted on PBS; the 12 hour documentary explored the intimate details of the Louds, a "typical" American family from California. Produced

much like its descendant, *Real World*, cameras followed the family members throughout their daily activities over the course of seven months. Footage was later edited down to the show's 12 hour run time and focused on the demise of Bill and Pat Loud's marriage, and their son Lance's coming out as a homosexual. Among its significances, the show is credited with drastically altering the way the family was portrayed in the American media, from a happy, trouble-free *Brady Bunch*, to a more complicated family picture, later represented in *Rosanne*. Most notable to this discussion however, is that *TV Guide* has described *An American Family* as the first reality television series (PBS, 2007).

In the 1980's and early 1990's a small wave of reality television aired on both network and cable channels and included hits like *Cops*, *America's Most Wanted* and *America's Funniest Home Videos* (Murray, 2006). Whether they were reenacted on *America's Most Wanted*, or real footage of criminals on *Cops*, they provided Americans with a taste of real-life drama and action, which was further emphasized by the popularity of *The Jerry Springer Show* in 1991. (Unknown, 2007)

Real World debuted in 1992, nearly a decade before reality television became a mainstream staple, and fared well with MTV's young audiences (McGrath, 1996). This reality drama, or "dramality", as they are sometimes called, followed seven college-aged strangers living together, and focused on the interpersonal relationships and conflicts. The program served as a prototype for later reality programs. Successors such as *Project Runway* and *Survivor* have used casting, filming and editing techniques that made *Real World* successful (Stern, 2007). By 2007 the show has changed little and has proven to be so popular that it has continued production for 15 consecutive years.

The success of *Survivor* (CBS) in 2000 marked the beginning of a steep climb for reality television in terms of variety and ratings on network and cable schedules. A television writers' strike in Hollywood in 2001 served as additional motivation for networks to expand their reality offerings, as the unscripted genre allowed them to circumvent the Writers Guild's demands (Rutenberg, 2001). Within a period of four years, the number of reality shows multiplied, as well as the quantity of channels offering them. In 2004 reality shows made up 19 % of the broadcast networks' primetime schedules; this number climbed from 5 % in 2001 (Atkinson & Fine, 2004, p. 1). Reality quickly grew into a network phenomenon. That same year reality television occupied 49 % of the television production days, which was more than twice the time taken by television dramas (Seibel & Kerschbaumer, 2004, p. 18). In April of 2004 the spring television ratings revealed that 12 of the top 20 shows for adults aged 18-49 were reality programs; on the initial fall line up in 2005 reality shows occupied 19 hours of primetime, contrasted with six hours the year before (Schmuckler, 2004). Since 2005 reality programs have remained popular with networks and audiences. Hits such as *American Idol* and *Dancing With the Stars* have been some of the top ranking shows. However, there has been a considerable leveling of production, as costs have risen due to union demands and a lagging popularity with viewers (Freidman, 2004).

The Audience

The reality program has generally been thought to appeal to a lower-income demographic (Nabi et al., 2003). The reality genre in general has been criticized as being exploitive of some of the worst characteristics, behaviors and ranks of the human race,

and was long considered by the industry to be low-brow entertainment (Freeman, 2001). Even as reality television became mainstream, advertisers were initially put off from investing in many of the programs, deterred by audience demographic and the possibly questionable material. “Advertisers once didn't like the thought of associating with what they regarded as often sleazy down-market fare” (Atkinson & Fine, 2004, p. 1). A study in 2001 confirmed advertisers’ suspicions when it found that 58% of regular reality audiences were in the middle to low income bracket, with annual incomes falling below \$50,000 (Gardyn, 2001, p. 1). However, recent demographic profiles show that reality TV appeals to a younger group of viewers, 18-49, or even narrower, 18-30 (Carter, 2003). This audience represents a coveted demographic for advertisers. Indeed, a quick look at the schedules of some of the most popular cable networks targeted at youth, would reveal an overwhelming number reality shows and the programming on MTV as of 2007 is almost entirely reality-based.

The Appeal

According to some, the appeal of reality television ranges from mere voyeurism to a hope that it offers insights into the human condition. Nabi et al. (2003) found that the initial draw for casual viewers is generally related to boredom, with other possibilities that while regular viewers of reality television tune in to be entertained. Some of the appeal may be the lure of watching “real people” on television. A study in 2001 revealed that 37 % of the Americans polled preferred to watch real people on television, as opposed to scripted actors (Gardyn, 2001). However, Nabi, Finnerty, Halford and Stitt (2006) suggest that some of the appeal of reality television may not reside in the quality

of the “reality”, but rather in the drama and suspense, elements of good storytelling, that are often found in reality programs. Voyeurism has also been cited as a gratification of watching reality television (Hall, 2004), although Nabi et al. (2003) questioned whether or not voyeurism is an appropriate term to describe audience’s motivations for viewing because cast members are aware that they are being watched and network constraints assure that explicit material does not make it on the air. Rather than the desire to view forbidden or scandalous material, it seems that viewers may simply enjoy observing other people’s lives and interpersonal relationships. There is also the notion that reality television fulfills the ever growing American obsession with celebrity and fame. “By vaulting nobodies into overnight celebrities, these shows appeal to the flip side of America's fascination with stardom: people's secret resentment at being shut out of Hollywood's seven-carat system. Reality TV is revenge for the regular Jane and Joe” (Conlin, 2003, p. 1). Andrejevic (2005) noted that part of the appeal of reality programming is the viewer’s sense of access, or the idea that the people on the screen could be them. On a more basic level, reality shows require minimum commitment to the program from viewers. Plots are minimally developed, series have limited runs—the viewing experience is efficient.

Criticisms

However, reality programs are not without their detractors. The actual realism of reality television (or lack thereof) and its presentation as “real” has been a subject of criticism. Nabi et al. (2003) found that while viewers perceived the casts of reality shows to be real, they did not believe that the situations presented were necessarily

representative of reality. These viewers may be correct in their perceptions, according to Bagley (2001) who said that much of what may be marketed to the public as “real” may actually be constructed, coaxed, or manipulated by production and editing processes. In his criticism of the *Real World*, Bagley discussed the potentially misleading production practices that attempt to give reality programs the appearance of being real by borrowing from the documentary mode. Much of *Real World*, which is considered one of the first and a prime example of the reality genre, lays claim to authenticity both by means of presentation and by direct statements. Each show begins with the same blatant claim to authenticity: “This is a true story of seven people, picked to work together, have their lives taped and find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real” (p. 62). *Real World* backs up this claim to verité with visual strategies that borrow from the credibility of documentary programs. Deery (2004) describes the reality genre as “postdocumentary”, implying that the genre has been changed from its parent genre, documentary, but still retains some of the same elements, mainly the form of presentation. This appearance as documentary, argues Bagley, is deceiving:

Real World's manner of presentation critically determines its acceptance as faithful documentation of material existence ... with aspirations perfectly coinciding with other forms of nonfiction production ... Being patterned after the TV journalistic style, *Real World* borrows on the confidence that genre provokes in its audience, and manages in the process to evoke its own mystique of authenticity that, in the final analysis, furnishes viewers with the rationale to successfully negotiate the show's authorial ambiguity (Bagley, 2004, p. 61-62).

Shaky, handheld cameras, natural lighting, ambient sounds, low production values, surveillance film and interview-like confessionals help to emphasize claims that *Real World* is representative of reality (Murray, 2006; Bagley, 2001). Some or all of these presentation tactics can be seen in various other reality television programs such as *Big Brother* (CBS) and *The Bachelor* (ABC). At best, reality television, according to Bagley is a mix of fiction and non-fiction. Specifically, he points out that most people, when placed before a camera, perform in one way or another, rather than behaving as they would in their natural environments. Furthermore, the heavy editing required to reduce the daily footage, sometimes up to 70 hours of tape, down into a 30 minute storyline is exacted with titillation in mind, rather than journalistic ideals of objectivity. The production process is motivated, not by informational goals or the desire to accurately present a situation, as it would be with traditional forms of non-fiction media, but rather by a desire to entertain and sell. This fact alone, according to Bagley (2001), discredits the genre as a subjective representation of reality because its purpose goes beyond capturing unmediated human relations and activities, crossing into the commercial realm.

Third Person-Perception

Other criticisms of reality television have emerged indirectly from studies of third-person perception, and have indicated that reality programs may be “socially undesirable” in the minds of viewers. Socially undesirable material has been central to the majority of research conducted on third-person perception (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000). As noted by Bissell, Peek, and Leone (2006), numerous studies have supported the idea that people perceive others to be more affected by media messages than

themselves, particularly negative content. They cited a study conducted by Gunthner and Mundy (1993) in which it was found that people believed that others were more affected by negative material than they were, but that there was no difference in their perceptions of the effects of positive material. The phenomenon has been shown in studies of campaign messages, negative political advertising, commercials, rap music, and public service announcements, among other types of media (Bissell et al., 2006).

In their 2006 study, Bissell et al. examined 640 college students' perceptions of reality television (*Real World*, *Fear Factor* and *Joe Millionaire*.) It was found that the students believed that reality programs negatively impacted others more than themselves, which the researchers suggested indicated their perceptions of reality television as “socially undesirable.”

Drama

Although it has not been extensively documented, the content of reality television tends to be hyper-dramatized—turning seeming unimportant events into crises. This is not surprising, given that its purpose is to entertain audiences. *Real World* producers carefully select cast members to produce the maximum amount of drama (Stern, 2007). Furthermore, producers of reality programs frequently manipulate situations in order to cause conflict. (Bagley, 2001; Hyde-Clark, 2004). The result of these manipulations and casting practices is often explosive. On the fall 2007 season of *Real World*, for example, Brooke*¹, on more than one occasion, expressed her frustration with her housemates by indulging in screaming rants. On the same season, housemates Davis* and Tyree*

¹ * indicates the names of personalities or characters on reality television programs

engaged in a screaming and somewhat violent encounter in a conflict that involved Davis* abandoning another housemate at a bar. This highly volatile behavior is not limited to *Real World*, but can also be observed in a large number of reality programs including *The Apprentice* and *America's Next Top Model*. According to *Real World* co-executive producer Joyce Corrington, this sort of conflict is intentionally fostered and is the best component of the show (Stern, 2007).

Creation of cliques also seems to be common on many reality programs. Shows such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *Joe Millionaire* and others seem to thrive on the concept of back-biting and the creation of alliances and cliques. Participants can be seen frequently talking negatively about other cast members or working to oust those who they perceive to be a threat. All this display of drama and negative behavior may have interesting implications for the impacts that it may have on viewers.

Audience Perception

Despite criticisms, there is some evidence that, to a certain degree, audiences do perceive some reality television to be “real”, although not all. Meng and Lugalambi (2003) found that reality programs were not perceived to be intrinsically real.

There seems to be a chain of inference in which plausibility appears to be a factor that mediates the relationship between show type and utility. In other words, audience members will judge a program as making practical sense to or having utility for them as long as they perceive it as plausible or believable. Against that background, we can conclude that the perceived reality of TV is relative, dependent

on the interaction between the plausibility and utility of a particular type of reality-based TV (p. 14).

In recent years, reality television has come under fire for being overly provocative and a disquieting representation of society. The South African version of *Big Brother* proved to be highly controversial for its overtly sexual content. Hyde-Clark (2004) found, however, that youth perceived the program to be a reflection of their culture. “Youth may see reality TV as a reflection of the attitudes and behavior exhibited in society. They may see the comments made by contestants as an accurate expression of how they are viewed by society, and adjust their perception of themselves accordingly” (p. 217). Given this perception, it is not surprising that Gotz (2004) described reality television as a powerful socializing agent for youth. In her essay on youth’s reactions to the genre she reported that some viewers actually develop perceptions of the world and learn how to interact with others from reality programs. She cited a young boy who reported that watching *Big Brother* taught him strategies to deal with conflict. Additionally, von Feilitzen (2004) noted that reality television could be instrumental in young viewer’s construction of identity. In her discussion of the genre she offers an explanation of the powerful potential that reality television has to influence its viewers and society:

Young viewers find reality TV programs entertaining and exciting. They also say they can learn from these serials, and they satisfy some of their curiosity about life and about people, find in the serials a space where they can analyze the behavior of more ordinary people like themselves, emotions, interpersonal relations, sexuality, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion for social acceptance, etc. Young viewers identify greatly with some people on

the screen (more similarity, than a desire to be like them), or see them as friends, but condemn others, check out what works and what does not work for being rewarded, something that is important for young viewers' identity building, i.e., how to be and perform oneself (p. 42).

This study is hinged on von Feilitzen's (2004) description of this learning relationship that youth have with reality television. The notion that youth learn from a genre that is widely viewed as only a partial representation of reality, and that is often focused on sex, alcohol and conflict presents considerable questions about reality television's impacts on individuals and society as a whole. MTV, being the primary marketer of youth culture, a highly influential source of information and entertainment, and a network saturated with reality television seems to be central to this discussion. As was discussed in chapter 1, a viewer's perception of a program as real or not real may have significant bearing on the program's impact on the viewer. This may explain, in part, von Feilitzen's (2004) findings that viewers garnish life lessons from reality television. One's perceived similarity and identification with personalities on the program have been shown to be factors in that determination.

Chapter 3: Research Questions, Audience Reception, and Methodology

Research Questions

Despite its apparent role as a purveyor of popular culture, MTV has been largely ignored by academics in the past 15 years (Jones, 2005). While a few scholars have conducted content analyses (Smith, 2005), little has been done to understand what role the network and its programming plays in the lives and minds of its viewers. Similarly, while the body of work on reality television is growing quickly, there seems to be a gap in understanding how youth relate to and learn from it.

There certainly is the potential that this television, purported to be real, and starring young people who so closely resemble their viewers, could be highly influential. However, the individual nature of realism judgments and the variance in the ways in which viewers relate and respond to programming made understanding this influence complicated. Additionally, the variety of content and style of the programs, and the ways in which personalities are depicted, even within the MTV network, further obscured the issue. It became clear that there needs to be a greater understanding of how these programs, created by a network hoping to exemplify the youth experience, were perceived. My goal was to better understand how young viewers perceived the personalities and situations, which resulted in the following questions:

- How do youth relate to reality television personalities?

Integral to this question was whether or not viewers felt that the personalities were their peers and the ways in which they reached that determination.

- What do MTV reality programs make young viewers think about themselves and the world?

This question address the ways in which viewers learn from reality television, and how viewing may impact the ways that they think about themselves and various issues in the world.

This study was designed as an attempt to understand the experiences of young MTV viewers and the research questions reflect this. The goal of this study is to allow subjects to describe their lived experiences, with the end result being that the researcher has a better understanding of the “essences” of the experience. Among the challenges of conducting this type of qualitative research, Creswell (1998) notes the importance of selecting participants who have experienced and can explain the phenomenon. In the following section I will explain the selection process and rationale, as well as the data collection.

Audience Reception

This study was based on audience reception theory, which assumes that there can be no “effect” without “meaning” (Jensen & Jankowski 1993). Audience reception theory seeks to understand the production of meaning from the perspective of the audience in light of social and media structures. The theory finds its roots in the humanities and the social sciences, and can be considered a hybrid of the two traditions. While the humanities have focused on the media themselves and the content therein, the social sciences have approached studies of the audience in terms of how viewers use the media they are exposed to. Audience reception, however, observes *how* messages are

received, perceived and interpreted by viewers, keeping in mind the text of the media as well. Hall (1973) discussed the production of “meaning” in terms of “decoding”, a process by which individuals create their own interpretations of the messages put forth by media. Jensen and Jankowski (1993) describe this encoding/decoding process as “asynchronous”, explaining that “at each point of the communicative process there is a scope of indetermination which allows for several potential meanings and impacts to be enacted” (p. 137).

This project was designed as a qualitative inquiry to address how these students make meaning of MTV reality programs and what sorts of variables affect their perceptions. I determined that interviews were the most appropriate means for investigating their perceptions, given that much of the information of interest was related to individual perceptions. In the next section I will discuss how I selected my interview participants, bearing in mind the importance of choosing students who were both within the appropriate age demographic and had extensive experience with MTV reality programs.

Participant Selection

In his discussion of qualitative inquiries, Creswell (1998) emphasized the importance of selecting subjects who have adequate experience with the subject at hand. For this study it was imperative that my subjects be (a) regular viewers of MTV reality programs, although their program of choice was irrelevant and (b) freshmen in college. While my rationale for selecting only regular viewers of MTV is obvious, my purpose in interviewing college freshmen may be less clear. The majority of MTV’s viewers are in

high school. However, access limitations and concerns that high school students may not have matured to the point of being self reflective enough to provide insightful information dissuaded me from pursuing them as interview subjects. Rather, I determined that freshmen in college would be ideal because of their recent experiences in high school.

I began my selection process by administering a short survey to 78 students in an introductory level telecommunications course at a Midwestern university. The survey served as preliminary research for me to get a general understanding of how MTV reality programs were perceived by college freshmen, and as an avenue to recruit students for the interviews. Those who responded to the survey and indicated that they were interested in participating in the research project were instructed to respond by email and were told that they would be selected on a first-come first-serve basis. In this way I was able to find interview participants who were truly interested in the subject material. Five students, Miranda, Brandon, Christopher, John, and Katrina (all pseudonyms) responded and completed the interviews. They each received a small compensation for their time. The remaining subjects, Sarah, Candace and Kelly were contacted by chance, via a social networking website. This situation proved to be ideal, as these girls were not telecommunications students, and therefore provided information from a different educational background and perspective not related to electronic media. While my group of subjects was a nice microcosm of MTV's audience in terms of boys and girls (see Stern, 2007 for viewing demographics), I would like to emphasize that my goal in selecting my subjects was not to obtain a representative sample, but to find subjects who had adequate interest in MTV reality programs.

Subjects were interviewed for approximately 1 hour, although actual interview time differed somewhat from person to person, as I talked with them until I felt that I had exhausted the topics. (A general outline of interview questions is available in Appendix D.) These interviews were open ended discussions, with the goal being to allow the students to talk about their perception of MTV reality programs. Each of these interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.

Table 3.1

Students Interviewed

<i>Student</i>	<i>Field of Study</i>	<i>Favorite MTV Programs</i> <i>*indicates most watched programs</i>
Miranda	Telecommunications	<i>Laguna Beach, The Hills, Real World*, Rob & Big</i>
John	Telecommunications/Audio Production	<i>Laguna Beach, Real World*</i>
Christopher	Telecommunications	<i>Real World/Road Rules Challenge*</i>
Brandon	Telecommunications/Visual Communications	<i>Laguna Beach*, Maui Fever, Real World</i>
Sarah	Magazine Journalism	<i>Laguna Beach*, The Hills*, Real World</i>
Candace	Magazine Journalism	<i>Laguna Beach, The Hills*</i>
Kelly	Marketing/Visual Communications	<i>Laguna Beach, Real World*</i>
Katrina	Telecommunications Management	<i>Laguna Beach, The Hills, Real World* Real World/Road Rules Challenge*</i>

Note: While many of these students talked about *Laguna Beach*, it was not on the air at the time that these interviews were conducted. Much of their comments about this program were in retrospect.

Qualitative research has often been criticized for its subjective and interpretive nature (Creswell, 1999; Jansen & Jankowski, 1993). Scholars have often noted the need for structure in the analysis process in order to maintain integrity and validity. For this

reason I conducted my analysis using a “data analysis spiral” as described by Creswell (1999). While Creswell acknowledges that each qualitative project is constructed uniquely, he posits that the analysis process “conforms to a general contour”, which he refers to as the “data analysis spiral” (p. 142). The process involved multiple readings of the data, writing memos, followed by the creation of categories and identification of themes. In the following section I will discuss the initial survey research.

Surveys

The first step in this project was a survey to determine how frequently college freshmen view MTV reality programs, and how they perceive and relate to the program content and casts. Its secondary purpose was to recruit students who watched reality programs on MTV for the interview portion of this study. The survey was conducted in a freshman foundational course in telecommunications at a mid-sized, Midwestern university. The 78 students were asked to indicate the number of hours per week that they watch television, and of those, how many hours were spent watching MTV. Students were then asked to rate the realism of events and cast members on the MTV reality programs on a Likert-type scale, and were given open-ended questions to explain their answers. (See appendix B for the full survey.)

The 78 students who responded an average of about 8.4 hours per week. Some students reported watching as many as 40 hours of television per week and others reported no television viewing or a preference for YouTube (see Table 3.2.) The median number of television hours watched was 6 and the mode was 2. Thirty-five students reported watching MTV, or approximately 48% of the sample.. Those who did watch

MTV watched an average of 2.62 hours per week. *Real World* was the most popular reality television show on MTV, with 24 students reporting that they watched it on a regular basis. 18 students reported watching *The Hills* and 16 indicated that they watched the *Real World/Road Rules Challenge*.

Table 3.2

Student Television Viewing

	<i>Television Viewing</i>	<i>MTV Viewing</i>
Total Hours Viewed Per Week	651	100
Average (hrs)	8.4	1.3
Percent of Total Surveyed	99	48

Table 3.3

MTV Viewing

<i>Program</i>	<i>MTV Viewers (n=35)</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Real World</i>	24	69
<i>True Life</i>	13	37
<i>The Hills</i>	18	51
<i>Real World/Road Rules Challenge</i>	16	46

*Most students reported watching more than one program

**Descriptions of these programs are available in appendix C

Two of the questions asked students who reported watching MTV reality programs to respond to the following statements and then comment on their responses:

Statement 1: The content of MTV reality shows is representative of reality ...

Statement 2: The characters on the shows you watch are like you or your friends...

Table 3.4

Responses to: "The content of MTV reality shows is representative of reality"

<i>Scale</i>	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Students	4	16	15	0	0
Percent	11	45	42	0	0

On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 "being strongly agree", the responses to statement 1 averaged around 2.31, falling between "disagree" and "neutral", with none of the students agreeing that the programs represented reality. Some of those who disagreed (16) and all of those who strongly disagreed (4) with the statement cited producer intervention, scripting and heavy editing as reasons that they believe MTV reality programs were not realistic. However, comments were more revealing:

"It's all swayed by producers' and director' wishes and demands."

"It is blatantly obvious that it is scripted"

"They edit it so the fights are the focus."

“All the shows are staged.”

“Producers purposely cause conflict and drama.”

Other respondents who disagreed with the statement 1 reported that they thought the situations were not realistic because:

“‘Real World’ is not real. It’s not real when you live in a mansion; they give you a job, car and roommates.”

“People are put in unrealistic situations and paid.”

“... in reality young adults actually have responsibilities.”

“... everything happens too perfectly. It’s not real life.”

Students who reported neutrality about statement 1 noted that, while they thought that the participants were real, much of their behavior was either the product of editing or was altered because of the presence of the camera.

“Whenever someone knows they’re being filmed, they aren’t really being themselves.”

“They are real people, but much of the storylines seem to be scripted.”

“Editing takes away from some of Reality.”

“It kind of does [represent reality], but I think it’s exaggerated.”

The responses to the statement regarding reality television characters or personalities seemed to be slightly more polarized.

Table 3.5

Responses to: "The characters on the shows I watch are like me and my friends"

<i>Scale</i>	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Students	11	11	7	5	1
Percent	31	31	20	14	2

The average response was 2.26, but a larger number of students strongly disagreed (11) that the personalities of MTV reality programs were anything like themselves or their friends. Many statements from those who strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that indicated that the dissimilarities were due to deviant or undesirable behavior on the programs. Compared to reality stars students said:

"My friends are down to earth, not fake."

"My friends and I don't fight each other for prizes."

"My friends and I are not fake and we are not stupid."

"My friends aren't crazy whores."

"They're not goal-driven like my friends and I."

Other respondents felt that the characters were not like them or their friends because their behavior was fabricated or provoked by bizarre situations. Students who had neutral opinions indicated that some traits or personalities of the characters on MTV reality programs were similar, but that some of the behavior was extreme or exaggerated.

Students who saw similarities between themselves or their friends and the characters on MTV noted comparable activities and personalities.

“Like to hang out, party.”

“Some characters are laid back and fun like my friends.”

Students were asked at the end of the survey what they like about the reality programs on MTV. A large number of students indicated that they didn't necessarily like the programs but watch out of boredom or to have as background noise. The majority, however, noted that the drama and extreme behavior was the primary appeal.

“They are usually entertaining because it's exaggerated and the drama that goes on.”

“I like the drama. Its entertaining to watch.”

“They are so stupid, I can't stop watching ...”

“Stupidly funny.”

A few of the students felt that they could relate in one way or another, to the programs, and that others felt that they were watching other people's lives.

“Diversity and learning about different people.”

“I like watching people who are around my age.”

“Some shows are so ridiculous that it is humorous, and others I enjoy because I can relate to the situations.”

“They are entertaining and I like to watch programming with ‘characters’ in my age group.”

Discussion:

In general, students’ responses indicated a high level of skepticism about the “reality” of reality-based programming on MTV. The overall reality seemed to be compromised in the minds of nearly all the respondents by what they perceived to be manipulative production processes (i.e. scripting or editing) or unrealistic situations. It is notable that a large number of students cited the production and editing processes as reasons that what they saw on the screen was not real. Following the survey it became apparent that the students’ education in telecommunications may have been a factor in their knowledge about reality television programs and that this may have skewed the results slightly. However, it does have interesting implications for how reality television may be received in the future as knowledge about the production process becomes more widely known. This may become an increasingly relevant issue as fan websites and other outlets, including reunion programs, reveal more to viewers about how programs were produced and behind the scenes information.

In respect to individual cast members, students gave few indications that they related to the people who appeared on MTV reality programs. There seemed to be little dispute that the cast of the reality programs were real people, but most students indicated that the behavior and relationships portrayed on these programs were not representative of anything they had experienced in their own lives, and that much of it was either scripted, manipulated or provoked. It seems that, although the most common reason for

watching MTV reality programs was to watch the drama unfold, few students could relate to the situations and many felt that the characters' actions were not genuine. It seems, in this case that the appeal of the drama in these reality programs has little relation to the people on the show or the actual outcomes of the problems, but, rather, seems to be connected to the "exaggerated" or "extreme" ways that cast members behave. The "reality" of the program seems to have little bearing on the entertainment value in watching others deal with relationships and problems. It may be concluded from these students' comments that much of the realism, or lack thereof, of reality-based programs is derived from how well the behavior and situations coincide with each individual viewers perceptions of what is "normal." This is consistent with Busselle and Greenberg's (2000) statements about how reality judgments are constructed using personal experience as a measure. Furthermore, comparisons against one's own personal experience seem to largely override any knowledge about how "real" a cast member is; students judged characters to be "exaggerated" and likely "scripted" because their behavior was outlandish, not because they had doubts that the member was who they were said to be.

It was unclear whether or not the drama that many students found to be entertaining was also perceived to be born out of genuine problems and relationships, or whether it, too, was believed to be fabricated. This begs the question of how drama on these reality programs differs from drama present on other program formats.

Chapter 4: How Real Is Reality?: Student Interviews

Sucked into Reality Programs

For whatever reason, reality television has never had much of a reputation as quality entertainment. Perhaps it is the low production values, or it could be the glorification of despicable behavior and debauchery, the commoditization of infidelity and scandal, or the fact that almost anyone can get on a reality show if they are willing to eat a few bugs, participate in seemingly dangerous stunts or unnecessarily lash out at others for the sake of dramatic entertainment. In its early days, reality television was referred to as “trash TV” and, even after it has become mainstream, it seems to carry with it a stigma: reality programs are outlandish, resembling of a freak-show, excessively dramatic and full of petty gossip. Yet, it seems that, at least in part, it is for these reasons that these young viewers, all freshman at a midsized university, found themselves hooked. *Katrina* and *Miranda* talk about being “sucked in”:

Katrina: When we were younger we weren't allowed to watch MTV and then, as you get older you get curious, so then you watch it and then you get sucked in. You're just so curious about it ... I don't know, it's kind of an escape from reality, I think, like I could never go on there and do all that stuff, like, I'd have too much of a conscience, and it's not how I would act, but you watch it and it's like, “wow! That would be fun to do for a day.

Miranda: I pretty much started watching them when they first came on. It's just something that sucks you in.

Sarah found herself drawn to MTV reality programs for similar reasons:

Sarah: Laguna Beach just because it was so much drama, it kept you interested and wanting to watch it because there's always something going on. And the same with “Real World” for this season. Sometimes they're boring, but if they have drama, which

“Real World” tends to have drama, then that’s why I watch them basically. Just because it’s interesting to see what happens.

Kelly described the reality programs on MTV as addicting ...

Kelly: Laguna Beach... I don’t know why I watch it. I’ve just always been addicted to it I guess. There’s always drama, the girls you hope you would never meet in person, they’re just awful ... “Real World”, I’m amazed at some of the things that they do on that show. Like, if my mom ever saw that show and I was on it she would just go nuts ... They’re all just shocking. You can’t believe that they’re all your age and they’re doing those things.

Candace describes her gratification from watching reality programs on MTV as similar to the satisfaction that she gets from reading tabloid magazines such as *Us Weekly*:

Candace: They’re always guilty pleasures and my favorites are probably “The Hills” and Laguna Beach... I like all the gossip on “The Hills” and “Laguna Beach” because my life is not filled with catty people like that ...

While he didn’t call it “drama,” John found the confrontation on the *Real World* to be entertaining.

John: “Real World” and Road Rules were kind of the first reality shows on there so I gave it a shot and it wasn’t too bad and I kind of liked watching the people fight, so it kept me interested.

Brandon said many of his friends in high school watched the reality programs on MTV, and once he started watching them, he became a fan as well.

Brandon: You’d see it all hyped up, like for the premiere and then you’d watch it ... I watch a little “Real World”, a little bit of “Maui Fever”, basically, whatever is on at the time. Sometimes you get caught up in it, but then you have to sit back and wonder is this real or is this scripted ...

Brandon's questions about the authenticity of reality television programs was common among these students and was one of the major subjects of discussion throughout this project.

Brandon: That's the grey area, if you will. You could agree with it, some people are like, "this is real, this is real, this is real," and other people sit back and can be like there's no way this can be real. It's just too perfect sometimes. A couple of my friends who are either still in high school or some of the girls that I know refuse to believe anything different than that it is real. That it has to be real, Even some of my guy friends who are a little awkward with reality television, they like to believe that it's real, like Laguna Beach or...

Unlike many of Brandon's friends, who believe that most of the "reality" on MTV is real, the majority of these students seemed to perceive the programs as a mixed bag. Some of the most popular programs on with my viewers were *Laguna Beach*, its spin-off, *The Hills*, and the long-lived reality staples *Real World* and *Road Rules* and the related "challenges." While all of these programs air under the heading of "reality" programs, the basic premises are slightly different and seem to elicit slightly different responses from their audiences. Generally speaking, these shows can be broken up into two separate groups, which, for the purposes of this study I will refer to as the "cinema-style" reality programs and the "documentary-style" reality programs.

Real World was a first of its kind when it first aired in 1992: it is commonly referred to as the first of the modern reality programs (Stern, 2007) and showcases the hallmarks of the new genre: confessionals, shaky cameras (providing a seemingly "raw" aesthetic) "bleeped" out profanity, the infrequent presence of the sound crew and producers on camera, and a cast selected from thousands of eager youth who auditioned to appear on the show (Bagley, 2001). Housemates are given a job and a car and are

filmed as they adjusted to their temporary life in the extravagant *Real World* house in places such as New York City, Hawaii, and Las Vegas. The most recent program at the time of this research was filmed in Denver, Colorado. The program has the aesthetic qualities of a documentary, being shot at the same film speed as television news with only one or two handheld cameras, and is purported to be an unadulterated look at what happens when people stop being polite, and start being real. *Road Rules* was a spin-off of *Real World*, and was filmed and cast in a similar manner, but rather than assemble strangers in a house, they were sent on a road trip and given tasks to accomplish. The challenges combined the former cast members of *Real World* and *Road Rules*, formed teams and had them tackle challenge-course type stunts in a competition.

Laguna Beach was the first, and is the flagship, of the expository or cinema-style programs. It first aired in 2004 and starred a collection of high school students living in sunny Laguna Beach, California. *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, and *Maui Fever* were all filmed in the same, expository style. Differing from the verité or documentary-style programs in which cast members were relocated to an unnatural situation, casts from these shows were selected and filmed in their home towns as they worked, went to school, interacted with friends, dated and squabbled. Unlike *Real World*, the plot lines of these programs are carefully and seamlessly crafted, and the cinematography appears like a movie, rather than television news. To produce the film-like effect, two or three cameras are assigned to each cast member, allowing crews to shoot simultaneously at separate locations, capturing “shots that other reality shows miss” (Gonzalez, 2005). Scenes are shot from a distance at a much higher film speed than *Real World*, allowing producers to capture multiple angles, resulting in a very sleek, movie-like appearance.

Given these differences, the ways in which these students related to the programs and perceived the cast members and the situations varied in some cases. In all cases, however, students described themselves making comparisons, in one way or another, between themselves or their friends and the aired experiences of the casts of the MTV reality programs and using these comparisons as a means enjoying the program and reflecting on their own lives, and to evaluate the realism of the shows.

Sarah: I don't think they're very realistic at all. I mean, they are really reality shows to me because that's why I watch them... because neither of them ("Laguna Beach" and "Real World") are anything like my life. So, they're very much more dramatic than my life would ever be ...

The following sections address how these students, Brandon, Candace, Christopher, John, Katrina, Kelly, Miranda, and Sarah (all pseudonyms) perceive MTV reality programs. The first section will examine how they relate to the personalities of the MTV reality programs as peers and celebrities. The next section will focus on the ways in which they evaluate realism, including knowledge of production processes and use of personal experiences to assess plausibility and possibility. The final section will address how these students learn from MTV reality programs and apply lessons to their own lives. Additionally, many of these sections will deal with how perceived realism affects these viewers' enjoyment and learning from the programs, and how they imitate and make comparisons with their favorite personalities.

Do They See Them as Peers?

The question addressed in this section is concerned with how the youth in this study related to the personalities on reality television shows on MTV. Specifically, the

phenomena of imitation, comparisons and perception of these personalities as peers appeared to be prominent. Additionally of interest is the idea that the scenarios and the situations on these reality television programs were in the realm of possibility or within reach for these young viewers. This seemed to play a role in how they watched and related to the personalities and storylines of these programs.

While the interviews were not solely focused on any particular program on MTV, with a few exceptions, the majority of conversation centralized around *Real World*, *Laguna Beach*, and *The Hills*. These shows are, although all technically “reality” programs, different in the ways that they are created, cast by producers, and received by the viewers. In many ways, the personalities of *Real World*, *Laguna Beach*, and *The Hills* are my viewers’ peers, being of similar age and social status. However, to many of my viewers, the personalities of *Laguna Beach* and “*The Hills*” have become celebrities in their own right, being the subjects of tabloid gossip and making appearances at red carpet events. My viewers seemed to feel that, although *Laguna Beach* and “*The Hills*” depicted what may be a relatively normal high school experience, the personalities themselves were not “average people.” For example, Sarah, Katrina and Miranda described how they perceived the personalities:

Sarah felt that, although the personalities of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were normal to begin with (as opposed to Hollywood actors or celebrities) their popularity changed that.

Sarah: I think they were all, you know, they all lived their lives like any other high schoolers would. But as soon as the cameras came in I think they probably changed, on film, and then they obviously changed after because they all became uber-popular, and a lot of them are now in Hollywood. Like L.C. continued to have her show and Kristen* is always in the tabloids ... they're followed so much by paparazzi ...*

She said that their current celebrity status makes her feel that, despite the fact that they started as average high school students, Kristen* and Lauren* are not her peers, but, rather, are inaccessible television personalities.

Sarah: I'd never go out of my way to be friends with them. I know some of the characters from Laguna Beach were on MySpace and Facebook, and some of my friends would be like, "oh yeah, I'm friends with L.C. on Facebook," and things like that. It never even crossed my mind to become friends with them. It never crossed my mind to even try to contact them. because they're just there to me. It's like a cartoon almost. I don't even see them as real.

Katrina felt that the kids on Laguna Beach were more sophisticated than her or her friends in high school.

Katrina: I feel like they were older ... They didn't seem like they were in high school, they seemed like they were in college, like they were older, but I guess they were in high school.

Miranda said she didn't feel like the lives of Lauren and Heidi*, the personalities of The Hills were very much like her because of their lavish lifestyles. She felt that, as reality personalities, they received more privileges than she ever hoped to.*

Miranda: A lot of the stuff they do is pretty extreme. Like, they had Lauren fly to New York for a day and come back and I don't think that's something that any normal person would do. I can't really relate a lot. I mean, I live in Ohio and they live in California: it's like two different worlds.*

However, the way in which my viewers perceived the participants on *Real World* was much different from their perceptions of the personalities of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. Without exception, these viewers felt that participants on *Real World* were average people, without the celebrity status of those on *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. *Katrina*

said that, despite the fact that the *Real World* housemates appear on national television, none of them seemed like celebrities to her; they were just average people who had the good fortune of getting on the show. She explained that participants who regularly appeared on the reunion challenge programs weren't famous because they frequently appeared on television, but rather they were attention hungry.

Katrina: Nobody's really been made famous from these shows. You just know them to be on these shows and that's it, so I think that they should have to do something and get a job... I don't think that being on a show for 6 months makes them a celebrity or makes them successful. They just got lucky. They said the right things on their casting tape.

John said that, for the most part, the *Real World* housemates were average, although they weren't all normal. He said that the audition tapes at the beginning of each season were proof that the chosen participants were average people, not celebrities, but that much of the way they behaved may not be considered "normal."

John: I think a couple of them are normal. Just by watching the tapes in the beginning. I think the majority of them are.

Christopher, felt that, while some of the participants on *Real World* were ordinary, others behaved in manners that were inappropriate. He felt that many the participants were not mentally stable and were chosen because they would be entertaining, whereas others acted out because they were compelled to do so, not because it was normal behavior.

Christopher: Before they came on the show they were regular people, and they still are regular people when they're on the show probably, whereas some of the people should probably be in some sort of psychiatric hospital.

There clearly is a sense that being a participant on *Real World* is very much within the grasp of these viewers. Most of them said that they have considered at one time or another, auditioning for the show or at least have speculated how they would behave or what stereotypical role they would play. Their comments indicated to me that they perceived the *Real World* housemates to be their peers, (although they did not necessarily behave similarly) because they discussed the program in a manner that indicated that they felt they had the opportunity, if they so desired, to live in the “*Real World*” house.

Sarah and *Candace* said that they have considered the possibility of being a “*Real World*” housemate, and that their friends have discussed it as well.

Sarah: I actually used to think about that (being on “Real World”) when I first started watching it a few years ago. We were just talking about this the other day, my friends were, because it was the season finale, and a couple of us were watching it.

Candace: I mean, I’ve thought about it, but I wouldn’t be very interesting because I would be like, “hey guys, lets just all get along!” I’d be the quiet one who stays in all the time.

John knew a girl who was selected to live in the “*Real World*” house. Seeing someone from his hometown appear on national television gave him the sense that the program was not only real, but that anyone had a chance at being selected. Given this, he said that he has imagined himself in the *Real World* house and has tried to figure out what sort of role he would play.

John: I think the fact that they just picked random people and put them together was what drew me in ... I would like to think of myself as in the middle of the whole thing. I

wouldn't try and cause the drama ... I would like to believe that I would be the nice, kind of friend who talks to everybody ... there's a sense of "I could do that, that could be me."

Brandon echoed John's statements, saying that the idea that he or any one of his friends could possibly appear on *Real World* added to the intrigue of the show and made it feel as if the housemates were his peers.

Brandon: It's the realm of possibility. It's like the combination of "this is something I can relate to" and "wow, I wish that would happen to me" or "what would I do if that happened" and you kind of put yourself in that scenario and it becomes the entertaining portion of the show.

In addition to imagining herself in certain situations on *Real World*, Katrina said that she has compared herself to the *Real World* cast, looking for similarities, and has often found them.

Katrina: It's just watching real people and that's what they're doing and can you see yourself doing that and you kind of compare yourself with them, like, "oh, I kind of see myself in them a little bit, and I kind of see myself in them, I don't know what I would do in that situation"

Whether or not my viewers think that the casts of *Real World* behave in "normal" ways, they do consider them to be peers because they imagine that *they* could possibly be participants in the program as well. This was not necessarily the case with *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. My viewers' relationship with these personalities is complicated because, although *Laguna Beach* was set in a traditional high school environment, which many could relate to, the personalities themselves seemed anything but ordinary high school

students. Some felt that they were completely outside the realm of reality and were merely entertainment.

John, for example, said that the absence of homework or other sorts of banalities common in high school, made it seem to him that the kids on *Laguna Beach* were nothing like him. He said that the show didn't even seem real and he hadn't considered the fact that they could be his peers because their lives were so different from his.

John: It seems like, on "Laguna Beach" they're just chilling in their Mercedes Benz and doing whatever. It could be realistic (given their social status), if they're very lucky, which they could be ... You kinda forget that they're in high school. It's just straight drama all the time between 18 and 19 year old kids. It might be realistic to some people, but not to me. I don't get to hang out on the beach every day.

Others felt that, while the lives of Kristen*, Lauren*, and the other personalities of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were clearly different from their own, it was interesting to see how other people their age lived their lives. In these cases my viewers felt that the situations on these programs were realistic and probable, although not necessarily reflective of their own realities. They looked in on the lives of the young people on these programs with curiosity, and, at times, envy, often comparing their own lives.

Miranda: "The Hills" ... (I like it) because I went to California three years ago and I just like everything about California, so watching someone do what you want to do...

Kelly felt that many of the problems shown on *Laguna Beach* were like her own experiences. She said that, although the personalities clearly lived privileged lives, she felt that their everyday lives were just like hers.

Kelly: They kind of are (multi-million dollar kids), but it's still interesting cause they're still in high school. They still have basic drama without the money issue. The only part where the money comes into play is where they show their houses, or they go shopping,

or the huge parties. But people in my high school had parties and we went shopping, maybe just not on Beverly Hills Boulevard.

Candace said that her interest in *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* was similar: she liked to see how other people her age lived their lives, although she did not actually want to participate in those situations herself.

Candace: "The Hills", I'm an avid watcher. It's interesting to see her (Lauren) grow up through the years, and I guess it's sort of stupid, but I feel like I just like to see how other people live their lives ... I think I relate more to Lauren*. We obviously live very different lives. I don't live in LA ... I've never really wanted to go to the West Coast ... I like watching the TV show, but I'm not attracted to that lifestyle for myself.*

This response is different than my viewers' responses to *Real World*: while *Candace* and *Kelly* enjoyed watching the California lifestyle on television, they did not express any hope to move to Laguna Beach, nor did they report wanting to meet or be friends with any of the cast members. Rather, they looked at personalities like Lauren* and Kristen*² as celebrities: inaccessible and objects of admiration. This contrasts with many of my viewers' responses to *Real World*, in which they reported that they had considered being a part of the show, and did not perceive the housemates to be any different than themselves, apart from personal and ethical disparities.

But, even while *Candace* felt that her life was dissimilar to the lives of the students on *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*, she did feel as if there were other people her age who could completely relate.

Candace: I'm sure there are countless people whose lives completely parallel that and that's why it's been such a hit, you know, because not only with the people who don't

² *denotes a television personality, rather than an interviewee.

indulge in petty drama ... I'm sure there are people who can very much identify their lives with the show and see a parallel.

Brandon indicated that he also felt that the personalities of *Laguna Beach* were relatable, even if they were not accessible.

Brandon: They don't seem like this big, highly paid actor that you're watching that you know is making a couple million dollars just to do this. You feel like you're watching, more or less, people your age ... You're watching "Laguna Beach" when you're a senior in high school you're kind of picturing that, putting yourself in those scenarios because that's basically your life right now. It may not be exactly to a T your life, but it's your age that's some of the similar things you're going through...they're your peers

In Brandon's mind, the kids on *Laguna Beach* were exactly like him and his friends, who grew up on the New Jersey shore. He said that watching *Laguna Beach* on television was almost like watching his own life being played out on the opposite coast. He said he had friends with the same names as many of the characters on *Laguna Beach*, and that MTV could easily make a *Laguna Beach* spin-off about him and his friends on the east coast.

These similarities solidified Brandon's perception that the personalities of *Laguna Beach* were very much his peers and that, if afforded the opportunity, he could easily be friends with them.

Brandon: It's not so much that I wish it was my life, because I live a pretty exciting life back on the shore too because I live like a counter part to the whole "Laguna Beach." Because I live on the opposite end of the spectrum, I live on the east coast, so I see a lot of that stuff happening ... I'd almost like to say Laguna Beach characters, (are like me) to a point ... It's a lot like my life: I live on the beach, I live on an island off the coast, so when I'm home it's like that, it's been like that, it's kinda like I can relate my friends to those people and what we do to the scenarios that happen, not necessarily the most outlandish things that happen on those shows, but for the general part, that's how my life is back home ... Yeah, I can definitely see my friends are like the kids on "Laguna Beach", not just the characters but what happens, just like on the beach, people having parties all the time. I live in a neighborhood where it's like oh everybody's coming over to my house for a pool party, kind of randomly. That's more or less my life back home, kinda looking at it like "oh someone else is doing this somewhere else, it's not just me."

Whether or not my viewers perceived the reality personalities to be their peers seemed to have a close relation to whether or not what they were seeing on television was in the realm of possibility for themselves. In the case of *Real World*, the fact that there was the potential for these students to audition and actually be part of the program made them feel like those who had done so and were on MTV were just like them. Perceptions of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were slightly more complicated, as the actual possibility for any of these students to appear on the program was unlikely. For some, the privileged and celebrity nature of the personalities' lives negated any sense that they were on a peer level. Others felt that the everyday lives of the personalities on *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were very similar to situations they experienced in their own lives, although they didn't necessarily feel like they were on equal ground with them. Much of this perception, however, comes not from the content of the programs, but from the extra publicity given to these personalities by paparazzi and entertainment news media. It seems that their status as tabloid fare sets Kristen* and Lauren* apart in the minds of some of my viewers, making them more Hollywood personalities and less their peers. *Brandon's* perceptions of *Laguna Beach*, were exceptional, due to the fact that he grew up in a setting similar to the program. Because of this, he felt that being a part of a show like *Laguna Beach* was potentially in the realm of possibility for him, even if it were unlikely. For this reason, he, more than others, felt that the personalities of the program were his peers.

How Real is *Real World*?

In this section I will discuss the ways in which my viewers perceive the reality television programs on MTV.

Integral to the reality television genre is the notion that, to a certain degree, the programs reflect a reality in the world. However, as the genre has grown and expanded, the editing process and producers' desires to entertain have blurred the line between what is reality and what is just television. There was no consensus among my viewers on whether or not MTV reality programs, in this case *Real World*, *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were representative of reality. Several different issues were factors in their determinations of what was real, including knowledge of production values and comparisons with their own lives. However, before examining these issues, it is important to distinguish how these viewers interpreted the term "reality," as it was discussed in various ways:

1. Unscripted vs. acting
2. Plot manipulation
3. Exaggerated behavior
4. Unrealistic situations for the average person

Unscripted vs. Acting

On the most basic level, the students questioned whether or not *Real World*, *Laguna Beach*, and *The Hills* were unscripted programs. Some of my viewers referred to "scripting" as the pre-production and production process (written scripts, direction, etc) while others referred to "scripting" as the post-production process (editing to create a

storyline). For the purpose of this discussion, I am referring to “scripting” as the pre-production process. The post-production process will be discussed later as “production manipulation.” *Christopher* and *Kelly* said they believe that these programs are actually written prior to production. *Christopher* said that if there is an element of reality present in any MTV reality program, it is minor. He began watching the *Real World* challenge programs with a friend for the sole purpose of making fun of them. He felt that, not only did the editing process almost completely eliminate any form of reality, but cast members were likely pushed by producers to act out, directed to behave in inappropriate ways, and, at the very least, were brainwashed into thinking that they should be overdramatic and exaggerate their emotions and opinions. He also felt that *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were scripted dramas.

Christopher: I think it's ("Real World") the most obvious example of something being called a reality show when it's clear that it's written, they tell people what to say, it seems really forced. It's just really funny because they act like it's so real and so life threatening but it's not.

Kelly believes that *Real World* is almost entirely scripted. She said that the housemates' behavior is so extreme that she can't help but be skeptical that any of it is genuine.

Kelly: I don't really believe that it's real, as far as "Real World" goes. I think it's scripted. The whole thing. Even though they say at the very beginning that it's real and everything, I still think it's scripted. Read from a script, told what to do ... a little of both. I mean, I would hope that no one would act like that in real life.

Sarah said she always used to think that the things that happened on *Laguna Beach* were real events. It was only after her brother told her that the programs were not that she began to question.

Sarah: Until he said it I was like, what? It's scripted? It didn't even cross my mind. I thought that it was real, this is what happened, this is just their lives. I still kind of think

that it is a little bit. I still want to believe that it is somewhat real. But I can see how some people would have brought it up and been like, oh this is scripted. There's just too much drama to be possible.

Some of my viewers felt that *Real World* seemed to be real, whereas *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were less so. For these viewers, the appearance and structure of the programs was the most questionable. The documentary style of *Real World* seemed more real than the cinema style of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. Much of this seemed to be related to actual camera and audio techniques used to film these programs.

John: Those ("Laguna Beach", "The Hills") seem scripted to me, they really do. I think it has to do with the way it's filmed. Just from a video standpoint with somewhat of a background on video ... Laguna Beach and Maui Fever, it's almost like a movie. Like, if you were to watch the whole series it would be like watching a movie.

Katrina: "The Hills" and "Laguna Beach", no, I don't think that's reality at all.

Brandon was less sure of whether or not he felt the two programs were real or not.

He felt that the seamless storylines seemed a bit too perfect to be real.

Brandon: There's also the situations that happen (on Laguna Beach), and that's what makes it the questionable call. Its like, how does it unfold that perfectly?

However, there were some elements of the production that he felt seemed to be more real than other sitcoms or dramas. He said that the lack of a set and the constantly changing scenery in *Laguna Beach* made the program seem far more real to him than *Friends* or *Seinfeld*.

Brandon: On "Laguna Beach" it could be anywhere. Some of them could be at the school, some of them can be over here playing golf ... it's a constantly changing scenario ... the way its filmed ... it's just a random jump to location ... its like they're being followed constantly. This is their life.

The shaky, hand-held camera style on *Real World* proved to be a visual cue for

John and *Brandon* that it was unscripted.

John: “*Real World*” is just single camera, just a single show and you’ll every so often catch an audio guy in the shot ... It’s just more real on “*Real World*”.

Brandon: It’s almost the way it’s done, the way its filmed makes it look more real. I mean, it’s not in a set, its constantly just, I don’t know, kind of real.

Plot Manipulation in Production

The second way that my viewers evaluated the realism of these MTV programs was related to whether or not what they saw on the screen was really what transpired. One of the most significant factors in this determination was their knowledge of the production process.

Miranda is a telecommunications production major. She said that she felt that what was shown on *Real World* was often a product of editing. She said that she has watched many of the reunion programs (when housemates get together after their season of *Real World* has aired) and seen evidence that events did not occur the way they were shown to.

Miranda: I think things happen, but I don’t think that the way they put it in the show is real. At first I was like, oh this is real, but then as I watched it more I didn’t really believe it. Then you see more about how it was filmed and edited and it kind of takes away from it.

She felt that the way that people were depicted on television was probably inaccurate.

Miranda: I wouldn't want to judge someone because of what I saw them do on TV.

Miranda's education as a telecommunications student has contributed to her skepticism about the realism of *Real World*.

Miranda: We had this class about reality TV and the shows and ... like before I thought this is not really real, but now I come here and it's like it's really fake and I don't take it too seriously.

Katrina reported a similar experience. She also took a class on reality television and said that it changed the way that she viewed the programs. While she believed that the housemates were real people and were acting of their own free will, she distrusted the accuracy of the post-production process.

Katrina: Just with my major and with the more we pick things apart and talk about production and stuff, but at the beginning it seemed more real ... I didn't know that the editors went back and made a story out of the footage that they had. That's what they actually do: they create the story. So it's kind of misleading.

Realism: Exaggerated Behavior

Another way in which my viewers talked about reality is whether or not the casts of these shows were behaving in front of the camera how they would behave normally. Many of my viewers said that they perceived that personalities on *Real World*, *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were not behaving in genuine ways, but were performing for the camera. On all of the programs, some of my viewers felt that the personalities were playing into roles that had been predetermined for them, or that they had developed for themselves.

Both *John* and *Christopher* said that they thought many of the housemates on *Real World* were acting in ways to fill a stereotypical role. They both pointed out that

there seems to be the same types of people cast each season: the nice guy, the jerk, the homosexual, the black person, the person with the drinking problem, the player and the girl who sleeps around, for example. They said that people often play into a certain role.

Christopher felt adamantly that *Real World* housemates behave in extreme ways or try to fill a stereotypical *Real World* role in order to get the maximum amount of face time.

Christopher: ... it's just this person's gay, this person's black, call em out on it, I'll get on TV more often, people will think I'm a jerk, but I know I'm no, at least I'll be on TV. I think it's really forced.

He said that he thinks that because many of the housemates were formerly *Real World* viewers, they know what will get the most air time and will behave accordingly to get it. In his mind, the storylines on the program are similar from season to season, as are the types of people who are cast.

Christopher: It's all about naturalization. They've seen it before they get on and they're like "oh the guy who's the douche bag gets on a lot, the guy who was gay got on a lot because the douche bag and the guy who was gay got in a lot of fights, so they were on a lot, so if I'm the douche bag on the show, then I'll get in a fight with the gay guy and I'll be in that episode where they get in a fight and they'll advertise it as the episode where the douche bag and the gay guy get in a fight.

Christopher thinks that most of the fights and drama on *Real World* are not the result of true conflict or personality issues, but are most likely provoked by producers or even the result of a highly charged atmosphere in which the participants actually begin to believe that what they are experiencing is serious, when, in fact it is not. He thinks most of the crises are exaggerated and overhyped for the camera and are rarely the big issues that they are shown to be.

Christopher: I think in their heads they think it's real. But, they don't realize that it's just a carbon copy of the last time they were in New York or L.A. ... I think just the idea of being on a reality show probably twists your concept of what is real and what is not real. And so, even little, like "hey this person said this thing, I'm all of the sudden angry, I wouldn't have know about this if I were in "Real World", but now I'm going to go confront this person because I think I'm more angry than I really am" ... I definitely think producers go behind the scenes and say "it would be really cool if you would do this, you'll probably be on a lot more."

Sarah said that she has seen housemates on the Denver season of *Real World* behave in extreme ways that she thought were unnatural and unnecessary. She didn't felt that one particular housemate, Brooke*, overdramatized many situations.

Sarah: There's some things, especially with Brooke's situation, that I would be like, oh I would have handled that much differently than her, and she's freaking out, and it's unnecessary, and it's just adding more drama than there should be, which is obviously a good thing in MTV's case, because then people watch it and they'd put that on the previews that she was freaking out.

John said that he often sees a "crazeball" character on each season of *Real World*. He thinks that certain people may purposefully decide to be the "crazeball" on camera just to get attention.

John: I just feel like there's a lot of people who want to be the center of attention and will do that, especially on TV with cameras in their face, they will absolutely agree to do that ... people will watch that and be like, "oh, that's awesome, you know maybe I could do something that she did and be the center of attention, crazy."

However, despite this opinion, John said he thinks the majority of things that happen on *Real World* are genuine. Candace, however, wasn't sure if the people she was seeing on *Real World* were being overdramatic, or if they were people with extreme personalities who were chosen to live in the house because of their dramatic tendencies.

Candace: I don't doubt that those characters are real and I definitely think that they're real portrayals. I just think they're an exaggerated form of that, cause to be on TV and good entertainment and what people want to watch, it's always exaggerated from what it really is. And, it's not like there aren't people who are really like that, because, like, I know people who are larger than life ...

All of the intensity and drama on *Real World* is what made the program seem real to *Katrina*. While she felt that a lot of the storylines were crafted and manipulated by editors, she said that the emotions were what made the program real to her.

Katrina: Just to see them struggle with it and get so emotional about it, and they get so heated about stuff, I feel like it can't be made up. I don't think they could script that, unless they were a really, really good actor ... I feel like the actual putting the drama here or there, that's scripted. The emotion makes it genuine. This season there's the one girl who's absolutely crazy when she drinks and gets in fights and stuff and you see her the next morning totally regretting everything and I feel like that's real. The guys arguing about police and values, I feel like that's real too. I think it's real because they're issues that are out there, so maybe that's why. Emotion makes it real.

Laguna Beach and *The Hills* seemed to be equally difficult to pin down. Most of my viewers were unsure if the drama and behavior on these programs was genuine, or just hyped up for the camera.

Brandon: The drama is the point where I'm unsure about it. I don't know.

Similarly, *Candace* felt that many of the cast members of *Laguna Beach* such as Kristen* played into roles as the program developed.

Candace: I think that for self promotional reasons, that once Kristen was pegged as that character she played it up and made herself come off that way. But, I don't doubt that's part of who she is. I'm sure it's a bit exaggerated, but I'm sure it's there.*

Miranda felt that it was very unlikely that the any of the cast members would be able to behave naturally in their situations.

Miranda: Like, you don't really realize at first that as they're sitting here there's cameras on them and stuff. They probably act differently.

Katrina thought that much of the behavior on *Laguna Beach* was related to real problems that were happening in the cast members' lives, but the events and conversations that transpired on-camera were prompted or encouraged by producers. In this sense, she called the program "scripted."

Katrina: I felt like the show was very scripted. Like they'd [producers] be like "here, talk about this." Like if it were you and me sitting here talking about shoes and then suddenly they'd be like, "so you and Steven" or something, so it's like scripted, I feel.

Other viewers expressed similar views, saying that they believed that many of the events were manipulated or directed by producers.

Realism: Realistic for the Rest of the World?

Finally, some of my viewers discussed reality in terms of whether or not what was happening on these MTV programs was realistic for their own lives and for the rest of the world, regardless of how genuine it may have been. Most of my viewers felt that the living situations in the *Real World* house and in Los Angeles were not realistic for the average person.

Candace pointed out that the whole situation on *Real World*, with seven strangers being randomly placed in a house together, was not really reflective of her reality.

Candace: They've been plucked out of their lives and given this fabulous house in an amazing city and given this great job... I myself won't ever be in those situations

She felt like the audition process ruined an element of reality of the program.

Rather than being a realistic mix of random youth, the housemates were chosen based off of their audition tapes and, according to *Candace*, the result is a group of overly dramatic people who would never live together under normal situations. In this sense she felt that the *Real World* situation was not realistic.

Candace: If they really wanted to be real, then they [MTV] would be like you and me, and they [MTV] wouldn't have people submit tapes, they would just be like, "you and you." They wouldn't sort through these hundreds of thousands of tapes and be like, "oh, this kid seems really angry," or "she's really dramatic, we like her," or "she's beautiful, we'll take her ..."

Sarah echoed *Candace's* opinions, saying that she didn't think that the living situation on *Real World* was very realistic.

Sarah: "Real World" is supposed to be more realistic. But, I think it's the setting that it's in is obviously not more realistic. Seven strangers living together ...I think I watch them because they're not anything like my life.

Katrina also felt that the living situation was not normal for most people.

Katrina: I mean, they surround the house with, well, I've heard this, they put alcohol everywhere and like, let them into everything for free ... I just don't think it's real. They don't work really. They get a job, but it's an easy job.

Brandon, however, said that *Real World* was a good representation of the real world because of the wide variety of people. He perceived the cast to be a microcosm of the United States. He was not so much concerned with the unnatural environment as with the cross section of people represented.

Brandon: I think it kind of is a little bit more a portrayal of "Real World" because right there you're throwing in the gay guy, you're throwing in the girl right out of college with a different lifestyle, you're throwing in different races, everything together. It kind of is the world of the United States; it is kind of a smaller sample size ...

Laguna Beach presented a slightly different dynamic: my viewers perceived the general setting to be somewhat normal—high school kids, living with their parents, going to school and socializing. However, the high socio-economic status seemed to be much less realistic. My viewers did not seem to think that it was an unrealistic situation, but rather that it was reserved for only the few and was not representative of the lives of most of the viewing public.

Miranda: They all seem to be on the beach, dress in nice clothes, shop all the time.

Brandon felt that the fact that *Laguna Beach* personalities were being filmed in their own environment made the show more realistic than other reality programs where casts are transplanted to the filming location.

Brandon: I feel like “Laguna” is more real because those people are in their own scenario, that’s where they live.

As much as *Katrina* acknowledged that the personalities of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* were wealthier and more privileged than the average teenager, she thought that the general situations and things that happened on the show were fairly realistic for most high school students. While *Candace*, *Sarah* and *Miranda* felt like the drama was exaggerated, *Katrina* thought that the parties, squabbles and love triangles were typical of many teenagers’ lives.

Katrina: All the drama, like all the boy drama was very realistic. They had it in my high school and they have it here. It never ended. You can’t escape that.

Brandon also thought that the lifestyles on *Laguna Beach* were very realistic.

Because he lived a similar life on the coast, he said that he had seen nearly everything on the program at one time or another in his own life.

Brandon: I feel like if you took my life with my friends where I live and made an East Coast version of that it would work out with editing with MTV ... I brought three of my friends back to Jersey for the weekend ... four days straight on the beach where I lived and they were dumbfounded when they came back. They were just like, "this shit really does happen" kind of deal.

So, while he realized that his life was some what exceptional, he, more than others, felt that the living situations on *Laguna Beach* were very realistic. Moreover, he said that much of his interest in the program revolved around knowing that somewhere across the country, there was someone else doing the exact same thing as him and his friends.

Learning from Reality Television

While many of my viewers are skeptical about the authenticity of MTV reality programs, it seems most of them have, at one time or another, found themselves affected, or at least provoked to think about various issues as a response to watching them. In this section I will discuss how MTV reality programs have made my viewers think about the world around them and, at times, have developed expectations or the perception of certain norms.

On the whole, this section does not have much relevance to *Laguna Beach* or *The Hills*. With a few exceptions, most of my viewers felt that the content of these programs was neither thought provoking or surprising. It seems that much of the appeal of these

two programs was their benign nature. When asked what watching *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* made her think about life, *Katrina* responded: “*I wish I lived on the beach.*”

As *Candace* pointed out that there really aren’t many life lessons to be learned from these programs, although she did think that perhaps they could influence viewers to be philanthropic.

Candace: I don’t really learn a lot of life lessons from Laguna Beach and “The Hills”. But, I mean, there was an episode where there was “Fight the Slide,” and they did a little fashion show to combat for a landslide that had just happened and I really appreciate episodes like that when they use their publicity for good causes. I think mostly what I take away from these shows is, “wow, I’m glad my friends aren’t like that.”

However, some of my viewers felt that there were definitely elements of *Real World* that made them think. The program made these viewers think about political and ethical issues, norms related to drinking and sex, the consequences of certain behaviors and mentally prepared them to deal with certain situations.

Katrina, Kelly, Brandon and Sarah reported that they began watching the program while they were still in high school and it made them wonder if they could expect similar things, particularly the amount of drinking, after graduation.

Katrina: A big party. I really thought that’s what college would be without the classes. I was like, oh, wow, that’s what you do when you’re out of college or whatever. And then it’s like, not at all.

Kelly also thought that college would be like *Real World*.

Kelly: I assumed it was [college like “Real World”]. I think so, I was coming here expecting that. You going to the bars and nearly every night people end up in jail. I mean, obviously I didn’t think that it would be that bad, but yeah, I walked into college thinking that every weekend would be a party. I just thought that drinking was what kids do for entertainment.

Brandon: I guess subconsciously you could say that [it developed expectations.] Like, ok, right now I'm going to go out and find a party once a week or something like that, and these guys on "Real World" are going out and getting shit faced several times a week, and so I think subconsciously it makes me think that when I get older this very well may be my life.

Sarah: I thought it was more normal to be belligerently drunk all the time because I had watched MTV, not growing up, but for the last couple of years I watched MTV and they always have, somebody's got a drinking problem, always. So I thought it was almost more normal to be like that and then when I came to college I noticed it's really not that normal.

*John and Candace, however, didn't draw the same conclusions. Both said that they already had an idea about what college would be like from older siblings, so watching *Real World* didn't affect their expectations.*

John: I kinda had a pre-notion about college because I had an older brother. Honestly, I didn't compare it to college.

Candace: I already knew what to expect [in college] because my sister is four years older than me ...

In many ways, watching the consequences of actions that these students perceived to be at least somewhat real, proved to be a useful learning tool. *Kelly* said that watching people on *Real World* sleep around and get in fights caused her to be wary of excessive drinking and getting into trouble.

Kelly: If anything it made me realize that, "wow, I don't want to act that stupid, I don't want to get arrested, I don't want to go home with a random guy," and in the back of my mind it made me think, "find your limit, stay there, don't go beyond" ... I think subconsciously I just store it away like, "this is the consequence, don't do this."

Similarly, *Sarah* said that watching the random sex on *Real World* has made her think about what was appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior.

Sarah: I always knew how much hooking up was bad and good and what not. I think MTV has probably formed some of my opinions about that, though. I've just seen how dirty and not nice it is.

Sarah said that, in a way, watching *Real World* helped prepare her for life after college and other situations that she had not yet experienced herself. Watching other people go through situations was valuable to her for understanding on a personal level what other people go through and for giving her a perspective on various options for handling life situations.

Sarah: I think that when watching "Real World" I saw what it's like to have that much freedom and how people handle that freedom. And some people went crazy, like Coley, and some people didn't do much. And that was good. It just kind of gave me a perspective on how different people handle these situations.

Specifically, *Sarah* said that watching big conflicts on *Real World*, such as a fight that occurred between two housemates in Denver, Tyree* and Davis*, made her think about what she would do if she were to be placed in a similar situation. She said that she had never thought about how she would handle a violent conflict until she watched one transpire on reality television and observed how the girls in the house dealt with it.

Sarah: I think it does [prepare me for situations.] I think I never actually thought of it that way, but I think it does. Because it makes you think of, what if that happened to you, what would you do? That's true. You know I never really thought about that, but it does. Yeah, I would say that it gives you certain scenarios and you kind of think of yourself. I think most people probably do think of it, too, like what would I do if that happened to me, and what would I be doing? And with the situation with Davis being drunk, you know, like how would I handle him? How would I try and...Yeah, it does...like, how would I try and deal with him? And especially with the Tyree* situation...But yeah, I think it does prepare you for those situations, because it makes you think, what would I do? And, I guess without that, I've never really thought, what would I do if I was in that situation, without seeing it on TV, I never really thought, I never put that in my mind.*

Similarly, *Katrina* explained that conflicts in the Denver house were insightful on issues with which she has little experience. She said that it was fascinating and difficult to watch how Davis's* mother disowned him over his sexual preference. It was interesting for her to see how his family dealt with the situation, especially since it was never something that she has never dealt with.

Katrina: This season one guy is a homosexual and his mom comes to visit and she's not ok with it, but the whole time they're there you can tell there's tension and it's really not settling so you watch that and see how the family would deal with that. Like, I don't have any brothers or anything in my family like that, so I don't know how we would deal with it, but it's interesting to see how other people deal with it ... to see it on "Real World" makes you think.

Homosexuality, for years, has made a frequent appearance on *Real World*. Many of my viewers said that, at the very least, seeing the issue addressed and dealt with by real people has made them think about it, particularly because the program often places it in a personal light.

Miranda: They always have the gay person. They always put that element in there. I feel like it has made it more acceptable, more normal I guess. You see them on TV all the time, so when you meet someone who is gay in real life it's like ...

While none of my viewers said that watching housemates be in conflict over homosexuality has ever actually changed their minds about the issue, they did think that watching real people deal with it was thought provoking. *Katrina* indicated that constantly seeing homosexuals on *Real World* and watching them interact with other housemates may have had a hand in her becoming more accepting of the lifestyle.

Katrina: Like, this year I've been so much more open to new things and just accepting of different people's opinions and I've kind of changed some of mine. Like I'm very open to

things like that [homosexuality]. I think that when they [MTV] keep reiterating it and keep putting it on TV it keeps helping the issue. So, I guessed it has helped.

John felt that MTV's portrayal of Davis*'s conflicts with Steven over the morality of homosexuality made him think about the issue. He said it had the potential to open other people's eyes, although he said that it did not directly affect his opinions.

John: It definitely gets me thinking about the issues. I don't necessarily agree or disagree exactly how they do, but it definitely gets your wheels spinning on the whole thing.

Brandon explained that seeing homosexuality directly addressed on *Real World* gave him another way to think about the issue, even though he didn't necessarily change how he felt about it.

Brandon: I think it's more like I saw the point, and I never thought of it that way before, or I never saw it in that way and I can kind of agree and change my view and look at it a little more deeply ... with like the gay episode, it did kind of make me think, more or less, "wow, Davis is kind of more, he's not looked at as a gay guy, he's a normal person too."*

While they don't necessarily perceive MTV reality programs to be completely representative of the real world, these viewers indicated that much of the events and extreme behavior has prompted them to think about issues such as drinking and sex. Many of them felt as though watching real people go through conflicts, difficulties and, at times, suffer the consequences of indiscretions caused them to subconsciously reference it to their own lives. For some, watching *Real World* was useful for observing how other people live their lives and how to avoid mistakes. For others, it developed expectations for life after high school, although most of them found that life in the real world was nothing like life on *Real World*.

Chapter 5: What Does it All Mean?

This study has provided numerous instances that support previous scholars' suggestions about how television realism is evaluated, how parasocial interaction may socialize viewers, and how perspectives on the world may be cultivated by frequent television viewing. My viewers provided exemplary support for Busselle and Greeburg's (2000) assertions about the ways in which audiences use personal experiences to make judgments about the plausibility and realism of a television program. Additionally, results of this project supported the notion that viewers are more likely to learn from television that they perceive to be real. My viewers reported a significant amount of learning from interactions shown on *Real World* (homosexuality, conflict, etc...) but learned less from *Laguna Beach* or *The Hills*, which were generally perceived to be more scripted. This project also revealed the important role that perceived celebrity or admiration plays in the phenomena of wishful identification. Furthermore, viewers in this project emphasized how knowledge of production impacts realism perceptions: students whose education involved media production were slightly more skeptical about how these programs represented reality than those who had no knowledge of how the programs were created.

The MTV programs that were discussed in this project, being produced and presented in such different manners, offered varied insights into how these students related to them. While *Laguna Beach* offered the students with familiar situations (high school, hanging out with friends, parties, and family life), the cast of the program was generally viewed to have celebrity status. Contrastingly, *Real World* presented these viewers with a cast that was perceived to be quite ordinary, being made up of their peers,

but a living situation that was out of the ordinary. These differences, along with the nature of the content drastically, changed the ways in which my viewers perceived and related to the programs.

How Youth Relate to Reality Television Personalities

It seems that much of the ways that these viewers made judgments about the casts of *Real World* and *Laguna Beach/The Hills* (both of which I will refer to as just *Laguna Beach*, since the two programs were referred to in the same context) was related to the “realm of possibility.” Being a part of the cast of *Real World* was perceived to be within reach for most of these viewers. As *John* put it, the sense of “I could do that, that could be me,” in addition to the knowledge that the cast was composed of average people like themselves, made my viewers feel as if they were watching their peers. Of course, many of them felt as if some of the housemates were slightly abnormal, if not completely outlandish, but did not perceive them as having of any sort of special celebrity status. This contrasts with the way that the viewers perceived the cast of *Laguna Beach*, who were viewed to be television stars or celebrities, rather than ordinary high school students. Much of this perception seems to be related to the media attention afforded stars such as Lauren* and Kristen*. Additionally, this may be attributed to the way in which the program was produced, having the appearance of a narrative movie, rather than a documentary film. Due to the film-like appearance of the program, the seamless editing and plot flow, many of my viewers were skeptical the cast members behaving genuinely. For this reason, many felt that they may actually be actors, rather than ordinary students. *Brandon* was one notable exception to this trend, however. Because he thought that his

life was so similar to the lives of the teenagers portrayed on *Laguna Beach*, *Brandon* seemed to feel that the cast members could easily be his friends, and that he too could be a star on a similar television show if he were given the opportunity.

Identification

The perceived celebrity status of the cast members of *Laguna Beach* and *Real World* appeared to be directly related to the occurrence of identification phenomena. Given that perceived similarity has been shown to be a factor in identification, it would seem that young viewers would be most likely to identify or wishfully identify with those who they perceive to be of similar status. However, this did not prove to be completely case, as admiration appeared to equally be a factor. None of my viewers expressed any desire to be like the personalities on *Real World*, despite the fact that they were perceived to be peers. However, *Sarah* and *Candace* said that they had aspirations to imitate Lauren from *Laguna Beach*. In their cases, it seems that perceived similarity played a significant role, as both of them discussed having similar personalities, career goals, and fashion sense as Lauren, although they viewed her as a celebrity. This supports Hoffner and Buchannan's (2005) assertions that perceived similarities are correlated with wishful identification. However, it may also be concluded that the social status of the object of wishful identification may play a role in whether or not the phenomena occurs.

Realism: Production Style

One of the primary ways in which my viewers determined the realism of these programs was through a simple evaluation of the structure. The narrative structure of

Laguna Beach proved to be an over-riding factor in my viewers' assessment of its realism; many of the viewers, particularly those with a background in media studies, found themselves quite skeptical of the reality nature of the program, despite its realistic, domestic setting. The emphasis placed on structure was further established by direct statements from *John* and *Brandon* that the documentary style of *Real World* made them believe that it was real, which confirms Bagley's (2001) concerns that the appearance of the program could be misleading.

Realism: Using Comparisons

As these students discussed some of the behavior on these programs, their reactions were either those of disbelief, disdain, or both. Some of them felt that much of the drama was exaggerated for the sake of the camera. Those who strongly felt this way, such as *Kelly* and *Christopher*, used the instances of cast members acting out as evidence that the programs were not representative of reality. While *Christopher* expressed that the drama was a blatant ploy to get attention, *Kelly* felt that cast members must have been provoked or instructed to act out because she could not believe that any person would normally behave in such ways. Their reactions support Busselle and Greenburg's (2000) suggestion that viewers compare their own perceptions of social reality in order to evaluate the realism of television.

Other students used comparisons to evaluate the realism of *Laguna Beach*, further confirming Busselle and Greenburg's (2000) position. While *Brandon's* life experiences, which were strikingly similar to *Laguna Beach*, left him with the sense that much of the program was realistic, *John* and *Miranda*, who did not grow up on the coast, used the

same comparative process to determine that the situations were not realistic at all. It was notable that the students only applied such judgments to *Laguna Beach*. This may be attributed to the fact that all of my viewers had been through high school, and therefore, had a set of real-life experiences against which to compare the television content. This supports Elliot and Slater's (1980) suggestion about the relationship between experiences and realism judgments.

However, as none of my students had ever been placed in a scenario like the *Real World* house, they used different methods of judging the program's level of realism. Many of the comments regarding the realism of *Real World* were in respect to the likelihood of such an exceptional living situation: most of them felt that living in a house with six strangers, a pool and an easy job was not within the plausible realm of their reality. These viewers seemed quite aware that they would have many more responsibilities than were given to the *Real World* housemates, and they perceived the living situation to be an interesting opportunity, but not a representation of real life.

Comparisons and Identity

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the ways in which some of my viewers chose to validate their own lives by comparing themselves with reality television personalities. One of the most common statements made in relation to the events shown on both *Real World* and *Laguna Beach* was, "I'm glad I'm not like that." In response to the drunken brawls or catty fights, many of my viewers expressed relief and pride that their lives and their friends were different. Upon first glance, this form of comparison seemed to be similar to the way that teenagers may look for flaws in their peers in order

to affirm their own worth. This type of self-validation may be viewed as a form of parasocial interaction. It also may offer an explanation, beyond mere voyeurism, as to why my viewers said they enjoyed watching the cast members fight, gossip and hook up.

These viewers also exhibited a degree of third-person perception. While several indicated that they thought younger viewers may think that reality programs are real, none of them said that they *themselves* believed that what they were watching was complete reality. This result is aligned with the findings of Leone et al. (2006) that indicate a general sentiment that younger viewers are more likely to be vulnerable to the images on reality television. Few of my viewers were willing to admit that they were currently affected by MTV reality programs, and a couple even expressed disdain for those who believe that reality television is real, reporting that only the naïve could take it seriously. However, some of them reported that when they were younger they *used* to believe that *Real World* and *Laguna Beach* were real, and that their beliefs *used* to be impacted by watching these programs. This result is particularly interesting because they revealed no shame in believing the programs were real in the past, so long as it was not their current opinion.

Learning

One of the most fascinating, and potentially impactful results of this research is the ways in which my viewers learned from watching these programs. *Real World* was shown to function as a socializing agent for these students, giving them “experiences” with groups of people with which they did not have frequent contact. Much of this learning was done through repeated viewing of various cast members lives, rather than

via listening to direct messages. Although some students, such as *John* and *Brandon*, said that listening to various arguments about homosexuality made them think about the issue, none of them felt that it changed their minds. However, several students (*Katrina*, *Sarah*, and *Brandon*) said that simply *watching* gay housemates such as Davis* live their lives and interact with other housemates made them more tolerant of homosexuals. It is important to emphasize that simple observation was more impactful on these students than verbal messages. Furthermore, realism was said to play a role in how my viewers interpreted what they were watching, as they said that watching homosexuals on a scripted program would not have had the same effect. This provides support for parasocial contact theory (Schiappa et al., 2005) and could prove valuable for future efforts to reach audiences with pro-social messages.

In addition to reducing prejudice, it seems that reality television may also have the potential to mentally prepare viewers for situations that they have not yet personally experienced. Watching the housemates make mistakes and suffer the consequences on *Real World* mentally prepared some of my viewers to deal with various scenarios and potentially make better decisions. None of them said they made direct mental references to *Real World* when facing similar situations themselves. But, but several students reported that they stored information in the back of their minds that subconsciously came up when it was relevant.

While watching *Real World* helped educate these viewers about the consequences of certain behavior, it also cultivated my viewers' expectations for college, particularly in respect to alcohol consumption. A number of my viewers (*Kelly*, *Miranda*, *Katrina*, *Brandon* and *Sarah*) said that watching *Real World* as high school students made them

think that it was common and acceptable to be belligerently intoxicated on a regular basis. Several of them thought college would be a “big party” and were surprised to find out differently. They explained that their perspectives have changed since enrolling in college, and that they are now more skeptical of extreme behavior on *Real World* because their experiences have been somewhat different. My viewers statements correlated with much of what has been said about social influences of television and realism.

Comments

The relationship that my viewers had with the cast of *Laguna Beach* was quite distanced and one of admiration from afar. While some of the girls had envy for Lauren’s* fashion sense and lucrative internship, there seemed to be a sense that they were celebrities and untouchable. This is ironic, since, at the time that *Laguna Beach* was on the air my viewers were also in high school and in very similar situations. These perceptions seem to be related to the way that the cast of *Laguna Beach* was portrayed and the way that the program was presented by MTV.

Contrastingly, the relationship between my viewers and the *Real World* housemates seems not to be authorial or one of admiration, but that of peers or equals. My viewers did not look up to them, attempt to imitate their behavior or appearance, nor did they express any desire to be like them in any way. Rather, my viewers regarded the *Real World* housemates with some degree of criticism, taking note of outrageous or unnecessary behavior and evaluating their mistakes and consequences with what may be described as mockery or chastisement for stupidity. The *Real World* housemates provided my viewers with a source of gossip and a chance to learn about the destructive

power of over consumption of alcohol or promiscuous behavior without having to indulge in it themselves. Furthermore, through observation, my viewers reported that they were able to learn about groups of people, such as homosexuals, with which they were not personally acquainted; this seemed to have a positive effect and speaks for the potential of reality television to educate viewers on subjects with which they have no experience.

Reality television has the potential to be a highly influential, social force. As a supposed representation of reality, the genre is in an excellent position to serve as window from which viewers can watch and learn about the world. My viewers have demonstrated the socializing potential that programs such as *Real World* have, in terms of providing exposure to different people and new situations. However, increasing knowledge about the production process of reality programs, and an ever growing set of life experiences has made them increasingly skeptical about how reliable reality programs are as a source of information. As my viewers described their experiences with MTV reality programs it became apparent that personal experience was an overriding factor in how messages from reality television were received. Students with prior knowledge about college life from older siblings or cousins used that set of information to develop their expectations for their own college experiences, rather than using reality television's messages. Furthermore, as these students matured and acquired their own set of college experiences, they used them as the standard against which to compare reality television. My viewers have demonstrated that personal knowledge about subjects such as drinking and sex has enabled them to navigate and evaluate the information given them by *Real World* and *Laguna Beach*. This study has provided numerous other

examples of how these college-aged viewers mentally draw on their own experiences to evaluate television, rather than drawing upon television to evaluate their lives.

There appears to be then, less cause for concern about the social effects that may arise from young adults watching reality television. However, this does call into question how younger viewers, particularly those who, for whatever reason, draw the majority of their information from television, may be affected. This issue seems particularly pertinent, given highly provocative and dramatic state of the genre. As Bagley (2001) pointed out, reality television is a product created to entertain and draw large audiences; producers are not primarily concerned with providing viewers with an accurate representation of the world and society, but rather with titillating material. Reality television programs are often chalk-full of sex, treachery and over dramatic behavior, being designed to entertain. As many of my viewers noted, they were much accepting of the outrageous behavior on MTV reality programs when they were in high school because they didn't know any better. Therefore, it would seem that the issue of concern in this case is not the top end of MTV's audience demographic, but the younger viewers. The perceptions of middle school and high school aged students watching reality television on MTV (or on any other network for that matter,) should be considered a subject of great interest because of their limited set of life experiences. These perceptions may be of even greater concern for young viewers who do not have the regular guidance of parents, guardians or older siblings to moderate the messages they receive on television.

Additional Comments:

While it was beyond the scope of this project, a few of my interview subjects spoke to some degree about how they perceived reality television may be impacting younger viewers. In my discussion of the need for further research, it seems relevant to mention some of their concerns. *Christopher* and *Brandon*, as older brothers looking in on younger siblings growing up experiences said that they were quite certain that reality television has impacted the social climate of many American high schools. While they acknowledged that gossip and cattiness was an inevitable part of any high school experience, both of them felt that students, particularly girls, were becoming increasingly more dramatic and vicious and that reality television may be to blame. *Christopher*, in particular, felt that reality television provided an unhealthy model for conflict resolution and glorified unnecessary displays of temper and confrontation. The mere fact that dramatic and inappropriate behavior is aired on national television gives it some degree of glamour and validation, which, according to *Christopher*, may cause young viewers to imitate. Given the results of this project, it may be worthwhile to further examine these issues.

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1990 MTV Programming

	Program						
Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Time							
6:00 PM	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Week In Rock	Video World Series
6:30 PM	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Dial MTV	Big Picture	Week in Rock
7:00 PM	Half-hour Comedy	Half-hour Comedy	Half-hour Comedy	Half-hour Comedy	Dial MTV	John Cougar Mellencamp	Video Music Awards
7:30 PM	Hot Seat	Hot Seat	Hot Seat	Hot Seat	Hot Seat	Mellencamp Videos	Video Music Awards
8:00 PM	Prima with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Street Party	All Request Show	Video Music Awards
8:30 PM	Prima with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Street Party	All Request Show	Video Music Awards
9:00 PM	Prima with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Street Party	All Request Show	Video Music Awards
9:30 PM	Prima with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Street Party	All Request Show	Video Music Awards
10:00 PM	Prima with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Street Party	Yo! MTV Raps	John Cougar Mellencamp
10:30 PM	Prima with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Prime with Martha Quinn	Street Party	Yo! MTV Raps	Mellencamp Videos
11:00 PM	Half-hour Comedy	Half-hour Comedy	Just Say Julie	Big Picture	Street Party	This Is Horror	Unplugged
11:30 PM	Club MTV	Club MTV	Club MTV	Club MTV	Street Party	This Is Horror	Buzz
12:00 AM	Turn It Up	Turn It Up	Turn It Up	Turn In Up	Dial MTV	Headbanger's Ball	120 Minutes

The majority of programming in 1990 was centered on music videos. VJ's such as Martha Quinn or John Mellencamp hosted some programs, while other programs were segregated by genres, such as Headbangers Ball or Club MTV.

1995 MTV Programming

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Time							
6:00 PM	Best of the 90's	Best of the 90's	Best of the 90's	Best of the 90's	Best of the 90's	Week in Rock	Music of Marvin Gaye
6:30 PM	Best of the 90's	Best of the 90's	Best of the 90's	Best of the 90's	Real World	Real World	House of Style
7:00 PM	Singled Out	Singled Out	Singled Out	Singled Out	Singled Out	Road Rules	Bootleg
7:30 PM	Most Wanted	Most Wanted	Most Wanted	Most Wanted	Week in Rock	Sand Blast	Bootleg
8:00 PM	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	Sand Blast	Jams Countdown	MTV Sports
8:30 PM	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	Most Wanted	Jams Countdown	Road Rules
9:00 PM	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	Most Wanted	My So-called Life	Unplugged
9:30 PM	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	Primetime	The State	My So-called Life	TBA
10:00 PM	Road Rules	Aeon Flux	Real World	TBA	Aeon Flux	Singled Out	Beavis and Butthead
10:30 PM	Unfiltered	Oddities	Real World	TBA	Beavis and Butthead	House of Style	Beavis and Butthead
11:00 PM	Singled Out	Singled Out	Singled Out	Singled Out	Singled Out	Road Rules	Aeon Flux
11:30 PM	Beavis and Butthead	Beavis and Butthead	Beavis and Butthead	Beavis and Butthead	MTV Sports	Beavis and Butthead	The State
12:00 AM	Alternative Nation	Alternative Nation	Alternative Nation	Alternative Nation	Yo! MTV Raps	Oddities Marathon	120 Minutes

By 1995 MTV had introduced a number of non-music programs including the pioneering reality show, ““Real World”” and its sister “Road Rules,” game shows such as ‘Singled Out,’ and the animated hit, “Beavis and Butthead.” Music videos were still available, but in smaller quantities.

2000 MTV Programming

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Time							
6:00 PM	Direct Effect	Direct Effect	Direct Effect	Direct Effect	Real World	Real World	Jackass
6:30 PM	Cribs	Making the Video	House of Style	Truth	Real World	Real World	Diary
7:00 PM	Making the Video	Senseless Acts of Video	Truth	Journey of Dr. Dre	Real World	2Gether	WWF Sunday Night Heat
7:30 PM	Video Music Awards	Jackass	Diary	Journey of Dr. Dre	Cribs	Making the Video	WWF Sunday Night Heat
8:00 PM	Video Music Awards	Fear	Say What Karaoke	All Access	Choose or Lose 2000	Cribs	Celebrity Death Match
8:30 PM	Video Music Awards	Fear	Say What Karaoke	Limp Biskit's Playboy Bash	Choose or Lose 2000	Jackass	Senseless Acts of Video
9:00 PM	Video Music Awards	Real World	Say What Karaoke	Limp Biskit's Playboy Bash	Choose or Lose 2000	Say What Karaoke	Jackass
9:30 PM	Video Music Awards	Real World	Say What Karaoke	Limp Biskit's Playboy Bash	Video Music Awards	Say What Karaoke	Jackass
10:00 PM	Video Music Awards	Real World	Jackass	Cribs	Video Music Awards	Say What Karaoke	Fear
10:30 PM	Making the Video	2Gether	Jackass	Diary	Video Music Awards	Say What Karaoke	Fear
11:00 PM	Truth	Truth	Truth	Truth	Video Music Awards	Fear	Rock'd
11:30 PM	Jackass	Fear	Undressed	Choose or Lose 2000	Video Music Awards	Fear	Cribs
12:00 AM	Senseless Acts of Video	Fear	Undressed	Undressed	Video Music Awards	Charlie's Angels	Charlie's Angels

By 2000 MTV had significantly added to its reality line-up. Among them, "Jackass," "Fear," "Real World," and "Diary." Music programming had been cut, for the most part, to after-hours time slots.

2007 MTV Programming

	Program						
Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Time							
6:00 PM	Exposed	Real World XVIII	Exposed	Reunited Real World Vegas	Wild n Out	Pimp My Ride	College Hill
6:30 PM	Yo Momma	Real World XVIII	Exposed	X Effect	Wild n Out	Pimp My Ride	College Hill
7:00 PM	Band in a Bubble	MTV Movie Awards	Hidden Palms	Pimp My Ride	Nick Canon/Cribs	Pimp My Ride	College Hill
7:30 PM	Reunited Real World Vegas	MTV Movie Awards	Hidden Palms	Pimp My Ride	Rob n Big	Band in the Bubble	College Hill
8:00 PM	Reunited Real World Vegas	MTV Movie Awards	Real World Challenge	Pimp My Ride	Reunited Real World Vegas	Band in the Bubble	College Hill
8:30 PM	Reunited Real World Vegas	MTV Movie Awards	Real World Challenge	Rob n Big	Reunited Real World Vegas	Real World Challenge	College Hill
9:00 PM	Engaged & Underage	Punk'd	Reunited Real World Vegas	Rob n Big	My Bosses Daughter	MTV Movie Awards	Wild n Out
9:30 PM	Engaged & Underage	Scarred	Reunited Real World Vegas	Rob n Big	My Bosses Daughter	MTV Movie Awards	Nick Canon
10:00 PM	Engaged & Underage	Real World Challenge	Reunited Real World Vegas	Wild n Out	My Bosses Daughter	MTV Movie Awards	Rob n Big
10:30 PM	Engaged & Underage	Rob n Big	X Effect	Cribs	My Bosses Daughter	MTV Movie Awards	Reunited Real World Vegas
11:00 PM	Real World Challenge	Rob n Big	MTV Movie Awards	Scarred	Punk'd	Reunited Real World Vegas	Reunited Real World Vegas
11:30 PM	Real World Challenge	Reunited Real World Vegas	MTV Movie Awards	Scarred	Music Live	Rob n Big	Band in the Bubble
12:00 AM	Unavailable	Scarred	MTV Movie Awards	Reunited Real World Vegas	My Bosses Daughter	Rob n Big	Pimp my Ride

In 2007 the majority of MTV's programs were reality shows. The subjects of the shows ranged from car make-overs ("Pimp My Ride"), dramalities ("Real World", "College Hill," "Rob n Big," etc...) to dating shows ("The X-Effect," "Engaged and Underage," etc ...) to home video stunt shows ("Scarred," and "Jackass.") The subjects of most of Reality shows were high school or college aged people or music or sports celebrities. Music videos were not shown during the sampled hours.

By returning this survey, you are indicating your consent for your statements to be used for research purposes. All information will be anonymous and confidential. You must be 18.

1. On average, how many hours do you watch television per week? _____ hrs/week
2. On average, how many hours do you watch MTV per week _____ hrs/week. *If none, go to question 7.*

3. Which reality shows do you watch? (check all that apply)

The Real World *The Hills* *Maui Fever* *True Life*
 Road Rules Challenge/ The Inferno *Scarred* *Next*
 Others (please list all) _____

If you don't watch any MTV reality shows, go to question 7.

4. The content of MTV reality shows is representative of reality...

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Explain _____

5. The characters on the shows you watch are like you or your friends ...

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Explain _____

6. What do you like about the reality shows that you watch on MTV?

7. Do you watch news programs on a weekly basis? Yes No

8. Which news network seems the most reliable to you? _____

9. Do you respect the American news media...

More than foreign media same as foreign media less than foreign media

**Note: Questions 7-9 were provided as time filler for those students who did not report watching MTV.*

Real World: a reality television program on MTV originally executive produced by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray. First broadcast in 1992, the show is the longest-running program in MTV history. Following Bunim's death from breast cancer in 2004, Bunim/Murray Productions continues to produce the program.

Each season consists of seven people, aged 18 – 25 (a reflection of the network's target demographic), usually selected from thousands of applicants from across the country, with the group chosen typically representing different races, genders, sexual orientations, levels of sexual experiences, and religious and political beliefs. Should a cast member decide to move out, or be asked to do so by his or her roommates, the roommates will usually cast a replacement, dependent on how much filming time is left.

The house is typically elaborate in its décor, and usually includes a pool table, a Jacuzzi, and a fish tank, which serves as a metaphor for the show, in that the roommates, who are being taped at all times in their home, are seen metaphorically as fish in a fishbowl. This point is punctuated not only by the fact that the MTV logo title card seen after the closing credits of each episode is designed as an aquarium, but also by a poem that Judd Winick wrote during his stay in San Francisco called *Fishbowl*.

The housemates are filmed all the time. The house is outfitted with cameras mounted on walls, to capture more intimate moments, numerous camera crews consisting of 3 – 6 people follow the cast around the house and out in public. Each member of the cast is instructed to ignore the cameras and the crew, but are required to wear a battery pack and microphone in order to capture their dialogue, though some cast members have been known to turn off or hide them. The only area of the house in which camera access is restricted is the bathroom.

Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County (often referred to as ***Laguna Beach***): an MTV reality show documenting the lives of several teenagers living in Laguna Beach, a wealthy seaside community located in Orange County, California. It differs from the usual reality show in that it is structured as a traditional narrative (seen more commonly in fictionalized television dramas or soap operas) than a straightforward observant documentary.

Each season documents the lives of a group of wealthy young people living in Laguna Beach, California and attending Laguna Beach High School. Casting would interview applicants about school, their social life, and any romantic interests in search of a story to document that would be of interest to the target audience. Cameras were not invited into the school, but a single camera was taken into formal dances usually by a cast member and some footage was used on-air. The only event to which cameras were allowed was graduation because it was in a public venue rather than the school itself.

The Hills: an MTV reality show documenting the life of Lauren Conrad and several of her affluent friends in Los Angeles, California after leaving home in Laguna Beach, California. There she spends her days balancing school and work (at *Teen Vogue*) while maintaining a steady social life.

Real World/Road Rules Challenge: a reality television series on MTV, that spun off from that network's two flagship reality shows, *The Real World* and *Road Rules*. The *Challenge* puts cast members from past seasons of the two shows against each other, usually dividing them into two separate teams according to different criteria, such as by gender, which of the two shows they first appeared on, etc. The two teams must complete challenges in order to win prizes and advance in the game. Recent seasons have taken a cue from other reality shows by adopting the system of eliminating contestants based on performance, or having a team vote a member into an elimination round, in which they must compete against a member from the other team to determine which one goes home.

True Life: a documentary series running on MTV from 1998 to the present. Each episode follows a particular topic - e.g. heroin addiction in the first episode, Fatal Dose. The show is created by following a series of subjects by a camera crew through a certain part of their life. Depending on the season and topic, the production values vary. *True Life* has covered everything from drug use, money issues, sexual topics to simple social behavior like visiting the Jersey Shore.

These questions served as a general guide to direct the interviews. Questions that were irrelevant to the individual interviewee were thrown out. Additionally, some follow up questions were asked as necessary.

1. Tell me about your favorite reality programs on MTV
2. What made you start watching them?
3. What do you enjoy about them?
4. How real do you think they are? Why?
5. Do you feel that the stars of these shows are similar to you? Why?
6. Would you ever want to be like the stars of these programs?
7. What do you think about the things that people do on MTV reality programs?
8. Do you ever take anything away from watching these programs?



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The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):


7

Project Title: Reflections on Youth Culture: When is Beauty Real?

Researcher(s): Rachel Potratz

Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Norma Pecora

Department: TCOM


Jeff Vancouver, Ph.D., Chair
Institutional Review Board

05/15/07
Approval Date
05/14/08
Expiration Date

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.