Emily Flint

COMM 460-02

Dr. Johnson

Fall 2011

**Reality Television vs. Viewer’s values of Romantic Relationships**

**Introduction**

Reality television has become very popular in the last decade and has changed many the social norms of what is appropriate to air on television. Reality television has had an influence on the media and other aspects of society.“In 1992, reality television was a novelty. In 2000, it was a fad. In 2010, it’s a way of life” (Poniewozik, 2010). Poniewozik also explained the effects of the exploitation of reality television stating, “Thus comes what you might call the realization of reality: the evolution of once private, or at least obscures, acts into performance (2010). Reality television has becoming very popular amongst its viewers which may have an effect on viewer’s perceptions and attitudes towards specific aspects of their life.

**Produced Television or Reality?**

Reality is thought to be unscripted, real life experiences from average people. Producers cast their version of “real people” to be selected as contestants on the show and demonstrate the real life experiences of these individuals. Reality television is supposed to mimic real life, but that is starting to be called into question. Is reality television really real? Are television producers telling us how we are “supposed to act”, by making us believe reality television is real life? Are viewers influenced by what they see on the show? Are viewers being cultivated to believe the world is something it’s not?

*The Evolution of Reality Television*

In 1992, MTV introduced its first season of the reality television show, *The Real World*(Poniewozik, 2010).*TheReal World* follows the lives of young adults who live together and depicts the issues of these individuals such as sexual and inappropriate behavior. *The Real World* broadcasts real young adult’s social and professional experiences and interactions. In 2000, the game show *Survivor* aired on the CBS television network.This show is referred to as the first program of reality television.*Survivor* is a game show where contestants live on an island and must use their resources to “survive”. Today, examples of reality television are shows like *Jersey Shore,* a reality show that exposes sexual content and other inappropriate behavior including alcohol and drug use. Poniewozik, explained that at any given time there are 1,000 people on air on reality television shows (think Top Chief all the way to American Idol) (2010).

*Reality television as a Genre*

“Reality television is more than a TV genre now” (Poniewozik, 2010). Poniewozik categorizes reality television in two subgenres:The first type of reality television shows are the competition type of programs where contestants compete to win a prize-whether it’s money or a title.Examples of this type of subgenre are *Survivor, The Biggest Loser, and Project Runway*. The other subgenre is the naked voyeurism (exposure of the practice of sexual interest) style of reality television shows.Examples of this genre are *Real World, Jersey Shore, and The Girls Next Door*. The producers of these shows cast contestants with more outrageous sexual interest personalities in order to increase ratings (Gold & Collins, 2009). Gold and Collins suggests, “Reality shows offer fame seekers a real prospect of jettisoning their anonymity and becoming a star” (2009). This proves that producers are casting specific contestants with a hidden agenda in mind, regardless if that agenda is to increase ratings, producers are altering the shows in some way to depict how they want to portray the shows and its characters.

*Background of Keeping Up with the Kardashians:*

The reality television show,*Keeping Up with the Kardashians (KUWTK,)* is a reality show that has aired on the E! network since 2007 that follows the professional and personal lives of the members of the Kardashian/Jenner family. The show exposes everything from problems with manager and mother, Kris Jenner at photo-shoots and endorsement deals, to her daughter’s relationship problems. The world was first introduced to the Kardashian family when Robert Karadashian, father of Kourtney, Kimberly, Khole and son Robert Kardashian, served as one of the defensive attorneysduring the 1995, O.J. Simpson trial.

*Keeping Up with the Karadashians* has become a popular show due to the lavish and fast pace lifestyle of the characters. Since the show first aired, the fame of these characters has dramatically increased. The main characters are always in the media and have been named some of the most beautiful people.The producers portray the lifestyles of the characters on the show, but as the para social interaction theory states, it is not certain if the producers are portraying the true lifestyle of these characters. Based on the show’s popularity and the fame of the shows characters, this study will determine if college female’s students are affected by the shows messages of romantic relationships and if those message influence the viewer’s decision and behaviors in their own romantic relationships.

Due to the recent popularity of the show,*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, data has not been collected regarding the nature and messages of the show. The purpose of this research study is to understand how female college students view the gendered stereotypes represented on the show and if theirpersonal values and attitudes of romantic relationships change after watching the show. Since reality television is now starting to impact many aspects in the American society, there is a gap in research regarding the effects on values of relationships of the show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians.*

**Theoretical Grounding**

Reality television can be viewed as cultivating it’s viewers in to having a false belief on specific topics. Viewing relationships on reality television programs may affect the viewer’s romantic relationships. The cultivation theory is defined as the more television viewers watch, the more exaggerated belief of the real world the will have or experience (Griffin, 2009). Another theory regarding reality television deals with social interaction among the participants. Para social theory defines social interactions and their importance of interpersonal relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Viewing relationships on reality television programs may affect the viewer’s romantic relationships.

*Cultivation Theory*

The cultivation theory explains how the exposure of television my effect the viewers and give them an exaggerated view of the world (Griffin, 2009).According to Griffin, “Heavy television users develop an exaggerated belief of a mean and scary world. “The violence they see on the screen can cultivate a social paranoia that counters notions of trustworthy people or safe surroundings” (Griffin, 2009, p. 327). Viewers of reality television are exposed to violence, sex, drug/alcohol, love, and perfecting body image, all of which may have an effect on the viewers. Viewers may be influenced by what they see on reality television, especially those viewers of the show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* due to the shows constant portrayals of love, sex, body image, etc. This research will focus on the cultivation effects on the viewer’s values and beliefs regarding, power dominance between romantic partners, sexual permissiveness of each romantic partner, body image portrayals, and offensive language used between romantic partners. This study will define if viewers are cultivated into believing differently or changing their own values regarding those topics.

*Para Social theory*

Social interactions and importance can have an effect on interpersonal relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Para social interaction is defined as a one-sided relationship, where one participant knows the information and the other does not (Rubin & McHugh). The contestants and the viewers of reality television have a para social interaction relationship.The contestants or “reality stars” know more information regarding the show compared to the audience. This theory also defines the relationship between the audience and the reality show’s producers and directors. The producers may alter the show by cutting or changing scenes in order to portray certain messages to the showviewers which may include specific messages regarding romantic relationships. These messages could be influenced the amounts of exposure of power dominance, sexual permissiveness, body image, and offensive language in romantic relationships.

**Literature Reviewed:**

**Female Stereotypes, Love, and the “Reality” of reality television**

*Textual Analyses*

*Female Stereotypes*

Since this research focuses on romantic relationships, it is important to understand how viewers view love on reality television. Adrienne Holz Ivory, Rhonda Gibson, and James D. Ivory conducted a research study to observe the gender portrayals of same sex and heterosexual relationships on reality television (2009). Ivory et al. studied heterosexual and homosexual relationships on prime time television broadcasts from the years 2001-2004. Their studied concluded that in heterosexual couples the men are more dominant and the women more submissive. In homosexual couples, the different individuals were labeled as either being more dominant or submissive. These gender roles prove and confirm that the stereotypes present about intimate relationships on television programs. This study provides grounding for research that was found based on television programs that aired in the early 2000s, which may correlate with the findings of my research.

Next, on *KUWTK* one of the main characters, Khole struggles with her personal body image and is ridiculed by the media regarding her body image. The show depicts the problems Khloe has with the media and how she consults her significant other regarding her body image frustrations. The study, “There’s a Beautiful Girl Under All of This: Performing Hegemonic Femininity in Reality Television” is a textual analysis of the show The Swan (Marwick, 2010). The show is about participants wanting to gain self-confidence through receiving plastic surgery to “better their image”. The show uses male doctors to analyze the women’s bodies to determine what changes need to be made. The researchers concluded that the male doctors use degrading terminology to create the perfect stereotypical female body image. This research proves that the reality television program *The Swan* encourages and promotes the view of the perfect, skinny, stereotypical female body. This study gives background regarding the use of negative terminology towards female bodies and portrays a specific “ideal” body type. This textual analysis of the show, *The Swan*, may correlate with the use of portraying an ideal body image on the show *KUWTK*. This study will support or refute the viewers of *KUWTK* attitudes toward women and how they deal with body image in their romantic relationships.

*Audience Reactions*

*Female Empowerment*

With the show *KUWTK* mostly featuring the female characters, female stereotypes may be represented. In the study, “Conceptualizations of Female Empowerment and Enjoyment of Sexualized Characters in Reality Television”, researchers observe the female empowerment stereotypes present on reality television shows (Cato & Carpentier, 2010). The purpose of this study was to define female empowerment after viewing the reality show, The Girls Next Door. The researchers conducted a study that surveyed sixty eight women that after watching a clip of the show and were then asked about their view of the characters and their behaviors. The researchers proved that the viewer’s thought of the female characters as being stereotypical based on sexual empowerment. These female characters were seen in the clip as having little clothing on and feeling empowered and proud of their bodies and sexual aggressiveness. The women surveyed agreed that they were more sexually aggressive after viewing a clip of the show and they believed that the show endorses the idea of stereotypes of female women and their empowerment. This study results define the sexual empowerment and female stereotypes present on the show, The Girls Next Door, which may be similar to the viewer’s opinions of females of the show KUWTK in regards to their romantic relationships.

*Why we watch?*

As previously stated, *KUWTK* is a reality television show, but producers may alter the show in order to falsely represent the reality of these character lives. Researchers have studied the idea of the role of reality television and how viewers perceive reality television. Papacharissi and Mendelson conducted a study, “An Exploratory Study of Reality Appeal: Uses and Gratifications of Reality TV Shows”, to determine why viewers watch reality television and concluded that the most popular reasons why students watch TV is doing it as a habitual past time and serve as entertainment (2007). The study surveyed 157 students who watched an average of 72 minutes of reality television per week. Although this study does not specifically focus on *KUWTK* it still proves the main reasons why college students watch reality television. The research gives grounding as to why students watch the show and may help determine if they feel they are being influenced by the messages portrayed on the show.

*Relationships on Reality Television*

The study, “The Value of Relationships: Affective Scenes and Emotional Performances”, observed viewer’s opinions on relationships, disposition, and emotional performance after watching reality television (Skeggs, 2010). The results yield that women are seen as domestic and confirms the stereotypes of the gender roles of women on reality television. This study will further my research by explaining the viewer’s perception of gender roles of men and women in romantic relationships after they have watched reality television. This study will help define how gender stereotypes are portrayed on reality television and if sexual empowerment is valued in relationships.

Punyanunt-Carter conducted a study to research if reality television images of love and relationships influence viewer’s perception of the realism of love (2006). The study surveyed 412 male and female students, to assess their perception of realism of love on reality television. The study concluded that women more strongly believe than men, in the realism of love portrayed on reality television. This study proves that at the time of this study, women believed the love and relationships on reality television to be true which may correlate to the findings in my study regarding love on the reality show, KUWTK.

All of these scholarly studies have identified different aspects of reality television and some identify how viewers interpret and understand the show. My study will define how viewers of*Keeping Up with the Kardashians* identify the shows key messages of sexual dominance, sexual permissiveness, body image, and offensive language regarding romantic relationships and if the viewer’s values of relationships change after watching the show.

**Methodology**

Researchers have studied the reasons why individuals watch reality television, if they believe it is real, and they have identified the gendered stereotypes, which will all help guide my research in identifying research participant’s values of sexual dominance, sexual permissiveness, importance of body image, and use of offensive language in romantic relationships and their values after watching the show. This research will evaluate the attitudes and behaviors depicted on the show and if those values influence viewers to change their own personal values in regards to their romantic relationship. This study is a quantitative study to ensure that the viewer’s attitudes toward power dominance in relationships, sexual permissiveness, ideal body image, and the use of offensive language in romantic relationships.

* *H1- After watching the reality television show, Keeping Up with the Kardashians, viewers have a different belief and/or attitude towards power dominance in romantic relationships*

This hypothesis will identify a correlation between watching the show and the different in values and opinions of the dynamics in power different in romantic relationships. This hypothesis will help determine if viewers believe it to acceptable for one partner to have more dominance in a relationship.

* *H2- After watching the reality television show, Keeping Up with the Kardashians, viewers have a different belief an ideal body image.*

This hypothesis will determine if viewers identify a specific body image that partners in a romantic relationship should have. This will identify if the viewer’s believe that each partner in a relationship should look a certain way.

* *H3- After watching the show, Keeping Up with the Kardashians viewers can define what acceptable sexual permissiveness is.*

This hypothesis will determine if the viewer’s believe if each partner is a romantic relationship should act sexually in a certain way. This will identify how viewers identify what sexual practices are acceptable for each partner to partake in.

* *H4- After watching the show, Keeping Up with the Kardashians, viewers can identify what language should be used towards partners in a romantic relationship.*

This hypothesis will determine the belief of viewer’s attitude toward the use of curse words and offensive language toward their romantic partner.

*Sample:*

This quantitative study will survey female college students ages 18-23 who are familiar with the show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. As previously stated it has been found that college students watch reality television as a habitual past time and for the entertainment value so that is why this study will use college students as its participants. James Poniewozik defines reality television as “a way of life” it is appropriate to use college students who watch reality television as the research participants.

*Procedure:*

The research survey will ask questions (see appendix A) regarding the viewer’s beliefs of the values of power dominance within relationships, sexual permissiveness between the relationship, ideal body image amongst partners, and the use of offensive language when communicating with romantic partnerships. The survey will first identify the viewer’s attitudes and if those attitudes change after watching the show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

When observing the hypothesis, “*After watching the reality television show, Keeping Up with the Kardashians, viewers have a different belief and/or attitude towards power dominance in romantic relationships?”* My research will identify the independent variable of what the viewer’s personal values regarding power dominance are and if those beliefs change after watching the show. A T-test will prove if there is a different between the beliefs before and after viewers watch the show. The independent variable is the viewer’s beliefs and values of power dominance, sexual permissiveness, ideal body image, and use of offensive language and the dependent variable will be if those values change after watching the show.

**Conclusion**

This research will define the gap of if viewers of the show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* have a different view of their personal values regarding romantic relationships change after watching the show. This research gap will identify if viewers understand the use of parasocial relationships from reality television and its audience. This study will also identify if viewers are being cultivate into believing specific values portrayed on the reality television show regarding their behaviors in romantic relationships.

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**Appendix A: Research Instruments**

*Survey Questions:*

1. On a scale of 1-10 (one being the least and 10 being the most) How appropriate to you think it is to have more than one sexual partner at a time?
2. Do you believe it is important for the male to have more dominance (wear the pants) in heterosexual relationships?
3. Do you believe women should stay home and take care of the children?
4. Do you believe that males should be the “bread winners”?
5. Should women be skinny and look nice for their partner?
6. Should men be skinny and look nice for their partner?
7. Is it appropriate to use curse words when talking to romantic partners?
8. Should women express their sexual desires to their partner?
9. Should men express their sexual desires to their partner?
10. How often do you watch the show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*?
11. Are you a male or female?
12. How old are you?
13. Are you in a committed/exclusive romantic relationship?
14. Have you ever been in a committed/exclusive romantic relationship? Questions 11, 12,13, and 14 serve as demographic questions to sort my participants.