

Feasibility question: *Do active viewers of reality shows emulate lifestyle and behavior shown in such shows and if so what makes viewers to emulate and to what extent such emulation is possible?*

Abstract

Background

Television has a tremendous influence on the minds of people, society and everyday life in general. The managers of MTV channel realize this and transfer on the air certain programs pointed on the base instincts of the population. These are reality shows which bring high ratings to the channel. The following research is based on the study of Jersey Shore's reality show and its influence on teenagers.

Results

The quantitative results are represented for the teenagers from 16 to 18 years old. The analysis of the audience opinion shows that 90 % of teenagers have a character in the show which they feel is similar to them. The teenagers are faced with the problem of identity, self-realization and embodiment of themselves, which often coincides with embodiment of the invented and thoughtful hero image. It leads to the result that images broadcasted to the masses define specific standards of conduct in society. The same 90 % would prefer to have lots of money as the heroes of *Jersey Shore*. Because participants of the reality show are paid for their behavior, it reinforces their image as successful people, and becomes a definite incentive tracing for the above mentioned teenagers involved in TV viewing.

Conclusion

The theoretical analyses based on the conducted survey indicated the great influence of *Jersey Shore* on the teenagers. They admire events and people seen on the screen. Many teenagers even copy the behavior of their favorite heroes. But the degree of such emulation is by now overestimated. The results of the research showed that the teenagers are able to emulate the behavior of the heroes only in certain context. The following subject still requires more detailed investigation for the reason of limited sample of the conducted research.

Introduction

Since the inception of MTV's *Real World* reality television has steadily immersed itself as almost a required staple for any mainstream media. The success experienced by shows such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Amazing Race*, *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, and other consequent examples of reality television illustrates the endemic popularity of such format. Among the latest MTV's reality television shows is *Jersey Shore* which follows the lives of 8 people who are tasked to live under the same roof for a summer month. One of the foremost elements that sets the show apart from other similarly housemate-enabled reality television shows is that instead of going for a balanced, mixed-personality casting, it focused only on a select stereotyped group of characters, purportedly 20-something Italian-Americans who distinguish themselves under the 'guido' subculture. The show's particular interpretation of this subgroup was amplified through elements of physical appearance – tanned, gym-buffed, and gel-haired males; toned, sensual females in skimpy clothing – as well as activities and entertainments enjoyed by the participants. These elements put the show under much scrutiny.

Brooks (2009) cites these qualities as illustrative of the 'bella figura' of the Italian-American culture, a reversal of characteristics that is employed to mask the individual – the poor makes everyone think that he is rich, and the rich makes everyone think that he is far below his capacities. Taking it into account the *Jersey Shore's* housemates turn to be total caricatures of people who are living 'beyond their means'. Another perspective in Brooks (2009) employs a kinder, albeit similarly negative portrayal of the 'guido' representative as a "handsome, uneducated kid who could only get by because of his looks and charm". These interpretations underscore the fact that the show depicts a shallow, one-dimensional characterization of the cast. Nevertheless, it did not affect the show's popularity as a third season is just waiting for the production. It seems that despite its frail qualities, the show exerts a measure of influence that extends its viewership.

One particular theoretical perspective that explains this popularity revolves around the idea of authenticity consumption. *Rose and Wood (2005) propose that viewing of reality television goes beyond ordinary entertainment consuming, the act itself engages viewers by allowing them expressing themselves in the context of the rigid format.* This means that despite a reality television show is designed, reality aspect enables viewer to participate in the events happening on video by means of projection. *Rose and Wood (2005) further explain the idea as similar to a contrived daydream by which viewer's aspirations and fantasy are realized in the television show.* The limitations put into place of a reality television show such as a geographical barrier (e.g. characters must stay marooned on an island, housemates must stay for a month), a competitive context (e.g. voting out cast members, being the first to cross the finish line), a social fixation (i.e. all cast members want to be chosen by the bachelor/bachelorette, players want to be super heroes), and other fixed frameworks allow viewers to exercise hyper authenticity or a discourse that a viewer engages with himself in the presence of a reality television show.

The *Jersey Shore* formulation is indicative of such focal aspects in reality television show. They have 8 housemates, all casted as Italian-Americans, and are allowed on the show for one month's worth of a summer. Although there are no embedded task limitations or game frameworks the actual casting personalities are distinguishing limiting factors in which viewers can achieve a measure of hyper authenticity. Since the characters are almost clones in terms of personality and subsequent wants, needs, and fears, a viewer may be more able to project his or her fantasies on the characters' actions.

It could also work the other way around. *Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) surveyed undergraduate students who watched reality dating programs (RDP) and found out that the practices portrayed in the television shows influenced on the actual dating behaviors of the viewers.* The results of the study show that the undergraduates who watch RDPs are more prone to advocating problematic relationship stereotypes such as gender double standards. *Christenson and Ivancin (2006) found out that health- and medically-related reality television shows such as The Biggest Loser and Extreme Makeover can serve as inspirations to behavioral change,* most especially to viewers who see themselves among the cast of characters in these shows. *Hall (2006) conducted a series of focus group discussions of individuals regularly viewing reality television programs and described people's apparent willingness to mirror behavior* seen in the shows especially if they see that it reflected an aspect of their personality.

In view of the apparent influence of reality television programs on viewer's opinion and behavior, *the effects of Jersey Shore may be reviewed in the same context and can be a point for research and discussion.* Since the show mirrors the salient characteristics of reality programs that have performed well and have grabbed the mainstream media's attention, *it can then be a point of*

interest to understand also the program's influencing factors and the types of behavior it could generate. Another point of interest is hinged on the actual perception of the show as understood under the backdrop of its viewership: do people consider it to be a 'good' or a 'bad' show, and if so, what makes these qualities stand out? Do these perceptions affect the frequency of the show's watching, i.e. do people still watch the show even if the characters are perceived negatively? What types of behavior would viewers acquire by watching the show, and what types of behavior they consider to mirror their own? Lastly, is the influence of the show related to the actual format itself or because the big umbrella of the MTV network is influential to the generation? These, and other questions, will be explored in this study.

Methodology

The level and character of the Jersey Shore's influence on viewers may be measured by survey of typical viewers. Consequently, a convenience sample of 20 teenagers aged 16-18 were given a number of surveys concerning general assessment of the Jersey Shore show, parallels with viewers' lives, desires to live as shown in the show, and reasons for such desires. 14 females and 6 males participated in the survey and were screened according to their viewing habits of Season 2 of Jersey Shore (i.e. respondents should have seen at least 5 episodes of the show).

Results

Based on the survey administered, there are some basic patterns that could be gleaned on the onset:

Survey Question	Average Rating (5- highest)
How much do you like watching Jersey Shore?	3.1
How much is Jersey Shore like your situation?	2.7
How much would you like your life to be like Jersey Shore?	3.05

The viewers who are watching the program had an average likeness rating of the show, neither seeing it as must-watch nor something to be passed. The viewers also do not see parallels between what's happening in Jersey Shore and their real lives, but has a relatively higher aspiration rating when asked if they wanted their lives to be more like what happens in the show. The surveyed teenagers were asked the reasons explaining why they wanted their life were like that described in the show:

Why would you like your life to be more like Jersey Shore?

To have lots of money / So you don't have to work anymore 90%

To feel like summer all the time 85%

To be able to go to exciting places 60%

To meet other people 60%

The above ratings show that although the viewers do not really have a particular fascination with watching the show, they feel that there are some aspects of the character's lives that may be worth having also in their real lives. These examples are mainly aspirational and may reflect what the viewer's lack in their particular contexts.

Why do you watch Jersey Shore?

For the controversies 100%

For the lifestyle 90%

For the characters 50%

It's MTV 5%

It seems that viewers watch the show because they are interested to see the social conflicts that ensue in that particular format. Controversies, in the context of the show's characters and the environment they move around in, are a staple in the show. Besides, the popularity is caused by the format itself but not by the popularity of the MTV network.

Is there a character in the show that you feel that's most like you?

Yes 90%

No 5%

Don't Know 5%

If so, why do you feel that this character is similar to you?

Personality 60%

Behavior in the show 15%

Physical Appearance 15%

Don't know 10%

A majority of the viewers feels that there is a character they can associate themselves with even if they see that the situations the characters are in are quite different from their own. Most of the viewers explain that they feel they are similar to a particular character of the show because they see themselves in some aspects of the personality of a particular character, seconded either by their behaviors or by their physical appearance.

What kinds of behavior would you copy from the show?

Actions of the character who is most similar to the person 50%

Actions that the viewer has done in the past 35%

Actions that the viewer has not tried out 15%

The results show that on the average, the viewer is more likely to copy the actions of the character whom they feel is most similar to them, with only a minority who really wants to try out new things learned from the show.

Discussion

Rose and Wood (2005) correctly explained that the general draw making *Jersey Shore* so popular lies in its capacity to entice the viewer with lifestyle alternatives without advocating them. The respondents in the survey generally understood the general elements that the show amplifies as opposed to what can already be done in the immediate context. Simply said, viewers can generally distinguish what is reality and what is not, even with the playful understanding of what can be. Seen through the lens of the viewer, the show mirrors only facets of reality and cannot show the complete picture of what really happens on the show (Huff, 2006). The viewers are aware that the program is still edited for maximum entertainment quality and, thus, understand that things are not always what they seem to be. Nevertheless, not the knowledge of alternate realities deter the viewer from watching the show, but other reasons that are not necessarily hinged on one's personality, i.e. the show does not necessarily mirror the behavior of the age or social group (Papacharissi, 2007). This is expected because the majority of the viewers do not really have the means to embody that particular subculture followed by the show's characters; only a small sample of the American population may afford a lifestyle of partying, part-time work, and shopping. Behavioral principles of the general environment of the majority of Americans do not really lead to the same values. The program represents an aspirational lifestyle for younger viewers that serves only to show what could be without really preaching that this is the ideal. Apter (2009) explains that this has been always the case with the show, given that there is a mainstream understanding that it is just another show which so happens to have a unique formula for reality television.

Of course, viewers also watch the show because of the underlying social intricacies between and about the characters. Brown (2010) puts it succinctly by saying that most reality shows are train

wrecks or tragic events that you can't help but watch. The environment of the show is fertile ground for awkward social situations, personality clashes, controversies, and other mishaps about life, things that make the show, as one respondent put it, "a heck of a show to watch". Brown (2010) explains this by saying that it's simply another form of entertainment that makes people feel better about themselves – given the relative abundance of "problems" within the shows context, viewing one episode presents a viewer not only with alternatives of the high life but of alternatives filled with conflict, something that is not really the case always with the average person's repertoire of activities. Similar idea is also expressed by Murray and Ouellette (2008). Brown (2010) further depicts this by describing that a joke is even funnier if the subject is not one's self. The fact that this is a reality television program makes it more viewable in this context because the conflicts seen on screen are viewed as authentic and are representative of that situation.

Given that the popularity of the show revolves in presentation of an alternative lifestyle, a unique but stereotypical cast of characters, and a framework for social clashes, it is surprising to note that the show can still be influential to a certain degree. The above mentioned factors have distancing effect separating the viewer from this alternate reality, which presents an expectation that the show cannot be influential, but it is true only in a particular context. Even if the lifestyle itself is aspirational, the behavior that is emulated is a function of how a viewer sees himself or herself in a particular character, and not because of the lifestyle as a whole. This means that a viewer might be more probable to mirror a particular action if it's done by a character whom he or she thinks closely resembles his or her self. This can be a physical characteristics or a personality quirk, but the assumption of similarity presents an opportunity for emulation, no matter what that point of similarity may be. For example, one respondent pointed out that Snooki's short stature made her feel as if she wanted to be as strong as her character. It shows how a viewer resonates with particular characters and supposes it might be fruitful for the advertising and media industry.

This, however, does not explain what kind of behavior would be emulated. This means that if a viewer sees a character physically similar to himself he would not necessarily mirror behavior in the same manner. For example, though one respondent feels that he is as physically capable as the character Ronnie, he is not up to emulating his regimen of tanning, partying, and gym. Although one respondent feels for the social ostracization done on Angelina, it does not mean that she will follow suit. For another respondent who resonates with the social conflicts of the character Sammi, this does not really tell of how she would behave with future relationships. In general, a viewer is more likely to emulate a behavior if he or she feels some kind of similarity with a character but only to a degree by which he or she is able to pull it off in their social context. In this case, if one expects that *Jersey Shore* is a hotbed of influence for the shallow upbringing of teens, then one can be rest assures that is still not up to that extent.

Summary and Conclusion

The cultural space of reality show, like any cultural space, performs a kind of synthesis of internal and external life of an individual, his ethical and aesthetic ideas and activities. The behavior of human is a unique relationship with all components of cultural space. This means that the influence of reality TV as a relatively new genre of television on the world outlook and spiritual mood of modern man can hardly be overestimated. Thus, in our view such TV shows have great potential manipulative effect. It can be implemented through the impact on the rational and emotional scope. Reality shows affect teenagers most of all.

Adolescence is difficult to some extent age which is full of crisis and stresses. Also it is the age of self-determination and establishment. A dramatic acceleration of mental and physical development is carried at this age. A profound impact on teenagers has a traditional cultural environment for their ideal image appearance and physique. This is one of the most important components of teen's relationships because high self-esteem affects personality, social adjustment and mastering of the broad interpersonal skills. A very important quality of every teenager is a need of ideal. It may be ideal of appearance, behavior, or relationships. Many teens seek for these ideals in the TV screen. It should be noted that telecommunications have a huge impact on the personality of youth. Since television communication is not only the exchange of information, but also the interaction and mutual influence young people perceive TV effects not only intellectually but also on the physiological and emotional levels.

Reality shows are so firmly embedded in the subconscious mind that many teenagers begin to behave just like their heroes. Unfortunately, such programs show communication which is full of quarrels and abuse; communication amounting at times to battering, whereas in life, on the contrary, teens should seek to conflict-free behavior.

In addition, there is a continuous promotion of a beautiful life. Reality shows aim at the fact that it is easy and simple to become rich and money comes by itself. Consequently, many people, especially teenagers, are moving away from reality into fantasy worlds. On the screen they see a different world, find what is not available for them in our real world. Episodes of the reality show are not the only means of entertainment for teens, but also a source and a translator of social norms, patterns and behaviors.

Although the dangers of negative influence are very real in the context of today's media, there are still general indicators that pertain to the robustness of the viewership to resist such influences. In the case of *Jersey Shore*, the format that it employs presents an explicit caricature that can be aspirational but is also in many ways not ideational. Even if alternative lifestyle that it presents shows a portrait of a group of people whose only characterization are to be themselves – and hence, authentic – it does not follow that their behaviors are necessarily influential to a big majority. Factors such as those limited by the environment, by resources, and social framework make a big part of this reason, but as the study shows, it may also be that there must be an element of connection between the viewer and a particular character to elicit a mirroring reaction – viewers may only emulate the behavior of the character that seems most like them. The actual criteria for this similarity differ from person to person, but what's more essential is that a viewer feels this connection and the actual similarity is present. It also needs to be said that the similarities are not necessarily the same as the behaviors themselves because viewers are still the end-all for any behavioral influence – in the case of *Jersey Shore*, viewers are aware of what behaviors to emulate and do not necessarily copy the characters hook, line, and sinker. This may occur due to the differences between what is presented in the show and what the general reality is. The characters of the show are explicitly seen as anti role-models that have redeeming qualities only if aspects of their personalities resonate with the values of the viewer.

The results, however, need more empirical research to compensate for its limited capabilities. Given the small convenience sample and the relative simple methodology employed to ascertain user

views, there are still avenues by which it can be improved. The strength of this study lies in its aim to present an exploratory viewpoint on the problem at hand and to point future directions of research but do not provide the specificity needed for a more focused approach. With this, a recommendation for future research is suggested.

Another recommendation that is based on this study is that research directions based on personality profiles and how viewers resonate with them to employ specific behavioral changes, something that benefit information campaigns in media and in advertising. If it can be corroborated that cast members who aren't trained as actors can be agents for social influence based only on their personalities, then there are many avenues for study that can be done.

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