Communication Research Proposal:

The Effects of Reality Television Exposure on Adolescents

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Abstract

Cultivation theory suggests that individuals who are exposed to greater amounts of television are more likely to accept the representation of reality as presented on television. This study investigates a connection between the amounts of exposure to reality television programs and the level of promiscuity existent in a young girls’ life. A questionnaire is given to 400 girls that are in high school. Half of the girls’ high school is located in a rural area and the other half is a high school located in an urban area. My prediction is that increased exposure to reality television programs affects the mentality of young girls. I believe that reality shows influence a change in the behavior of young girls causing them to increase their level of promiscuity. I intend to study this research using the cultivation theory. My independent variable is the amount of exposure to reality television shows. My dependent variable is the level of promiscuity a young girl has in her everyday life.
The Effects of Reality Television Exposure on Adolescents

People develop values and beliefs from experience, culture, society, and religion. The media has become such a prominent part of today’s society and a resource on how the world functions. For young viewers, social meaning and behavior are easily influenced by how the media portrays the “real world”. Reality television shows rapidly increase in popularity due to their realistic portrayal of life and society values. Their use of ordinary people in natural environments and extraordinary situations increase viewer connectedness to the show. Cultivation theory suggests that individuals who are exposed to greater amounts of television are more likely to accept the representation of reality as presented on television. Results from previous studies call into question the conclusion that adolescence that are exposed to reality television are under the impression that the ideas and behaviors displayed, are actual accounts of how the real world functions. This study more specifically investigates whether a connection exists between young girls’ viewing habits of reality television and their level of promiscuity.

Realities Television and Promiscuity

In society, the role of mass media has become a social development medium in developing countries (Osman, 2010). Previous studies have examined the relationship between reality television and the influence it has on its viewers. According to Osman’s findings, the content of television programs does have a significant impact on the mindset and attitudes of the respondents. Television has become an important communication medium and means for retrieving current news and information. Viewers are using television programs as educational tools, “this finding is indeed very important and the government, policy makers as well as television producers and directors should consider broadcasting more television programmes
which are more educational in nature, especially in terms of inculcating good moral values in the respective television programmes as a means of educating on certain important issues and simultaneously, positively influencing the mindset of the viewers” (p. 228). The content in reality based television shows cause viewers to believe that they are being taught how the real world operates. Due to this thinking, viewers tend to shape their lifestyle, values, and beliefs according the behaviors and mindsets they witness and feel they are “taught”.

Adolescents are more likely to treat television programs as educational sources. Reality television programs specifically target young viewers and display content that appeals to their values. Children and adolescents (ages 2–17) average 19 hr and 40 min of television viewing per week (Abelman&Atkin, 2000;ACNielsenCompany, 2000). At watching television at such high volumes it can be assumed that young viewers have a greater effect from television content. Given that violence, sexuality, and body image distortions are pervasive television messages, it is not surprising that a variety of negative health effects have been associated with excessive television viewing (Hammermeister, J., Brock, B., Winterstein, D., & Page, R. (2005). Although television content has little effect on a male’s psychosocial health profile, females are affected. Increased amounts of television exposure might result in feelings of loneliness, self-esteem, weight satisfaction, perceived attraction, and more (2005). Young female viewers are more likely than young male viewers to change the behaviors, beliefs, values, or attitudes based on the content of reality television shows.

In a national survey, 70% of teens aged 15 to 17 reported having learned “a lot” or “some” about relationships and sexual health issues from the media (Hoff, Greene, & Davis, 2003). Television has also become a prime resource for adolescence to gain information about relationships and sex. Reality television programs strategically display sexual content for viewer
satisfaction and to increase ratings. According to Fisher, D. A., Hill, D. L., Grube, J. W., Bersamin, M. M., Walker, S., & Gruber, E. L. (2009), “sexual issues are often presented in a positive, compelling, and explicit manner, sexual portrayals on television may capture the interest and attention of youth more effectively than other socializing agents (p. 123). There is a relationship between television viewing levels during childhood and social reality beliefs in adulthood.

**Reality Television and Adolescents**

Adolescents are affected by reality television because as they get older and gain more exposure to it, it begins to frame their perception of the social world (Hall, 2009). Exposure to fictional situations and programs did not relate to social reality beliefs (2009). Therefore, viewers are more likely to change their perceptions and values as a result of viewing reality television shows because they believe them to be true. If adolescents watch reality television they develop assumptions about their peers’ sexual experiences and about sexual stereotypes (Biggermont, 2005). The television content embeds sexual curiosity into the mind of adolescent. Students that desire popularity and physical attractiveness (or that possess negative psychosocial health profile) are more likely to feel connected to reality television programs and be influenced by the values exhibited (Smith, Kaltchev, Patino, 2011).

**Promiscuity and Adolescents**

By being exposed to the content that reality television displays, adolescents develop sexual attitudes that develop into sexual behavior (Vandenbosch, Eggermont, 2011). Sexual attitudes are socialized by television viewing. Young girls then began to engage in sexual conversations with one another (2011). They believe their peers are attending to sex-related
media so they decide to attend to it too (Chia, 2006). After witnessing the level of sexuality displayed in the media, adolescents believe they should be displaying the same level of sexuality in their lives. Thinking their peers are engaging in sexual activities or behavior causes them to be more attracted to reality television programs and more interested in increasing their promiscuity. Young women who are attracted to reality television programs are more likely to endorse sexual empowerment views and traditional female roles (Cato & Carpentier, 2010). The views and roles displayed by reality television will be thought of as norms and the women will eventually practice and engage in the behaviors. If girls are already sexually active, watching reality television shows will likely cause them to expose themselves to sex in the media and increase their sexual activity (Bleakley, A., Hennessy, M., Fishbein, M., & Jordan, A. (2008).

Problem Statement and Hypothesis

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects reality television has on the behavior of young girls. Studies have been done to discover the effects that television violence has on younger viewers. Most scholars agree that there is a relationship between both variables due to cultivation theory. The theory suggests that viewers believe the world they are viewing is the same as the world they are living in. Less research has been done on the effects that reality television has on young viewers. More specifically, the effect reality television has on the promiscuity of young girls. The problem is that teen pregnancy continues to increase each year. According to the American Pregnancy Association, 468,988 babies are born to teenage mothers each year. There are 60,000,000 women in childbearing years of 15-44 and 70% of these women are sexually active. A shocking 3,000,000 of them use no contraception, making it 47% unplanned pregnancies. The sexual behavior of women along with their mindset and attitudes towards relationships has changed drastically from past generations. This change may be
directly or indirectly related to the increasing number of teen pregnancies. If there is a relation then researches can examine the psychosocial profiles of these women and compare them to the backgrounds of their peers to discover if a pattern exists. Knowing what affects a persons’ psychosocial profile, behaviors, and perception of the world will enhance researcher’s chances of discovering a solution.

Studies consistently found relationships between television viewing and social beliefs. However, limited studies examine the affects reality television has on the social behavior of young girls and to what extent these learned behaviors have on their decision making in their everyday lives, the following hypothesis was drawn:

H1: *Increased exposure to reality television shows increases the level of promiscuity a young girl experiences in her life.*

**Method**

**Participants**

In the study, 400 adolescent females from two different high schools (grade 9-12) one located in a rural area (50 from each grade= 200 students) and one located in a large urban school district (50 from each grade=200 students) were compromised for quota sampling. The urban high school is located in a diverse community having residents with various linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The rural high school is located in a community that is made up of mostly shared demographics. The sample age 13-19. Five different ethnic identities will equally be surveyed, 80% Caucasian, 80% African American, 80% Asian
American, 80% Hispanic American, 80% other. The demographics of the different high schools will be significantly different.

**Research Procedures**

*Television habits.* To measure how frequently participants viewed television 10 questions were generated. Response options for the items were as follows: 0-1 hour a week, 2-3 hours a week, 4-6 hours a day, 6+ a week. These items measure the frequency of watching television; the frequency of watching reality television shows; the frequency of viewing sexual content on television; and the frequency of viewing sexual content on a reality show.

*Attitude about promiscuity.* This measure consisted of 25 Likert-type items, with response options ranging 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items asked were designed to gather information about participant’s attitude toward promiscuous behavior (e.g., “I discuss sexual encounters I’ve had with a few close friends,” and “I think I should have an intimate moment with a person before I leave high school”). All questions are focused on discovering the participant’s attitude about sexual behavior on reality television and in their real lives.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this is that the likeability of reality television shows cannot determine if it has a direct affect on the decision making skills of a young girls. There are multiple influences that will affect the outcome of a decision. There is also no way of knowing whether the participants will accurately and truthfully complete the questionnaires. Being at such a young age, girls are very self conscious of revealing sexual information to adults. They are aware that expressing sexuality usually is accepted at an older age. This factor may cause them to hold
back information. There is also the inconsistency of events that occur daily. One day a sexual situation may happen and one day it may not. Researchers will have to be extremely particular about which questions to place on the questionnaire.
Reference


