

# Free essay on the effect of reality television on society

[Media](#), [Television](#)



Reality television has become one of the most popular genres of entertainment in American society over the past two decades. This genre of television, wherein groups of real people are followed with cameras in a documentary-style format takes many forms - often they are in the form of a game or competition that will eliminate contestants one by one until a winner is revealed. While the authenticity of the events in reality shows is often disputed, the impact of these shows cannot be overstated - millions of Americans watch reality shows on a regular basis, to the point where they are the highest rated shows on the airwaves. Overall, the advent of reality television has led to a significant negative effect in modern society; body images, bad behavior, anti-intellectualism and rampant consumerism are just some of the things that reality television has brought to the forefront of American society.

In this essay, we will examine these traits through the reality television series American Idol, The Real Housewives of Orange County, and Big Brother. American Idol is a reality singing competition, wherein judges take contestant singers through various rounds of songs and performances to vote them off one by one. Big Brother involves a group of regular contestants who live together in a constantly-monitored house for a period of time, getting voted off until one wins (Brenton and Cohen, 2003). The Real Housewives of Orange County, meanwhile, is a documentary reality series about a group of rich socialites who are married to powerful Orange County figures, following their lives and friendships.

Reality television promotes the exploitation of bad behavior for the sake of attention. Studies have shown that many people watch reality shows in order to feel self-important; they are motivated to feel a sense of goodness about themselves (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004). This is a type of schaudenfraude wherein people enjoy watching the misfortunes of others in order to make themselves feel better. On American Idol, one of the primary draws for the show is the 'audition' period, in which many candidates sing poorly or behave in unconventional, comedic ways, only to be booted by the judges. On Big Brother and other house-type reality shows, there are often abrasive 'conflict' contestants that are placed there to provide tension and comic relief through their bad behavior. The Real Housewives of Orange County revolves around a small group of middle-aged, upper-class women who, nonetheless, engage in petty jealousies, shouting matches, and overall uncouth behavior around each other.

At the same time, reality television viewers have been shown to value expedience over ethics (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004). This stems from the need to feel self-important that drives people to watch people they hate get their comeuppance; whether it is getting voted out of the show or engaging in a catfight, the participants and contestants of reality television shows are spiritual punching bags for the audience. This leads to a tremendously grey moral center wherein people value vengeance and expedience over ethical behavior; this can lead to a feeling of self-importance that places undue emphasis on revenge and enjoying the misfortunes of others (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004).

Reality television creates the glamorization of upper-class, socialite lifestyles and present bad role models to the audience. Another reason people watch reality TV is to gain a vicarious experience through the lives of the people being watched (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004). This means that, when someone wishes to watch American Idol, they wish to fulfill their desire to be a popular music star by experiencing it through the contestants. On *The Real Housewives*, the audience fulfills their desire to be rich and carefree by living through these women. In addition, the *Big Brother* house is often an extravagantly furnished bodega with a swimming pool, fully stocked state of the art kitchen, and all the amenities one could hope for. All of these things add to the spectacle and production value of the house, because no one would watch *Big Brother* if they lived in a hovel. This plays to the desire for wealth that is present in many people; the audience sees these people enjoying these nice things that they, being middle-class Americans, will never really experience.

At the same time, there is also a sense of entitlement presented by the participants of these reality shows, including *Real Housewives*. Their lifestyle, that of extravagant vacations, lives of ease and luxury with little to do but shop, is presented as the American ideal. All of the main characters in the show gleefully go about their lives without consequence, simply buying and consuming without regard for their finances. It is very telling that the husbands typically play a small part in this show, simply being (for the purposes of the show) a pocketbook with a mouth.

This portrayal of an unapologetically consumerist lifestyle can set an example to establish buying patterns to the average, workaday American that could be economically disastrous. Because of the television's portrayal of possessions as status symbols (particularly in reality television), more and more people feel inadequate if they do not also have the things that the Real Housewives cherish so much. This can provide them with a sense of failure, which leads to further self-esteem issues down the road.

With few exceptions, reality TV is used as 'advertainment,' a unique blend of advertising and entertainment wherein product placement is an even more integrated part of the show than in a scripted program, where the show would simply be interrupted by commercials (Deery, 2009). In American Idol, there are numerous events that are hosted by different companies; musical guests frequently appear on the show to promote their new album; Coca-Cola is seen in the hands of the judges, on banners, and in the show logos. Many of the Real Housewives wear and use products given to them by designers and companies, so that they can appear on the show to advertise for them. This aspect of 'advertainment' is closely related in marketing terms to voyeurism and pornography; looking into the lives of real people is exploited to sell products (Deery, 2009).

Reality television creates unrealistic expectations of beauty and talent that can lead to unhealthy behaviors in order to match those images. American Idol and Big Brother alike feature attractive young men and women, all with perfect teeth and skin, often airbrushed and worked on constantly by a small army of makeup and hair designers. In The Real Housewives, the main

characters routinely receive Botox injections and undergo cosmetic surgery in order to maintain youthful looks well into their thirties and forties. According to studies, there has been a 46% increase in cosmetic surgery procedures since 2000, which can be attributed to the increase in prevalence of reality programming (Sperry et al., 2009). People who watch reality television have been shown to display a tremendously higher preference and favor to cosmetic surgery; they also feel greater pressure to undergo those procedures (Sperry et al., 2009).

These statistics demonstrate a decided increase in the pressure to look beautiful, and to undergo arguably dangerous, unnecessary procedures in order to do so. Seeing the overly made-up, perfect army of teenage pop stars on American Idol, combined with the cavalier attitude toward cosmetic surgery provided by The Real Housewives, can contribute to an overall feeling of body dysmorphia in the average American viewer (Sperry et al., 2009). When people do not feel as though they are beautiful, they can also participate in eating disorders, and they add significant stress onto themselves for not feeling as perfect as those on television. While this is true for many media depictions of individuals, the fact that these are supposed to be "real" people brings in a significantly higher rate of anxiety compared to seeing a physically perfect character on a scripted television show (Sperry et al., 2009).

There are some who argue that there is an educational element to reality television; there are some shows that can educate people on restaurants, people or events that were previously unknown to the audience. Apologists

for the reality television genre's effect on American society state that entertainment does not make someone do something, and therefore should not be held responsible for someone's actions. Simply because someone watches someone else act a certain way, or get plastic surgery, does not make it the reality show's fault when someone gets plastic surgery or engages in these types of behaviors.

However, what these counterarguments fail to realize is the sheer cultural impact that reality television has. While television and other forms of entertainment do not strictly dictate what people should do, they do play a part in influencing cultural attitudes of those who watch it, and can provide role models for behavior, whether good or bad (Hill, 2005). In the case of reality television shows, programs like *Real Housewives* or *Big Brother* can all-too-easily promote a lifestyle of overt decadence and unhealthy competition with others in order to 'get ahead.' This can result in a lack of empathy for one's fellow man, and a distinctly murky sense of ethics, both at home and in the workplace.

In conclusion, reality television has a cumulatively negative effect on American society. It can lead to justification of bad behavior for attention, even when it is negative attention. It creates unrealistic standards for wealth and beauty that cannot be reasonably reached by most Americans, leading to a feeling of inadequacy. It also engages and rewards feelings of competition and vengeance to the point of contributing to an overall lack of empathy. While some argue that there is educational value to reality television, and that there is no harm in it, the simple dearth of scripted,

creative programming in lieu of reality shows demonstrates its immense hold on the American viewing public. As a result, it is vital to consider the quality and lessons of what these reality shows offer to the American people.

## **Works Cited**

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