

# Reality programming as ideology: focus on teen mom tv show



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Reality TV shows have risen drastically over the past decade in today's popular culture and have become a household commodity. There are many different genres of reality TV shows, such as social experiment, transformation, competition, documentary and such. The claim of using "ordinary" individuals in reality TV could draw the connection and create similar interest to the audience. On the side, according to Lemi Baruh, a Turkish psychologist, voyeurism is the contribution to the rise of popularity to watch reality TV shows (Baruh, 2010). The show focuses on "real" situations, the audience acquire a sense of satisfaction from being transparent spectators in the unsuspecting individuals' lives. However, the majority of these shows are not truly "real" and contain the element of "semi-scripting," in order to create a sense of authenticity, they make use of familiarity and the reproduction of the dominant ideology. This paper will take the show - "Teen Mom" as an example and argue how it as a show represents social conflicts and the use of narrative to restore the social conflicts and thus resolves the ideological contradictions.

### Social Conflict

"Teen Mom" is an American reality TV show series aired in 2009, and the show follows four young mothers as they navigate motherhood and cope with different challenges including problematic exes, souring relationships, emotional problems, family issues and so forth. "Teen Mom" has brought its viewers into the harsh realities of teenage pregnancy and parenthood and see all the hardships and challenges that the four young mothers encounter in their life. The fights, tears, drama and emotional breakdowns portrayed in the show have certainly drawn the audience; it takes advantages from the <https://assignbuster.com/reality-programming-as-ideology-focus-on-teen-mom-tv-show/>

serious emotional problems and poor life choices of its entertainment subject. One of star – Catelynn Lowell, who struggled with postpartum depression has suicidal thoughts after the miscarriage in season 7. Another star – Amber Portwood, was arrested due to drug possession and domestic abuse in the second season. Farrah Abraham, one of the former “ Teen Mom” star, was arrested drunk driving and fighting with the security officer in season 3. These are the evidence from the show to articulate the social norms of teen mothers from the lower class, seeing them as abusive, irresponsible, immature or any negative stereotyping and stigmatization.

On the other hand, the show reinforces the idea that teen pregnancy is a social problem and the series is deeply rooted in consequences. There is a case where a couple was not emotionally and financially prepared for their first child in their 16. As a result, they placed their daughter in adoption. There is another case where the “ bad” mother who physically attacked her fiancé in front of her young daughter, seemingly it generates dramatic storyline, brings controversy to the show and draw large audiences. On the contrary, there is a successful case where Maci Bookout represents as exemplary of a teenage mother who goes to college and supports herself and her son. In which, she has relatively less screen time than other teenage mothers from broken homes and low levels of education. The show represents social conflict through the combination of teenage motherhood and the conformity of the typical framing of poor and lower class to the teenage mothers. Moreover, the show mainly depicts the failure and adverse outcomes of how teenage mothers handle the situation and cope with different challenges.

## The use of narrative to restore the social conflict

The reality maker manipulates everything from the casting to production in order to deliver dramatic storyline. Meanwhile, the viewer reads the character as a real person, not as a function of the plot but it helps to create a sense of realism by including “unwritten” event. Tyler Baltierra and Catelynn Lowell are one of the couples in the show. They are both from dysfunctional families, both of their parents have issues with drug addiction. Besides, the dramatic point is where Catelynn’s mom was married to Baltierra’s dad. According to Holmes, “the structured and managed setting” which always shapes the television contexts in which “ordinary” people perform” (p. 259). The show selects their subjects from a broken family and complicated relationships to represent the social norms. The combination of social discourses, such as class, family, race and more have reinforced the negative stereotyping to teenage mother. However, if the show portrayed the characters are from the upper class and receive high-level education, the story would not be as compelling and convincing as it is now presented.

Furthermore, through a variety of means, including editing and camera work, “Teen Mom” use a narrative structure to tell dramatic stories about real people. The show “Teen Mom” is preceded by another show “16 and Pregnant”, currently playing the 7th season and has more than 130 episodes. Amber Portwood, one of the lead character in “Teen Mom,” the show portrays her life from a teenage mother from season 1 to nowadays - the mom to 9-year-old daughter. Amber’s life is chaotic, many ups and downs and full of challenges, besides, she has an issue with anger problems due to bipolar and borderline personality disorder. In season one, the show <https://assignbuster.com/reality-programming-as-ideology-focus-on-teen-mom-tv-show/>

starts by introducing Amber as a party girl and dropped off from high school when she discovered she was pregnant. Throughout the show, it depicts the tough journey that Amber has encountered into parenthood. The editing and cinematography invite the audience to judge the mother's action — the cutaways that highlight the connotation of poor parenting. The close-up shots of piles of clothing left in the corner, the plates left on the couch, shots of Amber's daughter playing alone with the potential dangerous household item that left on the ground and shots of Amber screamed at her daughter whenever she cried or whined. These examples reinforce the incapability and inability to parent her child. Besides, the editing and camerawork hide the means of construction and express the character's authenticity as being a neglectful and lazy teenage mother. In season 2 episode 20, Amber was physically and emotionally abusive to her ex-fiancé, the scene portrays every detail, slap, punch, and kick are depicted clearly on the screen.

Subsequently, she went to jail due to the domestic abuse. Later on, she re-entered into society and claimed to learn from the past and move on.

According to Hill, "reality TV retains a degree of verisimilitude in part because of its use of documentary techniques (as cited in Sgroi, 2007)."

Also, reality TV shows are like a narrative and revolved around conflict. It presents the disturbance, followed by crisis, ending in a resolution. In fact, "Teen Mom" provides a strong, dramatic and emotional storyline, witnessing the whole journey of one of the cast has gone through drastic changes from bad to become a better individual after going to jail. Programs rely on narratives to structure the shots and episodes and present "the real." The editing and camerawork are used to manipulate the audience and

representation. Hence, the "ordinary" teenage mothers in the reality TV  
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show are edited to represent selective and stereotypical behavior. “ It [reflects] our values and defines our assumption about the nature of reality (Fiske & Hartley, p. 85).”

Resolves the ideological contradictions

Social discourse presents teenage mother as a stigma and illegitimate in the society. However, there is a paradox in the show, while the producer has framed the teen mothers as particularly troublesome and has portrayed all the hardships that teen mother need to overcome, it also glamorizes the lives of these young women and deviates from societal expectation. The show has turned the “ ordinary” teenage mothers dealing with difficult circumstances into celebrities. According to Today. com, there are girls from public high schools who try to get pregnant to get on those shows. Some may see the show distorts the educational pregnancy prevention tool but also promote the fantasy to be famous. Such purposeful pregnancies have much deeper roots than watching a TV show. According to the Pew Research Center, the show “ Teen Mom” and “ 16 and Pregnant” have surprisingly led to fewer teen birth (Patten & Livingston, 2016). These shows create a positive impact to the local in the extent that the audience ensures the storyline on screen were not mirrored on their life in consideration of all the disastrous side-effects of pregnancy illustrated on the show.

The show has successfully lowered the teen birth rate due to the use of exaggeration and make filters to the content. The show has mainly focused on the conflicts, damaged relationships and all the negative impacts toward a teenage mother, while, minimizing all the positive and encouraging

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moments with their kids or family. Thus, this show exaggerates how worse it could be as a teenage mother. According to O'Shaughnessy, " ideology works by masking, displacing, and naturalizing social problems and contradictions (p. 95)". This reality show has reproduced and established the dominant ideologies to normalize the events happened in the show. Taking into account that the use of a preexisting dominant form of white femininity to frame its portrayal of the teenage mother. Furthermore, the frequent and loud objections projected by Farrah Abraham to her mother in all seasons is somewhat relatable and familiar to the targeted audience. The way Abraham disputes her mother portrayals of teenagers protesting to their parents. Also, the society considers teenage pregnancy a social dilemma, yet, the show magnifies all the negative side effects to construct content with a sense of realism. It offers us ways of understanding the society and it associated with the belief of family and relationship to resonate with the audience. The show has featured the attempts to bring the teenage mothers back to acceptable female roles and behavior. Certainly, the ways that they struggle to be " normal" is nearly impossible. In season 1 episode 8, Abraham goes to parent-child music with her daughter, and she is the only mother at her age and without a partner. " Otherness" is illustrated on teenage mothers from other typical mothers. This show only represents a partial picture of the society and intends to disuse the values from the minority in order to resolve the ideological contradictions.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the reality TV show " Teen Mom" is a successful show where it creates a positive impact on the society but it cannot generalize all the other

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reality TV shows. “ The use of narrative structure creates a sense of closure and ideological reassurance” (Baker, 2018). In term of casting, they are representing the dominant ideologies and stereotypes. The fact that they are “ ordinary,” mostly white, have low education level, coming from the lower class to lower middle class, growing up in a dysfunctional family and so forth. These factors are built in conformity with the social norms to adapt to the audience as well as the society. Thus, the show extends to emphasize the conflicts and quarrels from what the teenage mothers were supposed to be. The destructive behavior and the image of being irresponsible and reckless used to describe the teenage mothers are portrayed through the failure and poor life choice. It is constructed out what is seemly natural and familiar. Henceforth, the audience witnesses all the traumas and crisis as known as the climax of the story, from make-ups to break-ups to domestic violence and loss of child custody. The show edits and filters the content to disclose what fit the society the most. Also, it intends to form an emotional bond to the audience with the relatable context and disseminate the core value of the show.

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