

## 90 Days for Who?: An Investigation on Viewership of Reality Dating Shows

For college students, especially those who live at Harvey Mudd College, there exists a massive variation in the type of TV content viewed. While some individuals speak of their time viewing American Football, others find themselves immersed in the worlds of *Game of Thrones* and *Stranger Things* among other dramas, while even others become interested in the lives of others through American reality TV dating shows (henceforth described as reality TV shows). Shows such as *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Too Hot to Handle* have become popular mainstays in American culture, with *The Bachelor* celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> year on TV in 2022.

However, upon reflecting on my time at Harvey Mudd College, I have heard polarizing views on the show with some individuals clearing out 1.5 hours per week of their schedule to view the show with friends versus others who describe their adamant disdain for the show. Thus, the question arises of why there is such a discrepancy in how individuals view the show and why there exists such separation between the opinions on the show. To understand these questions, I believe it is more important to focus on the question of viewership of the show. That is, this investigation seeks to understand who the individuals are whom compose the viewership of reality TV shows, how may they be broken down based on different groupings, and what is the reason for different groups having varying opinions on reality TV shows such as *The Bachelor*.

I approach this question from an angle of being an individual who does not enjoy reality TV shows, as I often opt for more drama-type television shows. Similarly, as the child of an education-oriented family who tried to limit my media consumption to educational programs for the majority of the first 13 years of my life, much of the TV consumption that I grew to enjoy as a child were educationally oriented. This included shows such as *Sesame Street*, *Dora the Explorer*, and *Dragon Tales*. From these tv-shows, as a cis-gendered male identifying person, I then began viewing shows such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* among other television shows more traditionally associated with the teenager male population. Thus, growing up, I had little connection to reality TV shows of the style of *The Bachelor* beyond when I left my household and had occasional outside viewership. These instances were rare and often tangentially related to American reality TV shows, such as through Mexican reality TV shows that I would view with my grandmother and family in Mexico. While I have been exposed to reality TV as I have grown older, it remains a novel concept to me and one that I do not consider myself a part of the viewership of.

To properly investigate the question, it will be beneficial to use the anthropology techniques that we have learned thus far. Having discussed the notions of “defamiliarizing the familiar”, it will be important to discard any preconceived notions of what one may have as to who constitutes the viewership of the shows, why individuals may be attracted to reality TV shows, as well as my personally developed opinions on reality TV shows and to instead, try to consider the genre and viewership in a new light. It will be beneficial to conduct different forms of interviews with individuals to understand these new perspectives. Most of the investigation will be done by

interviewing different individuals. I believe it would be beneficial to interview individuals who fall into categories of self-described reality TV fans, indifferent viewers of reality TV, and individuals who dislike reality TV. From there, it would be important to understand how each came to their opinion on reality TV. This can be understood by enquiring about past viewership experiences such as when they first viewed reality TV, which ones they have watched, and what aspects draw them in or push them away. However, as described by Dr. Faye Harrison in *Ethnography as Politics*, these interviews will be an “ethnographic dialogue”, a method of conversation for which the investigator and the interviewee are able to share information with one another within their conversation. To facilitate trust with the individuals for which I hope to speak with, I will be opening myself up to be queried and questioned about my experiences with the genre, though I anticipated difficulties with maintaining neutrality. Similarly, as has been described in the writings of the *Nacirema* by Dr. Horace Miner and *Speaking is Believing* by Dr. Susan Harding, it will be essential to consider the language that I use to converse with individuals and the language that they respond and use and possibly the common jargon used by viewers. By understanding language and in reflecting upon my own biases towards the genre, I will be better equipped to understand how individuals decided their viewership status with regards to reality TV. Beyond interactions directly through interviews and conversation, I believe that it would be beneficial to investigate online forums and social media platforms. On social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, it is common for live streaming shows such as *The Bachelor* to become “trending” during their streaming time. At those moments, fans of the shows are vocal in their thoughts on the shows. However, it may be more difficult to understand the different components of someone’s identity who is tweeting since direct communication (through direct message) is not always a reliable method of contact and that not all social media profiles have ample information to understand components of someone’s identity. However, these investigations may present an opportunity to reach out to individuals if direct communication is possible and successful, which furthermore allows for the opportunity to transition from monitoring online postings to a conversation model. Through using these anthropologic techniques, I hope to be better able to understand the viewpoints of those who both do and don’t enjoy the genre.

While I have some preconceived notions as to how the lines of viewership may be broken down by different categories such as gender, race, and age, by embarking upon the anthropologic process of creating an ethnography, I will be better equipped to approach to the question. While my current theories try to be cohesive, the framework of anthropology informs that there does not exist a coherent unifying theory as to who constitutes the viewership of reality TV shows. Therefore, I will be better able to consider how different factors may interact with one another to answer the question for individuals. By looking through several different lenses that together unfurl the issue of who constitutes the viewership of reality TV show and their reasons for such, we can see how the answer may vary by individual we speak to. The tools of anthropology allow one to consider different cases and to utilize different prior frameworks of thought to try and understand a problem with the flexibility of knowing that the set of conclusions may not be unanimously true. Rather than looking for a set of defining characteristics of an individual that is a viewer of reality TV shows, we can understand different individuals’ stories of how they came to their opinion of the genre and from there, who they are.