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## 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*, while even others become interested in 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 television culture, with *The Bachelor* celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> year on TV in 2022 and constant renewals and importations of new shows.

However, upon reflecting on my time at Harvey Mudd College, I have heard polarizing views on reality TV shows and while discussing these topics with some of my fellow cohort, I have begun to see the divides over these types of shows. Thus, this begs the question 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. As a result, I have asked different individuals their relationship on these sorts of shows, ranging from how many hours do you spend a week viewing reality TV shows, to why do you enjoy or not enjoy the shows so much. However, during my discussions on these topics, I have found that it is more important to focus on the question of viewership of the shows as it opens the door of understanding why some people may enjoy the shows and why others may not. This investigation seeks to understand which individuals 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*.

To synthesize the different results of my investigations and to attempt to answer this question, I will be producing an ethnography that recounts my studies of who constitutes the viewership of these TV shows. In this, we will be able to go over different interviews, participant studies and general moments that were crucial to my investigation while explaining how these results draw off frame works, I will explain later and how they may add to such frameworks. In doing so, I will emphasize representing individuals in a manner accurately reflecting their desires and their opinions while synthesizing my analysis with other literature and information as I apply different anthropological lenses throughout my work.

In considering influences on my life and how the way my biases may manifest, it will be better in helping the reader understand where my perspective comes from.

I approach the question of viewership from an angle of being an individual who does not enjoy reality TV shows. I often opt for more mystery/athletic television shows. Similarly, as the child of an education-oriented family who tried to limit my media consumption to educational/athletic programs for the majority of the first 13 years of my life, much of the TV consumption that I grew to enjoy was educationally oriented.

This included shows such as *Sesame Street*, *Dora the Explorer*, and *Dragon Tales*. After I stopped viewing these shows, 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, cis-gender, heterosexual male population. Thus, growing up, I had little connection to reality TV shows beyond when I left my household. 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.

I am a cis-gender, heterosexual man who comes from an upper middle-class, Catholic family that put education in front of all other issues. These factors have greatly shaped the way in which I view media. Thus, when considering my construction of what media is and what it is useful for, a lot of my personal analysis is rooted in these same structures; do I deem this sort of media beneficial for myself in some way. I do note how subjective this question is, as well as how this likely has affected my indifference towards reality TV shows. For the most part, I have not found elements of these shows that lead me to believe that they would be beneficial for my life, whether that be to teach me something new (such as with educational or philosophical material or in some sort of mystery solving puzzle) or to fulfill another passion of mine (such as with athletic events).

In understanding this issue and in conducting my research, it will be imperative to discard of my prior existing ideas about reality TV and judgements. Instead of using my prior methods, I will employ a methodology of cultural relativism by setting aside my judgments on what makes different forms of media important/watchable and thus consider other value methods. By stepping out of my own world view, I can instead enter the world views of the different individuals of whom I wish to speak with in my different field work methods. I can then observe their thoughts and more deeply begin to understand how they may think about the genre. To appropriately understand the issue, my investigation will be centered around asking why individuals are drawn to this sort of media: how they began watching, what their motivations are, what other kinds of media they consume, what are their favorite elements of the shows. Therefore, to properly appreciate and understand their perspective on the genres, akin to how Harding stepped into the “witnessing” role when she encountered Reverend Campbell and lived in the space between believing and rejecting his attempts, I will exist in this limbo state of trying to understand through cultural relativism. Through this methodology, I will use the tools of anthropology to set aside my prior experiences and judgments to try to truly understand an issue and individuals’ perspectives.

When considering topics from the course, I believe the most beneficial framework in understanding the questions of viewership would be understanding language. From my preliminary observations, there seems to be a particular jargon to these shows. Certain words take on different meanings, as well as certain phrases being integral to understanding the structure of the programs/episodes. In analyzing the language used by different viewers, the most useful methodology for answering questions of viewership that is presented in the course material would be the methods used by Captain Picard in the Darmok videos from *Star Trek*. In the episode, Captain Picard created a mutual flow of information between himself and Darmok to understand the Tamarian language.

Picard focused on how phrases were used and in which situations they were utilized to understand what the phrases meant. Further, this illuminated the grammatical structure of the Tamarian language. This same methodology of understanding the context in which particular words are used, such as how “Fantasy Suite” and “B.I.P.” as used in *The Bachelor*, would inform what the structure of the show is and allows us to focus on certain moments in the show. This in turn allows people to demonstrate their favorite components of the show and their immersion. Thus, isolating these components and focusing on language, we can begin to understand why individuals are drawn to the shows, thus helping us understand the question of viewership.

To properly investigate the question and to best utilize the framework of understanding questions of viewership through language, it will be beneficial to use some of our anthropological tools. Having discussed the notions of “defamiliarizing the familiar”, it will be important to discard my priorly described biases of 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. Instead, I will try to consider the genre and viewership in a new light and attempt to use language in a non-imposing manner. 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 who live at Harvey Mudd College, without a bias for age or gender. The hope will be to be able to interview as large a set of students as possible to best see different opinions on the subject. This study will not be restricted to any age or status but will classify those who watch reality TV shows based off how they describe their interest. After establishing their opinions, it is 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. It is from these dialogues and conversations that I hope to be able to get to know the participants. To do so and to facilitate trust with the individuals with 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.

In my participant observations, I plan on meeting people who consider themselves a part of the viewership of reality TV shows and then participating in a viewing of reality TV show with them on a weekly basis at the time of the live showing of the participant’s favorite show. In this setting, I would be better able to discuss the show and view the show from their perspective, not only due to physical location, but due to the ongoing dialogue over the show and liveliness of the event that presents a different experience of the event from those of isolated viewings. Similarly, as this situation provides a far more candid setting, it would be far easier to have relaxed conversations with the participants and for them to reveal different insights into their opinions on the show. It would similarly be interesting to participate in both a live viewing and a taped viewing of the show to determine if there exists a legitimate difference between the two.

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 times. At those moments, fans of the shows are vocal about 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 to see if direct communication is possible. If successful, we furthermore gain 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.

With the different methods used to garner information, it will be important to consider the representation of individuals. As we have seen throughout the course, proper anthropological research is reliant on representing individuals as they wish to be represented and in using unbiased language to accurately reflect the participant’s opinions on different subjects. As a result of my background and indifference towards the genre, my personal feelings will be important to control, as well to make sure that the way I convey individual’s reasons for being drawn to the genre in an accurate manner.

Answering the questions accurately is also dependent on representation. Since the question tries to determine who constitutes the viewership of this genre, it is imperative to try to discuss the topic with people who represent as large a set of different identities as possible as mentioned earlier. Without proper representation, the question cannot be answered in a complete manner. Thus, it is important to represent people’s identities and opinions accurately as well as consider as many diverse opinions on the subject as possible, such as the diversity of individuals interviewed.

As mentioned above limiting cultural biases influence on my work is a key step to producing this ethnography. Thus, our before mentioned model of cultural relativism provides help in answering our question. Cultural relativism relies on dispelling prior judgements about what makes certain types of TV “watchable” and thus helps one limit their personal biases. However, cultural relativism is also useful for this type of investigation as it shapes the types of questions that an anthropologist should ask to better understand the issue. By focusing less so on questions that perpetuate a particular world view, and more so on questions that try to understand differing opinions on the matter, we can focus on individual reasoning as to their status as a viewer or non-viewer and helps us accurately represent individuals.

Cultural relativism also has the consequence of garnering deeper trust between the investigator and the parties that they are meeting with. If the questions lack judgment and imply curiosity, the party who is sharing their experience may be more inclined to trust and open further to the anthropologist about their affiliations with reality TV. However, cultural relativism also presents some downsides. While cultural relativism assists in asking question and fostering trust, it will be important to remember to ensure the accurate representation of individuals as described at the beginning of this paper and consistently and openly describe my personal biases.

When considering the question of viewership, it will also be important to consider the role that raciolinguistics and the way that different American reality dating TV shows talk about race and perpetuate images about race. It is well documented that

shows such as *The Bachelor* have a track record of selecting predominately white contestants, with the first black “Bachelor” (referring to the title held by the individuals the show focuses around) being selected in 2021. As such, it follows that not only could individuals be drawn to watching or not watching the show based on their ethnic and/or racial backgrounds because of representation in characters, but it will also be important to consider how these representations of individuals are constructed and understood.

In the process of producing these shows, producer cut and choose the narratives to perpetuate about individuals. The production of these shows is a constant process that shapes and controls the ways in which individual’s narratives are told and made. Dr. Amahl Bishara discusses the controlling of Palestinian narratives by media conglomerates and the “accumulated authorship” in which everyone in the process of producing said narrative implicitly affects the narrative through their decisions such as content selection in her text, *Back Stories: U.S. News Production and Palestinian Politics*. Dr. Bishara discusses how this can change the narrative. Producers of reality TV shows do the same. By splicing different clips in the hopes of achieving the overarching goal of creating a piece of media that will be consumed by as many individuals as possible (as one does in capitalism), producers construct the narratives told by others about contestants’ identity into something that they hope will sell in, akin to how large media conglomerates with stories of Palestine (though on a **much** less grave scale). Thus, it will be important to consider how different viewers may understand the construction of different characters based on race and the racial narratives about different contestants that the show presents. Similarly, this presents an opportunity to study how individuals who view the show may discuss different characters based on race and to understand why they may hold such feelings about characters. Though we could not draw a direct line between the way that viewers discuss characters on a racial basis, we can consider how these opinions on characters describe who they are as a viewer and how racial narratives may affect their status as a viewer or a non-viewer.

Culturally, reality TV shows are not ubiquitously present. Thus, it is foolish to assume that the concept is constant across all cultures. Reality TV shows can provide a lens to understand the viewership through understanding how different cultures display dating rituals and relationships. In “Our Own Way: On Anthropology and Intellectual Property” by Dr. A. David Napier writes on the incompatibility of indigenous knowledge due to its shared communal aspect and cultural differences of sharing and knowledge in general. Applying the need to understand cultural differences on different topics, we cannot assume compatibility of knowledge of cultural elements such as television/entertainment, relationships, and love across all cultures. In my analysis, it will be paramount to avoid these kinds of assumptions of cohesivity to reduce the expectation of shared knowledge and to allow for a deeper understanding. Furthermore, by using cultural relativism to relinquish these prior understandings of relationships, love, and its relationship to entertainment that are perpetuated by Western media, interviews with individuals can include questions of what constitutes a relationship and how different individuals display affection to others. From there, an understanding of how different cultural expectations of love can affect an individual’s decision to partake or to not partake in the viewership can attempted to be understood.

While it is important to set aside preconceived notions of value for entertainment, it would be significant to question why other individuals choose to watch TV or what they look for in their day-to-day forms of entertainment. By gaining an

understanding of this, we would be better able to understand how different people may classify different forms of entertainment differently and choose different forms of entertainment. Just as I confronted my cultural experiences with entertainment to understand my biases and why I prefer different kinds of media, these similar lines of questioning for participants would be fruitful for the investigation.

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 us to consider different cases and to utilize different prior frameworks of thought to try and understand a problem with the flexibility of knowing that a singular set of conclusions is not 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. The purpose of this investigation is to begin to understand who constitutes the viewership and why they have decided on their status as a viewer or non-viewer either subconsciously or consciously.