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What's real about reality television?

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Abstract

Reality Television may not be as real as some might be led to believe. Ventre reported that MTV's reality television show "The Real World: Skeletons" and its content is influenced by producers. Is it possible that this statement accurately describes many reality series? Is it possible that some reality programming is scripted? More importantly, how does the television viewing audience perceive reality television? Do viewers perceive such programs to be candid and unscripted? Why do people watch reality television? The purpose of this case study was to uncover perceptions of reality television as portrayed through social media, particularly via Twitter. This study is significant because it uncovers viewer perceptions about reality television that suggest reality television lacks reality and that viewers of reality television should not assume that such programs are unscripted and spontaneous. It may even encourage thoughtful reflection upon the ethics behind alleged manipulation of reality television content.

Keywords: Reality television; Social media; Twitter; Facebook; Mass media; Mass communications; Case study; Social constructionism; Uses and gratification theory

Introduction

Reality Television may not be as real as some might be led to believe. Ventre reported that MTV's reality television show "The Real World: Skeletons" and its content is influenced by producers [1]. Is it possible that this statement accurately describes many reality series? Is it possible that some reality programming is scripted? More importantly, how does the television viewing audience perceive reality television? Do viewers perceive such programs to be candid and unscripted? Why do people watch reality television? The purpose of this case study was to uncover perceptions of reality television as portrayed through social media, particularly via Twitter. This study is significant because it uncovers viewer perceptions about reality television that suggest reality television lacks reality and that viewers of reality television should not assume that such programs are unscripted and spontaneous. It may even encourage thoughtful reflection upon the ethics behind alleged manipulation of reality television content. What is reality television? Oxfordictionaries.com defines reality television as "television programs in which real people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative" [2] (para. 1). For the purposes of this study, reality television was defined as television programming in which people are followed by video cameras that are recording their "real lives," specifically on the reality television shows "Marriage Boot Camp," "Dance Moms" and "Real World: Skeletons". These reality television programs were chosen at random by the researchers. Also, Twitter, a form of social media that allows users to share with their followers "Tweets" with a maximum of 140 characters was purposely chosen so the researchers could access viewer feedback and commentary regarding the selected reality television shows.

Theoretical Perspective

While there are many theories that could be used to explain reality television, the researchers selected social constructionism as the lens through which to view the issue. According to Baran et al. [3] social constructionism is classified as an assumption that our experience of reality is an ongoing social construction in which we have some responsibility, not something that is delivered or otherwise transmitted by some authority or elite. This theory is particularly useful for audiences of reality television. According to this theory, each day individuals wind their way down the paths of their lives, interacting with others, learning, and taking responsibility in shaping their views and understanding of the world. As such, reality television contributes to the construct of its viewers. With each passing moment, viewers of reality programming are shaping their understanding of their own world as well as the worlds that are being portrayed by each show, conducting an internal dialog that influences their thinking.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

It is assumed that individuals who were tweeting about the reality television shows in this study watched the shows and were truthful while tweeting. A delimitation of the study was that three one-hour reality television programs were identified among the universe of reality televisions, which may not represent the field of reality television programming. A limitation of this study may be that other social media, such as Facebook, could be just as useful to obtain feedback for each reality television show.

Literature Review

One scan of a television network's primetime programming line up reveals one reality: reality television is a featured component of television programming. Papacharissi et al. [4] explored the truth behind reality television, suggesting, "The growing appeal of reality programming raises the question of distinction between real and fictional programming, especially in terms of how audiences perceive reality versus fiction" (p. 20). Is the content of such programming real? Unscripted? Raw? How do viewers perceive reality television? As Ventre [1] raised concerns about the reality of reality television, and if reality television content is being manipulated, then perhaps it is because reality is just not interesting. According to Kitman [5] "The weakness of reality television as entertainment concept is that real people can often be quite boring. That's where the Television creative

establishment fits. First, they select a real person bound to create controversy: a black or gay. The real people are often coached to act in a certain manner by off-screen handlers who feed them talking points sure to create heat. The end result is called "enhanced reality" (para 2).

To understand enhanced reality is to understand reality television and vice versa. In discerning why people watch reality television Reiss et al. [6] applied Reiss's sensitivity theory, suggesting, "individuals prefer to watch those shows that arouse the joys most important to them" (p. 365). Reiss et al. [6] also make note of sixteen of the most basic desires as they relate to reality television, focusing on "social contact," "curiosity," and "status". The authors indicated that curiosity is one of the most common traits in any person. People are always looking for something new and exciting or striving for better things, which is all about being curious. When viewers watch reality television they are curious to know more about these people's lives and what and why they do the things they do. It gives viewers the joy of "wonderment".

Research Methods

This qualitative research study focused on understanding individual's perceptions of reality television shows. A case study was conducted using content collected from social media medium "Twitter" to find common themes of perceptions on three specific shows: "The Real World: Skeletons," "Dance Moms," and "Couples Therapy". This approach allowed the researchers to gather a variety of viewpoints from a number of participants. The researchers noted that utilizing a case study model was effective. Soy [7] noted, "Social scientists, in particular, have made wide use of this qualitative research method to examine contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods" (para. 2).

To collect data, the researchers viewed the reality television shows at their regularly scheduled times. The researchers then logged on to Twitter and searched for content shared by viewers, or "tweets" related to each show by utilizing hashtags (#). For example, when searching Twitter for commentary regarding "The Real World: Skeletons," the researchers used the hashtags #TheRealWorld and #RealWorldSkeletons, among others. Once content was identified it was logged in a spread sheet. To protect the identity of the individuals who were tweeting, the researchers did not collect identifying information. Fifty tweets were located at random for each reality television show and the tweets were then organized into categories of common themes. To verify the research in this case study, the researchers utilized that approach outlined by Dukes in "Qualitative Research and Research Designs: Choosing among Five Traditions" [8]. The data was first submitted to and confirmed by another researcher who identified patterns in the research that were similar to the patterns the researchers identified. The data was then confirmed by outside readers, and the experiences fit together in a logical manner. Finally, the researchers applied the results of the research to shed light on other reality television shows.

Findings

Through the research five themes were uncovered: excitement for the show, relationships, conflict, emotional connection, and favorite characters.

Excitement for the show

Fans communicated that they were excited to watch the reality television shows. Hours before the shows started they would Tweet about how they couldn't contain their excitement for viewing them.

They would share commentary regarding highlights from previous episodes and openly discuss their anticipation for what could unfold in the upcoming episode.

Relationships

Viewers were quite interested in the relationships of the "stars" of each show, tweeting about such relationships in a way that seemed as though they had a personal stake in the lives of these individuals. One person Tweeted: "I'm scared that Tyson won't propose to her idk if he's scared or what but if you don't wanna lose her better do something #MarriageBootCamp". The types of relationships varied within each show, including dating, friendships, or enemies.

Conflict

The researchers observed a great deal of conflict on each show, and the results of the research suggest that the individuals sharing their perceptions on Twitter believed that not only was there a great deal of conflict occurring, the conflicts were planned and partially scripted. One viewer of Real World: Skeletons noted on Twitter, "Who's ready to see @t_raines33 reaction to @madiwadi2by4 skeleton? #RealWorldSkeletons".

Emotional connection

Individuals sharing their perceptions on Twitter largely developed an emotional connection with the reality television show cast members as they watched the characters develop and unfold. One Twitter participant note, "Spencer just broke my heart on #MarriageBootCampRealityStars. We love you Spencer! Keep being you".

Favorite characters

Viewers tended to, through the course of watching a show, dichotomize the characters into "favorites" versus "unfavorites". For example, one viewer noted, "Drunk Tony, Sober Tony. It's doesn't matter cuz he's just a doucher. #RealWorldSkeletons".

Conclusions

The researchers sought to uncover viewers' "reality" of reality television with a look "behind the curtain" to understand viewers' perceptions of reality television. Through the literature review the researchers determined that the lines between reality and fiction in reality television are blurred, which suggests that such programs may be manipulated to improve ratings, shares, downloads, and views. It may be true that in some cases, reality television is not real, perhaps partially scripted to increase viewers and appeal, and perhaps this is most evident through the "excitement for the show" theme that emerged. If reality television executives are actively seeking ratings, shares, downloads, views, and revenue, and if real people are as boring as suggested by Kitman [5] manipulating reality television content may continue to occur and increase, if not to account for the metrics and economics that drive its programming. Do viewers of reality television believe that it is unscripted and spontaneous? This research suggests that viewers do not believe that reality television is real. Each of the themes that emerged revealed a clue about such perceptions. Perhaps the most significant factor was observed through the common theme of "conflict". As noted, the researchers observed a great deal of conflict on each show. Individuals sharing their perceptions on Twitter were quick to observe such conflicts, suggesting that the conflicts were planned and at least partially scripted. Social constructivists might argue that

viewers' perceptions of reality are being unfairly skewed, if in fact manipulation of reality television is occurring.

Curiously, viewers dichotomized the casts into "favorites" versus "unfavorites". Do producers of reality television shape the casts of such shows to guide viewers' perceptions, choosing a cast that would create such dichotomy? Further research should be conducted to uncover such inquiry. Nonetheless, viewers noted that observing the relationships that grow on the shows is important to them. Perhaps reality television can best be understood through the lens of "uses and gratifications". Baran et al. [3] might suggest that some individuals watch reality television for entertainment, relaxation, to pass time, escape life, or any number of uses and gratifications that suit them. It seems reasonable that if producers of reality television are attempting to meet the needs of their viewers, it may be possible that they are manipulating their programing, if their unaltered content is not meeting such needs. As viewers revealed their uses, gratifications, connections, and perceived relationships to the cast, the researchers observed an element of voyeurism among viewers. As Reiss et al. [6] noted sixteen of the most basic desires as they related to reality television, perhaps peering through a window in to the lives of others is a key feature of reality television. Aside from a potential for voyeurism, the relationships perceived by viewers were quite evident. Reality television executives and their representatives who monitor social media for feedback on their television programming may take such information in to account as they select or eliminate cast members and during alleged situations where reality content may be manipulated.

Just as the debate regarding the manipulation of images of models on magazines has fuelled discussion for years, the ethics of the manipulation of reality television to increase ratings, shares, downloads, views, and revenue is a discussion that must be held more often and openly. If viewers are presented with a skewed view of the world and their constructions reflect such manipulation, are viewers wronged? Is it assumed that viewers will discern reality from fiction without receiving harm? Should reality television executives who manipulate content thus skewing reality disclose such activity to viewers during reality television programming? The concept of ethics in reality television content should be further explored. Perhaps other programs could be studied; other forms of social media could be used to gather content; more content could be collected from Twitter to further validate the results and perhaps identify other common themes.

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