

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF FILM-VIDEO

WRITING REALITY

ALEX HYNEMAN
SPRING 2019

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Film-Video
with honors in Film-Video

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Anita Gabrosek
Professor of Film-Video
Thesis Supervisor

Rod Bingaman
Professor of Film-Video
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

The landscape of contemporary television cannot be explained without mentioning reality television. This unscripted genre gives the audience a sense that these characters are *just like us*. In contemporary storytelling within the past decade, audience's desires have grown for a sense of realism in the films they watch. Interestingly, this shift to realism has already been happening within the television industry in the form of reality television. In spite of the pushback and controversy, reality shows still persist to this day.

Because of this thesis, I learned how the genre of reality television could be depicted truthfully in a screenplay and the portrayal of feature-length screenplay's characters regarding this subject. I also explored four films that satirize television, examine social media, and show a writer returning to her hometown. This not only helped me understand the structure of feature-length films but also allowed me to realize themes – specific to the world of reality television – that I could implement into my script.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Thesis Supervisor Professor Anita Gabrosek for helping me complete this and challenging me to focus on way to strengthen the overall thesis. Additionally, I want to thank my parents for helping me realize that I had the ability to write this thesis. I also want to thank Dean Selden, Former Dean of Multicultural Affairs within the College of Communications, for inspiring me to understand my potential at Penn State and in my career.

Finally, I would like to thank the faculty and staff of the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications who have all aided in my Penn State journey. I've realized as an undergrad that their encouragement and dedication to the students is what ultimately makes the university such a unique and special place.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The concept of “staged reality” started in 1992 with the reality television show (rTV) MTV’s *The Real World*. In this show, reality is staged by its circumstances: housemates are strangers, strangers are confined to the house, and they are always filmed (“Reality TV”). This show also introduced the idea of confessionals; these are when the participants open up to the camera and give the audience insight into their mental state (“Reality TV”). Viacom’s former chairman of MTV Networks, Tom Freston, recognizes how the channel roused the trajectory of rTV to the success it’s endured today (Dunfee). Because of these and other factors, *Real World* would become standard for rTV in the 1990s and open the door to this new genre of programming.

In its first season, *Real World* brought seven young adult strangers to live together (“Reality TV”). Because of this close confinement, the seven participants discussed social issues broadcasted on the show that they have experienced or are relevant to them (“Reality TV”). This idea of young adults addressing social issues would prove instrumental in creating the formula for MTV’s most successful rTV shows.

In collaboration with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, MTV created *16 and Pregnant* in 2009 (Dunfee). The show tried to be earnest about social issues and document the trials endured by a pregnant teenager. Their goal was to reduce the rate of unexpected pregnancies of teenage females. “The ‘problem’ of teen pregnancy when highlighted on reality TV shows like *16 and Pregnant* then, may offer voyeuristic pleasure in viewing the

‘untainted train wreck personalities’ rather than useful advice about how to avoid pregnancy in one’s teen years” (Dunfee).

The consequence is that the priority shifts from telling the audience the importance of preventing teenage pregnancy to glamorizing it (Dunfee). As a result of *16 and Pregnant*, social issues when addressed on rTV have the possibility of having their messaging be manipulated between a show’s development and distribution.

However, teenage pregnancy is only one social issue among hundreds. And some shows, like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, have only proliferated issues, in their case specifically circling around social media and body image. As a result of this, these new social issues have inspired new situations and circumstances that are addressed by filmmakers and writers through the stories they create. *Eighth Grade* by Bo Burnham addresses the effects of social media on younger audiences. *Ingrid Goes West* by Matt Spicer examines mental health in the age of the internet. *Young Adult* written by Diablo Cody tackles portrayals of women in media. *Network* written by Paddy Chayefsky presents a satirical take on the direction of television as entertainment through its characters. Social issues motivate media in finding truth.

This thesis focuses on rTV’s ability to address social issues by comparing its intent to its results. The topics covered include: depictions of social media, mental health, the female identity, and the “characters” within these programs. Through this research, the successes and shortcomings of rTV in addressing social issues will be explored.

Chapter 2

Depictions of Social Media

In the script of *Eighth Grade* written and directed by Bo Burnham, middle school student Kayla Day is finishing her last week of middle school. In the story, the audience also witnesses her struggles with self-confidence and social anxiety, only further exacerbated by social media and her desire to thrive in that world. This is evident in Burnham's script in the following scene action about Kayla:

She stares at her computer screen, her face is in blank contrast to the things she's looking at: MUSIC VIDEOS, ARTICLES, PICTURES, EVERYTHING, EVERY PIECE OF CULTURE EVER RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF HER IN BRIGHT LIGHT. (Burnham)

As a result, Burnham draws parallels between social media and overconsumption, especially for teenagers who grew up with the internet and social platforms. However, this overconsumption presents a sense of anxiousness with the line, "EVERY PIECE OF CULTURE EVER". It conjures up imagery of something never-ending and infinite. In protagonist Day's mind this is what she must keep up with. Thus, she tries to take in as much as possible so to stay relevant – with her anxiousness being the fear of no longer being knowledgeable or cool.

When writing the screenplay, Burnham pulled from his own anxiousness before his standup performances. Burnham acknowledged this on NPR's podcast *Fresh Air*, "This awful D-

list celebrity pressure I had experienced onstage has now been democratized and given to everybody. And everyone is feeling this pressure of having an audience – of having to perform” (Gross). Because Burnham realized the parallels between his anxiety and the pressure from social media, he depicted Day as someone who simultaneously uses social media as a place to escape and as a force of oppression. She feels the need to compare herself to the popular girls and feels inadequate for not being able to reach that level by lacking an audience on social media. Yet Burnham also poses that this is a mutual relationship between social media and its user. Finally, Day learns to break the cycle of this social media self-oppression by interacting with and confronting people face-to-face. This shows the idea behind *Eighth Grade* that the desire for authenticity can overcome the fear brought on by social media. And only in the pursuit of authenticity can Day and other characters let go of their inhibitions and do things for themselves – because they want to – as opposed to doing it for the benefit of an audience.

Yet this idea of self-expression as a goal of using social media conflicts with the goals of social media as a means of marketing and branding. In this scope, social media becomes a way for an individual to sell his or her lifestyle, company, or service (Khamis). The theatrics of this lifestyle is then financed by advertisers. These advertisers sponsor individuals to promote their product by reaching an audience (Khamis). These products become further relatable by associating them with dimensions of personality, like: ruggedness, sincerity, or premium (Khamis). Within the quote, the dimension of *premium* meaning deluxe or elite. Additionally, these personality traits would be something that individuals aspire to have and hope to possess in their future (Khamis). This may become irresponsibility when the act of this attribution promotes specific ideals with an audience possibly lacking the means to attain that standard or needing to compromise aspects of their identity (Khamis). Through this evolution of social media, the

definition of celebrity has changed in the age of social media by way of the micro-celebrity (Khamis).

A micro-celebrity is an ordinary person who uses social media to gain a small audience with that following tending to be short-lived (Khamis). This smaller audience can allow the micro-celebrity to engage with them in a more familiar manner than what would be possible with full celebrity status (Khamis). Thus, cultivating a more active following base – through their likes, comments, etc. – while expanding to new audience members (Khamis). The notion of it being ordinary people should be noted because it was the same conceit for what made rTV prominent in its early years of development (Stewart). By promoting this attitude of ordinary people with online personas, the audience becomes trained to think these online personas are the norm and feel inadequate when measuring their lives to something on television or a phone screen.

Another result of social media beyond self-marketing is the idea that one-way communication has evolved to two-way communication (Teurlings). Through this access, individuals now have a means to criticize and seek out groups with similar opinions (Teurlings). No longer do audiences just watch television, but can interact with it by tweeting, blogging, or connect in other ways; this is especially true for rTV (Teurlings). Thus, the evolution of this two-way communications can also be seen as commentary. This commentary can be pushed further if it gains a strong enough following and outcry. Finally, the presence of commentary could persuade individuals without a strong opinion to follow the loudest crowd and propagate the majority belief.

This use of engagement of social media is similar to trends set by President Trump's use of Twitter (Edwards). He uses this platform to take jabs at his opponents and twists commentary

on current political events, especially if they are unfavorable to him (Edwards). Yet this brash and bold approach to confrontation can find its roots in NBC's rTV program *The Apprentice*. Like how participants would be manipulated in other rTV shows, Trump would manipulate the participants, feed misinformation, and play them against one another (Edwards). Furthermore, many of these tactics can be seen on Twitter, even not necessarily by Trump himself (Edwards). Even though President Trump found his foundation to this behavior on rTV, the proliferation of this behavior has become normalized, given Trump's popularity in the United States 2016 Election and later rise to presidency.

Moving into modern-day reality celebrities, this has only flourished with the widespread use of social media (Miller). Furthermore, social media has become a new means to flaunt one's wealth (Miller). Additionally, this is further validated because of Americans' desire for material goods (Miller). Finally, by having these social media influencers become role models, they indoctrinate children to aspire to not only be like them, but own their products as well (Miller).

Because of celebrities' ability to connect with an audience all the time, this can cause the audience to always have a desire to be keeping up with their lives. While this can make celebrities more approachable and has created a tier between celebrity and someone non-famous, this could have an adverse effect with the idea that stardom could be more feasible in the form of micro-celebrity. This means that the idea of attaining fame becomes more important than the reason one is famous. So, if social media makes it easier for individuals to attain their own fame as well as manipulate public opinion, then the focus is no longer on their contribution to society, but the appeal to an audience.

Chapter 3

Depictions of Mental Health

In 2011, the television channel Bravo ignited a firestorm of controversy after announcing it would continue *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* with a second season (Galloway). The instance inciting this was the suicide of show participant Russell Armstrong, the vilified husband of housewife Taylor Armstrong, before the season two premiere (Galloway). His decline was well documented, stemming from financial problems, arguing with his wife, and even telling *People* magazine a month before the suicide that, “This show has literally pushed us to the limit” (Galloway). In response, the executives at Bravo released a statement and mentioned that the premiere would be re-edited and possibly delayed (Galloway). Still, detractors criticized continuing the show at all as a result of the situation (Galloway).

Ultimately, the suicide illuminates the psychological stress that is felt by these participants on rTV. Shows, like *Real Housewives*, *16 and Pregnant*, and *Jersey Shore*, found their success because it documents the weakness in people (Galloway). This weakness is what drives the drama of rTV; however, it can also create controversy if the participants aren’t fit to withstand the pressure and lash out inappropriately. Without having standardized protocols across television to help participants handle stress and other mental health issues, networks can green light or move forward with these programs and prioritize the program over participants. This also trivializes mental health as it fails to treat these issues with the proper weight and concern as should be addressed. By this trivialization, a depiction of mental illness could offend audiences if they feel it being misrepresented on the show. Additionally, with the stresses of rTV

participants to always drive drama causes them to sink further into poor mental health without a way to exist when deprived of the drama (Galloway). An element in a successful rTV's formula is creating a *villain* or someone who tries to antagonize the other participants to get a reaction from them (Stewart). Thus because of Russell Armstrong's depiction of being the show's *villain*, his actions and motives that could have stemmed from untreated mental issues painted him as someone irredeemable. Even if the intent of the show is to glamorize the house life of socialites, it carries the consequence of depicting someone suffering with mental issues as a villain who is demonized instead of reconciled with and helped. This suicide illuminates the inability of *The Housewives of Beverly Hills* to accurately depict other social issues, beyond its original intent. However, a lack of sensitivity may not always be the problem to address these issues.

Many of these problems stem from money. Reality stars can earn up to hundreds of thousands per episode, especially if the show performs phenomenally well (Galloway). However, when it's starting out, the participants rarely make much from the shows. In the first season of *Housewives*, Taylor Armstrong earned \$5,000 an episode (Galloway). However, for season two, this increased to \$135,000 – 27 times more the rate of season one (Galloway). However, this cost was only because of the show's resulting success. Most rTV budgets for casting can be as small as \$10,000 (Galloway). This lets very little room in the budget to hire additional staff, especially ones qualified to address participants' psychological needs from being in such a changed environment. Yet, this is only half-true. The rTV industry has transformed in a way to maximize profits for the network (Galloway). This is why casting budgets are so little and why shows lack adequate mental health support for the participants – it's viewed as non-essential. Furthermore, rTV prides itself in the ability to support this business model. Whereas scripted shows try to hire

qualified cast and crew, rTV can hire inexperienced people and still have the same dramatic tension as a scripted program.

Yet in spite of the costs, some rTV programs have found a way to provide mental health support to its participants without compromising the tension rTV is known for. A&E's *Intervention* focuses on addiction and an individual's story of overcoming that addiction. Former President of A&E Nancy Dubuc assured its audience that the show's executives would provide the necessary treatment to its participants (Galloway). This is reinforced by the network's parent company hosting local community meetings to start a dialogue surrounding addiction and partnering with the nonprofit Drug Free America (Galloway). Taking these additional steps of activism show that a program can advocate for social change by having a stake in the issue. This also demonstrates that mental and emotional support can be provided to participants while still being financially successful. However, many shows still have yet to or have no desire to implement this kind of infrastructure into their programming – only having a desire to prey on this mental illness as a means for drama.

With rTV's desire to foster drama within the series, portrayals of happiness and contentment are exchanged for feelings of anxiousness and tension. This is evident in MTV's *16 and Pregnant* in the introduction of its teenage mothers through the individual's own narration. This narration depicts the teenager as carefree, optimistic, and eager for the future (Dunfee). However, this sense of contentment becomes upended when the teenager reveals they're pregnant (Dunfee). The drama is further driven in each episode by framing the pregnancy as a choice – requiring the teen mom to take personal responsibility for “letting” the pregnancy happen and to deal with the resulting consequences (Dunfee). In most cases, this means getting a job, finding suitable care for the newborn, and maintaining relationships with family members,

friends, and the significant other – all without a high school degree (Dunfee). While independence is encouraged as teenagers transition into adulthood, the additional responsibility of raising a child can be taxing to the participants.

These anxieties manifest themselves in dramatic moments for the benefit of the audience. However, the show presents no indication that these anxieties only manifested themselves as a result of the pregnancy. Furthermore, these teens on the show primarily come from lower-income households; meaning obstacles can't be solved with money (Dunfee). Yet in spite of this subjugation of teen moms as something scary and stressful, these participants are still glamorized and admired because they have a captive audience (Dunfee). In 2010, MTV was named the “#1 cable network for 12-34 year olds” – the channel's target demographic (Dunfee). In 2018, for the 18-49 demographic, MTV still has a strong following, ranking fourth as the most watched basic cable network (Moraes). With such a large viewership, this portrayal of teen moms could alter itself to become something aspirational for its female viewers.

However, the show and its spin-offs do not dismiss mental health concerns, rather they integrate them into plotlines. In 2018, MTV's *Teen Mom OG*, a spin-off featuring teenage mothers originally on *16 and Pregnant*, brought one of the participant's, Amber Portwood, illness to light (“Amber Portwood”). She opened up about her struggles with postpartum depression and contemplating suicide with another *Teen Mom OG* participant, who overcame similar mental health issues (“Amber Portwood”). Portwood also has suffered from bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder (“Amber Portwood”). While the show's desire to address these issues is respectable, *Teen Mom OG* made this storyline the season finale, when the most tension of a series occurs to keep audiences engaged until the next season and lingered on the question – whether Portwood will leave the show (“Amber Portwood”). Even if these

intentions are sincere in addressing mental health, the show lacked compassion towards its subject and rather it capitalized on the opportunity to tantalize the audience before the season wrapped. This also fails to give Portwood the proper agency to address the illness on her terms, as it only gives her the option of staying on the show or leaving it – instead of treating her mental illness or failing to treat it. The question *Teen Mom OG* posed about Portwood shows the attitude rTV has to its participants. Ultimately, everything comes back to the show and how the participants are related to it. It shows that the drama cannot exist without the show, and the show cannot exist without the drama. While these become intertwined, the shows still define the depictions on their terms. So while participants of mental illness may not be portrayed accurately or with care and concern, the rTV show disregards a holistic depiction, in favor for one that works with their narrative.

This idea connects back with *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and the concerns of how the network handled the suicide, which indicates that rTV doesn't exist for the benefit of the participants. This mentality starkly contrasts to documentary filmmaking, where professional documentarians understand what lines should and should not be crossed for the safety of their subject. RTV programming makes the decision to not only cross those lines but also to blur them. With any mental processes, the ability to transform these cognitions into action and subtext is a skill some filmmakers take most of their career to master. RTV cannot afford to have that level of patience given the constant production cycles. This means having the rTV filmmakers provoke the participant during filming with something personal, in spite of lacking the ability to handle the participant's mental anguish after the cameras cut. These unresolved feelings fester and result in unintended consequences – either heightening the drama of a show or creating controversy. Regardless, if a major news organization picks up and publishes a story about the

show, the show still benefits from this negative coverage – as it affirms the show’s relevancy in the media landscape. Creating a cycle and pushing to the participants through new, bleaker, unaddressed mental states.

In the film *Ingrid Goes West* by Matt Spicer, characters can feel larger than life. Taylor Sloane, played by Elizabeth Olsen, is a social media influencer and fixated with attaining a seemingly perfect life. She becomes the obsession of protagonist Ingrid Thorburn, played by Aubrey Plaza, who struggles with attachment issues and mental instability. This film dives deep into mental health and complicates how mental illness is perceived and stigmatized – all through the scope of social media.

In the film, Ingrid’s mental illness is portrayed as something that alienates her from connecting with other people. In Ingrid’s hometown, most people belittle and insult her – only fueling her sense of insecurity:

Ingrid hides behind a cardboard display filled with candy.

We HOLD on Ingrid’s face as she waits for them to pass, removing her earbuds so she can hear them whispering –

JENNY (O.S.)

-- what is up with her hair?

NICOLE (O.S.)

Seriously. Who’s your stylist? Helen Keller?

They laugh. Ingrid touches her hair self-consciously.

Spicer crafts mental health in such a way that becomes relatable to the audience – connecting to an audience’s own insecurities. They may not understand the mental turmoil in Ingrid’s head but can still relate to the experience of feeling insecure, making the audience able to empathize with Ingrid rather than pity her. This pitifulness can be seen in *Teen Mom OG*’s portrayal of Portwood through her battle with post-partum depression. The show fails to explain what Portwood’s journey is like, only that she is the one dealing with it. Without the show working towards this common ground, the audience can only view from a distance and witness the drama from this mental health crisis – as opposed to taking the journey with her.

RTV feeds the audience with everything they need to know, so then when someone explodes on-screen, there was a build-up that was set up for the audience. While the idea of building up to something is also an important structural element within storytelling, scripted movies and television may not reveal everything or only leave hints for what will happen. With this, someone’s mental health cannot solely be explained in talking but needs to be set up with nuance and the subtleties of an individual. While rTV’s format may not be the best way to show these subtleties, it can still document the struggles of a friend’s or a family member’s who must cope with someone close suffering from this affliction, instead of demonizing them as a villain. Ultimately, television and media is a powerful way to spread a positive message or represent a marginalized community; however, just as easily as portraying something positive, the same content could create controversy or trivialize specific social issues – even if that was not the intent. Still, with the prioritization of pay out over participants, the intent can never be to benefit the individuals.

Chapter 4

Depictions of the Female Identity

In season 14 of E!'s *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, the sisters decided to get educated on Planned Parenthood and the services it provides in the episode "Catch Me If You Cannes". The sisters listened to multiple stories of women who received life-saving services from Planned Parenthood. After listening to these experiences, the sisters realized the breadth of health services that Planned Parenthood can provide to women, as well as men – outside of abortion. Ultimately, they expressed their support for Planned Parenthood. And, that was it.

With a show averaging a viewership of over a million people, these stories were able to reach an audience where Planned Parenthood and its services could only be administered hundreds of miles away (Lerner). While the Kardashian sisters' support of Planned Parenthood was significant as were the stories the women shared, that's ultimately all the sisters did in the episode. The sisters did not take a stance on abortion, encourage individuals to seek out help from the clinic, or did not even start a dialogue about why Planned Parenthood really matters. By sidestepping the more controversial practices of the clinic, the show failed to add any meaningful insight into the issue of abortion rights or counteract the opposing viewpoint from detractors of Planned Parenthood.

The problem in all of this was that the show did not see the issue through. It addressed what Planned Parenthood can do, how the nonprofit helps these individuals, but failed to address why it's necessary. The question *what makes Planned Parenthood different*, especially when regular doctors and surgeons could provide these services or refer patients to someone else, wasn't answered. While these questions can be answered on their website, the show missed the

opportunity to let the Kardashians share their personal answers – this served as a way to avoid supporting one side of the issue too strongly and alienating the audience of the opposing stance.

Furthermore, as this show's viewership hits over a million viewers, the stances the Kardashians take can have an impact on its audience. By taking this indirect stance, it informed the audience that they only need to express their support and that would suffice as an opinion. Structurally within the episode, the Planned Parenthood storyline acted as a C-story, or the one with the least amount of screen time and plot development, and primarily served to boost one of the sister's, Kourtney, self-esteem after her ex-husband threatened her. While this empowerment was a positive outcome, this result failed to truly describe what Planned Parenthood can do and why its significance should matter to the audience.

However, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is not the only rTV programming to fall short of clearly expressing its motivations. Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* also fails to make a point or critique of their participants' unique perspectives. Featuring housewives who are mostly middle-aged African-American women, the show failed to portray these housewives beyond the traditional lens of subservience and objectification (Stewart). The stereotypes have their roots in patriarchal white supremacist ideals by conveying these minority women as sexually appealing and dependent on their husbands (Stewart). As a result of this mindset, the stereotypical ideals that these women strive for and suffer from are: wealth, elitism, materialism, and vanity (Stewart). Thus, devaluing other possibly progressive themes like: equality, independence, or family. This show also entertains a post-feminist mentality, in which it is believed that the goals of feminism have been achieved, and therefore no longer need to be pursued (Stewart). However, the interpretation of feminism ultimately contradicts with the show's overarching themes of consumerism and greed, as the women in a post-feminism world

could transcend things, like elitism and vanity. As a result, this show exemplifies the oppression that patriarchal white supremacist notions can cause, as opposed to the liberation of those traditional norms. Furthermore, by showing these women as successful, it can create harmful notions that the audience should aspire to share in these ideals for womanhood as a means to define who they are as individuals.

These melodramatic, narcissistic characters are similar to the female protagonist Diablo Cody portrays in the beginning of *Young Adult* (2011). Charlize Theron plays protagonist Mavis Gray, a divorcee in her late 30s struggling with a drinking problem. Mavis is also a ghostwriter for a young adult book series – which dovetails into Mavis’s immaturity. The plot of the story revolves around Mavis trying to get back with her high school ex-boyfriend Buddy after he and his wife invite her back to her hometown to see their newborn baby.

In the first few pages, the audience finds out Mavis suffers from the same kind of entitlement, selfishness, and self-absorption that these reality stars also show symptoms of:

MATT FREEHAUF, 36, is watching from an adjacent barstool. He’s sad-faced and overweight. There’s a STEEL CRUTCH, the permanent kind, leaning against the stool. Mavis glances at him. She looks away and takes a pink compact mirror out of her purse. She opens the mirror and checks herself out.

She glances over at Matt again. He’s still staring. (Cody)

In these few words, Cody established Mavis’s lack of interest in anyone who isn’t her ex-boyfriend Buddy. She’d much rather direct her vision to herself than any other person. Yet Mavis is still forced to confront the trauma at the climax of the film when she reveals that she

and Buddy were expecting a child until she miscarried. This leads Mavis to realize she is above her hometown and the stupidity of pursuing her former boyfriend, resulting in her leaving.

This narrative arch opened Mavis to understand who she is. Throughout the film, she defined herself as who she was in high school – the popular girl. She also attributed this label to those around her: Buddy – the popular jock and Matt – the nerd. In the beginning, Mavis hasn't outgrown those labels like how mostly everyone else had. However, by the end of the film, she became able to shed this identity and begin the process of growing up.

With regard to the female identity, *Young Adult* made its protagonist grow and have an emotional journey as a result. In spite of the trauma and identity that labeled her, she still found a way to move on with growing up and gain a new perspective on her life. However, this is not the same with reality stars. They'll find new problems to deal with, repeat bad decisions, or fail to truly gain a sense of their identity beyond their celebrity status. By lacking a strong sense of self, they cannot grow up because they have nothing to grow from.

Finally, this all relates to the topic of female identity because viewers, who are still trying to figure out who they are, become normalized to this kind of behavior and feel the desire to act this way as a result. With rTV stars lacking an identity beyond their persona on the screen, these individuals could struggle to figure out who they are after a show ends. Ultimately, this all relates back to the themes rTV programming flaunts; when people are unable to attain whatever they desire in their lives, they can go to extremes to rebuild it as a result.

This idea of extreme lengths can be seen in makeover rTV programming, featuring women undergoing this transformation, targeted specifically for women. One example of these is Fox's *The Swan* from 2004. From the title, the imagery of a swan evokes its transformation from

the ugly duckling in that children's fairy tale. Already, this association gives the show a sense of fantasy or an unreal quality.

In season two, one of the contestants of this makeover-beauty pageant show named Sylvia Cruz is filmed in her bikini, explaining the insecurities of her body (Weber). Her physical appearance has hurt her confidence, according to her boyfriend (Weber). With the audience, this is being reviewed by the "Swan experts" – or the team in charge of Sylvia's and the other duckling's transformative makeovers (Weber). In this segment, they criticize Cruz for her "bland bone structure" – which will be addressed with implants, liposuction, and lifts to give her a "more feminine look" (Weber). When debuting her transformation, she is revealed insincerely. Cruz dons formal wear, heels, professionally applied makeup, fake eye lashes, and hair extensions (Weber). From the show's creator, Cruz is described as, "resurrected" and "powerful" (Weber). Because of her physical transformation, Cruz can now be reminded by those around her that she should be confident. This show also poses that this confidence can only be attained by being skin deep, as other transformations – like ones based in academia or professionalism – cannot be as fulfilling.

Cruz's situation is further complicated because she is someone who is a part of the Latinx community (Weber). Furthermore, the show portrays her body issues stemming from her diet of eating traditional Latinx dishes – which are conveyed as unhealthy – as well as other aspects of her culture (Weber). This creates a relationship between the food of that community with unhealthiness and dangerously stereotypes the Latinx community consuming a diet rooted in their heritage as overweight and unhealthy. However, these two consequences solely stem from an underlining philosophy the show is promoting – behavior of conventional Americans should be celebrated and trump one's cultural traditions. Finally, anything that does not fall into

conventional American norms should be ridiculed and extinguished – on the basis that it's different. This was what Cruz experienced from the show. And because she wanted to hold on to these traditions in her life, Cruz was considered undesirable and eligible for this twisted transformation. Consequently, she had to surrender these traditions, in order to be *resurrected*. However, the goals of the resurrection seem to align more with her forsaking her heritage to be replaced with the normative American ideal.

The deeper purpose of this show makes sense given its audience. The reality of makeover shows is that they appeal to aging baby boomers who aspire to return to their youth, and they can experience that vicariously through this kind of programming. With the show pushing for conventional American ideals to a conservative baby boomer population, these converge to ultimately suppress the beauty of women – and the community as a whole – of Black, Latinx, Middle Eastern, and all minority groups.

From truly making an impact on a controversial social issue, like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, to preying on the insecurities of women, like *The Swan*, rTV programming – with its target audience of women – should celebrate the different and unique identities and intersections of womanhood. By perpetuating the myth of a one-size-fits-all definition of a woman, rTV cannot address modern issues plaguing women as it is unable to truly celebrate the diversity of that gender to begin with. However, through subverting stereotypes, focusing on different female identities, and supporting women, rTV can begin reflecting the multitude of identities already present its audience and can make progress to take a stance on larger social change – no matter surrounding the controversy.

Chapter 5

The “Characters” of Reality Television

The stereotypes of characters in storytelling help ground the audience and acclimate them to the story. In *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, the five women’s value system entails greed, vanity, and power among their peers, with the show further leaning into prevalent stereotypes of black women in media (Stewart). Through their interactions, African-American housewives NeNe Leakes, Sheree Whitefield, DeShawn Snow, and Lisa Hartwell are crafted to lean on tropes of being “sassy” and “angry” to provide the audience with the most dramatic tension (Stewart). Because of the show’s decision to lean on these lazy stereotypes, the problems and issues endured by them become accessible and understandable to the audience; furthermore, this means that the characters of the show are in constant pursuit of greed and power, making them fail to transcend this desire or aspire to a new want.

While having desires of wealth and influence are not inherently bad or misguided, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* was one of the first shows to feature a predominately non-white female cast (Stewart). This is further aggravated as offerings for shows featuring women of color were rare to find at the time (Stewart). As a result, the characters in this kind of programming are individuals that African-American women should aspire to be in order to find success within the industry, especially when these traits are exemplified by more than one character. This portrayal is further distorted as it could be seen as television’s answer to more diversity in its programming line-up. While it does feature women of color with exciting stories, it is unable to accommodate or be inclusive to African-American women who may not fill the checklist like how the other housewives do.

However, this argument can only extend to the African-American housewives, as Kim Zolciak is the only white housewife of the series (Stewart). Zolciak's opinion only further steps into ambiguously racist rhetoric, treading into post-racial territory. The term "Post-racial" refers to the opinion that the United States has overcome its bias and preconceptions of other races, so the notion of racism is antiquated (Stewart). Thus, Zolciak's comment, "I'm a Black woman, trapped in a white woman's body," does not acknowledge the privilege she has to defy the stereotypes that the other Atlanta housewives perpetuate (Stewart). From this comment, she also integrates herself among the other housewives; letting her have a kind of approachability to black viewers and viewers of other races while still being identified as white. Finally, these qualities all connect to create the character of Zolciak. In this instance, she still experiences the stereotypical trappings of her fellow housewives and actively participates in them, but she is differentiated by her whiteness. By incorporating Zolciak into the show's dynamic, the relationship of race can be addressed within the scope of the show; however, the show cannot explore Zolciak's whiteness in Atlanta without contradicting itself as Zolciak is *a Black woman, trapped in a white woman's body*. This is Zolciak's identity throughout the show, and she is unable to redefine her place as it could risk backlash or a lower viewership from the audience.

Yet this idea of characters as stereotypes is not exclusive to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* but can also be seen in *16 and Pregnant*. The characters of these shows do contrast as *16 and Pregnant* shows the transformation from teenager to teen mom (Dunfee). Because of this, the character-participant must grow and understand their role as a mother and caregiver, still for the benefit of the audience with presenting highly dramatic content. As a result, the character-participant can have a character arc, or a strand of narrative dealing with the change and development in the personality of an individual character ("Character Arch"). While the idea of a

character-participant having a happy ending may seem like a pro-social approach for rTV, this has the consequence of presenting the fantasy of teenage pregnancy with the promise of television stardom and inevitable satisfaction with young motherhood (Dunfee). Furthermore, the character-participants cannot be anything but teen moms in *16 and Pregnant*. So while a character-participant within a self-contained episode can change and have a character arc, the cycle resets in the next episode with a new teenager facing motherhood. While the different problems each character-participant endures within an episode result in a different solution and an accompanying lesson, the cycle of teenage pregnancy still persists within the execution of the show. Thus, the message of the show becomes each character-participant being able to overcome their individual teenage pregnancy story, but society still impotent in bringing long-term and meaningful change.

With *16 and Pregnant*'s spin-off *Teen Mom* and its related series, some of these character-participants are welcomed back to be one of the main focuses on the show (Dunfee). Consequently, this promotes character-participants to behave in a way that attracts an audience, and thus help producers profit off of a character that a participant acts out, regardless if it reflects the person as they really are (Dunfee). Thus, characters undermine the show that was originally pitched to discourage teenage pregnancy into one that glorifies and pushes for teen moms who possess specific stereotypical traits, like: troubled relationships with family and father of the child, mental health issues, and financial struggles (Dunfee). Similar to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, documenting these issues is not the problem, but rather idolizing and displaying the damaging stereotypes that fail to confront or subvert the stigma already possessed by viewers before tuning into the first episode. By conforming to the status quo, rTV cannot challenge its

audience to question the standards that are followed within American society – rather it reinforces them.

This direction of television, as a means of profit over social progression, has been long predicted in Paddy Chayefsky's script *Network* (1976). *Network* reflects the distrust of television as a means of educating and informing. The story follows nightly news anchor Howard Beale, played by Peter Finch, as he transforms into a sensationalized prophet, evangelizing the desperation of the American television-watching audience to them. As a result, Beale attracts an audience by ranting about counter-culture and anti-establishment ideology, which the movie's network executives continue to support as it increases viewership. So ultimately, *Network* poses that those outlets promoting rebellious and insubordinate ideologies are also the ones that are owned by corporations still reinforcing it: effectively making counter-culture into its own industry.

The network executives continue commodifying Beale's outrage, in tandem with the audience's outrage, until Beale changes his message. With a potential merger of the network's parent company with another conglomerate, Beale galvanizes his audience to take action against this acquisition. The network executives then have one of the company's chairmen tell Beale that his prophetic ideals of counter-culture are futile. This leads Beale to altering his fanatical prophet character to one that reinforces the depressing reality of the status quo, which people watch television to escape from. With a consequent drop in viewership but the chairmen's demand to keep the show on, the network executives decide to go to the extreme and kill Beale during his program – ending his show and the film itself.

The idea of Beale's show straying from a formula promoting outrage to one that promotes resignation and results in a drop in viewership is a similar problem that rTV

experiences in its programming. The show *Lindsay Lohan's Beach Club* on MTV features actress Lohan running her extravagant seaside resort in Mykonos, Greece (Berman). However, the appeal of the show extends beyond this. The scenic vistas of the Mediterranean and over-indulgent hedonism reflect a desire in the audience of indulging in that kind of lifestyle, even if only temporarily. This ability to communicate desire is also the appeal of Beale's ability to articulate the audience's outrage. Additionally, after Lohan's history with drug abuse and legal issues, *Beach Club* gave its audience the opportunity to see into Lohan's life post-rehab (Berman). While this show does feature other characters and storylines, none are as engaging with the audience as Lohan's are (Berman). Consequently, the show has seen a dip in viewership as audience members get the answer of *how Lohan is doing* and tune out since nothing is keeping them there (Johnson). Therefore, the show's formula created from the reputation and character of Lindsay Lohan nosedives when other characters and their problems are introduced, especially when not related to Lohan. Finally, like how Lohan's audience tunes out after the show shifts its focus from the allure of her lifestyle to other characters and their drama, Beale's audience tunes out after his message turns to one of defeat. *Beach Club* makes it clear that Lohan is no longer the reckless teenage celebrity from her past; unfortunately that was also something that made people intrigued by her.

However, the decisions to renew, cancel, or change a show falls onto the network executives. In *Network*, the character Diana Christensen, played by Faye Dunaway, distorts desirable traits of a woman entering into a male-dominated industry and turns them into something objectionable. Like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, Christensen desires power. However, she is also financially independent and is employed as a network executive, which deviates from the characters of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. She is also able to hold up

against her male co-workers and bosses and throughout the film, as she continues to gain power. And while Beale may be evangelizing this counter-culture ideology, Christensen makes the network profit from it and develops show ideas with similar ideologies. One of the shows she airs is a documentary-style program featuring a communist terrorist regime committing acts of radical violence and crime. This could be seen as a satirical yet prophetic take on the landscape of rTV today. With rTV programming's tendency to disregard its show's impact on an audience beyond asking if they'll tune in, the violence and crimes of the show Christensen produces do not indicate any deeper meaning to Christensen than being seen as subversive to more traditional television programming of her time. She does not care what message the terrorist regime is promoting:

Everybody looks to Laureen Hobbs (a member of the communist terrorist regime).

LAUREEN

The Ecumenical Liberation Army is an ultra-left sect creating political confusion with wildcat violence and pseudo-insurrectionary acts, which the Communist Party does not endorse. The American masses are not yet ready for open revolt. We would not want to produce a television show celebrating historically deviational terrorism.

DIANA

Even better. I see the story this way. Poor little rich girl kidnapped by ultra-left sect. She falls in love with the leader of violence. But then she meets you, understands the true nature of the ongoing people's struggle for a better society, and in an emotion-drenched scene, she leaves her devotional lover and dedicates herself to you and the historical inevitability of the socialist state.

This ultimately reflects Christensen's shrewdness and shallowness. Her character sees television as a means of entertainment, disregarding the consequences and moral quandaries from the programming she decides on. The emptiness of Christensen is why *Network* is still relevant, as it shows the vapid nature that television and entertainment can encroach on. Finally, shows like *16 and Pregnant* may try to advocate for awareness and the destigmatization of teenage pregnancy; however, if the show cannot change or evolve their formula – even if financially successful – then it ends up diluting and manipulating its own message by overexposing and disseminating a narrative of everything working out better than the truth. If a show is focused on its characters finding and creating constant conflict, then it cannot challenge the conventions of social issues. By not deviating from the show's formula, characters of rTV programming must return to the same place they were in the beginning – needing something they do not have – without any way to resume their growth from before.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This thesis explored rTV's ability to look at topics of social media, depictions of mental health, depictions of the female identity, and stereotypes in characters. In using the films – *Eighth Grade*, *Ingrid Goes West*, *Young Adult*, and *Network* – the presentation of these issues served as a baseline of how they could be accurately depicted in media to relatively successful critical portrayal. These films were compared to rTV shows like: *16 and Pregnant*, *The Real Housewives* franchise, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *Intervention*, *The Swan*, *Lindsay Lohan's Beach Club*, and others. This comparison shows that while rTV shows do acknowledge all of these issues to some degree, it fails to holistically examine these issues as a way to inform an audience, rather only letting them service a plotline or conflict in a larger narrative.

Still, rTV does show promise to challenge its viewers to rethink the way they would perceive social issues. This is evident in *Teen Mom* when it did bring up issues of post-partum depression. Additionally, rTV can help its participants work through the tough situations with programs like *Intervention*, which led the way of assessing mental health issues and helping their participants through it.

However, these social issues addressed also have perspectives and further discussions that films can also fail to include. Ultimately with any form of media, priority should be put on handling the subject issue and more controversial aspects with consideration and responsibility. While in most cases, films were found to be better suited to address social issues, this does not mean rTV cannot also join in the conversation and bring to light an aspect of the subject matter

that had been otherwise overlooked. However, rTV does have problems it must overcome – making a profit over helping people, adjusting its narrative, and depicting stereotypical characters – in order for it to be an accurate and authentic representation of specific social issues. In the future, audiences could begin seeing this concern to be more socially conscious permeate throughout rTV, just as it has other forms of media.

Appendix A

Link to the Screenplay

<https://psu.box.com/s/i6szridiynz490nh3qta5kpnlwnu8wwd>

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ACADEMIC VITA

Alex Hyneman
ajhyneman@gmail.com

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Bachelor of Arts in Film/Video
English Minor
Schreyer Honors College Scholar

THESIS

Title: Writing Reality
Supervisor: Anita Gabrosek

PRODUCTION EXPERIENCE

Milkroom Studios: AR/VR Production Company – Production Intern
May 2018 – August 2018
Reading, PA

American Pavilion at the Cannes Film Festival – Videography Intern
May 2017
Cannes, France

Penn State THON – Video Team Volunteer
October 2016 – February 2019
University Park, PA

WFMZ 69 News – Production/Editorial Intern
May 2016 – June 2016
Reading, PA

Penn State Athletics – Promotions/Video Intern
January 2016 – May 2016
University Park, PA

LEADERSHIP

Penn State Homecoming – Production Director
October 2017 – October 2018
University Park, PA