MTV, Reality Television and the Commodification of Female Sexuality in The Real World

By Danielle M. Stern

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To the chagrin of television critics, reality programming has yet to leave the small screen. Since the premiere of the first Real World on MTV in 1992, broadcast and cable have taken the idea that truth is stranger, more entertaining, and often more profitable than fiction and used it to the fullest potential. Now more than two decades old, MTV is more popular than ever with adolescents and young adults. It is viewed in 342 million homes worldwide, up from 1 million in 1981, and is the number one cable network for the 12- to 24-year-old demographic (Ali & Gordon, 2001). What began as 24-hour music video programming has turned into a profitable media outlet that includes in-house television production as well as a film company. MTV has used its initial success as a purveyor of music and youth culture to branch into various program forms, including game shows and documentaries.

To this extent, MTV can be credited with creating the reality television genre with The Real World in 1992. The program’s popularity has prompted more than one season per calendar year in some years, making the most recent edition, set in Philadelphia, The Real World’s 15th season. The show is an unscripted, half-hour look into the lives of seven young people between the ages of 18 and 24, usually beautiful and always overly dramatic, set in a different location each year. The producers initially intended to create an original, scripted soap opera for MTV, but cost prohibitive sets and talent fees caused the shift to the reality concept (O’Connor, 1992). Cameras follow the non-actors 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including into the bedroom. In fact, season 12, set in Las Vegas, included more sex and sexual innuendo than any previous season and garnered The Real World its highest ratings among MTV’s coveted 12-24 demographic since season one (Feiwel, 2003). With more than 65 percent of the United States’ 31.6 million 12- to 19-year-olds owning television sets in their bedrooms, advertisers are willing to pay anywhere from $10,000 to $20,000 for a 30-second slot to target MTV’s young viewers (Ali & Gordon, 2001). MTV is a multibillion-dollar industry, and like other media industries, caters to the interests of advertisers via the ratings system (Pettigrew, 1995; Meehan, 1984).

On MTV images of sex and youth culture abound, but, how do the female audiences of The Real World interpret the series and its sexual displays? Through a discussion group with female viewers of the series I hope to uncover their feelings and thoughts about the show. I have framed my research around the following question:

RQ: What does The Real World reflect about what it means to be a young woman in American society today?

I have limited my reception study to female viewers at this stage because previous scholarship on MTV and my own previous viewing of it reveals the network’s reliance on the male gaze (Lewis, 1990). As such, I am interested in young women’s interpretation of sexual displays on The Real World. Is the male gaze still relevant, or do women feel a sense of control about the images on the program? The Real World now draws more than 2.2 million viewers on average, more than triple that of the first season (Peyser, 2001). The series is consistently in the top ten cable programs according to Nielsen Media Research. With so many young people tuning in, The Real World deserves to be scrutinized with a careful eye.

While plenty of research exists on the content of MTV music videos (Baxter; 1985; Kaplan; 1987; Lewis, 1990; Seidman, 1999; Vincent, Davis & Boruszkowski, 1987), these studies were mostly content analyses that neglected to uncover the broader meaning of sexual displays. Despite the popularity of sexual reality shows like The Real World, Temptation Island and Joe Millionaire, research is also lacking on representation in reality programs and their reception. Research efforts are also few and far between on audience interpretation of reality shows like Real World (See Roscoe, 2001 for an examination of the interactive features of programs like Big Brother). Given that previous research has avoided contextualizing the televised images in reality series of women and sex from women’s viewpoints, this research attempts to give a voice to the “real” women who are represented in this sexually-charged genre. The Real World is the longest-running reality program ever and has been one of MTV’s highest rated non-music programs. The Real World’s popularity, coupled with the program’s reliance on sex, calls for an understanding of the implications of this sexual visual imagery. Further, the overt sexuality of The Real World represents a larger problem of television producers using sex and the exploitation of the female body to attract a young audience. It is the task of this study, then, to begin bridging the gap by examining previous discussions.
on MTV’s use of commodity sex against discussions with female viewers of The Real World.

Televisual Reality and MTV

Kilborn (1994) argues that reality television executives, like television executives of other genres, are faced with economic pressures to produce programs suited to pleasing advertisers. In turn, this leads to exploitative reality programming that serves commercial interests above all. Moreover, Kalof (1993) argues that females are bearing the brunt of sexual exploitation via television representations that reinforce traditional views of gender and power. She finds problems in “cultural preoccupation with female sexuality as a commodity to be bought, sold and used in the negotiation of power and status in a patriarchal culture” (p. 648). Meehan (2002) reminds us that feminist critiques of patriarchy are inextricably linked to capitalism. As such, scholars cannot separate the two. Kaplan’s (1987) analysis of MTV points to the cable giant as a powerful purveyor of images and consumption practices that include the exploitation of sexuality. Kaplan finds contradictions in studies that focus specifically on the obvious sexual denotations of MTV. She argues that MTV is a postmodern, continuous commercial that sells youth and culture back to youth while also reinforcing “codes” of materialism and sexism, among other “isms.” As such, MTV’s manifestation as an uninterrupted flowing text impedes questions of reality versus production.

In her book Gender Politics and MTV, Lisa Lewis (1990) argues that from its inception MTV, driven by the economic need to attract a large audience and establish itself as a credible cable network, developed the “preferred address” of the white heterosexual male young adult viewer. While her study came at a time when MTV was still airing mostly music videos as opposed to original programming, Lewis’ contribution is crucial to an understanding of the commercial motivations and ideological underpinnings of MTV. Mulvey (1975) identified the male gaze in film as one of active participation of males projecting their fantasies on the passive female. Women, Mulvey argues, are presented strictly for men’s pleasure. Their objectification is articulated as beautiful and stylistic, leaving little room for women to resist. As such, women partake in their own degradation, learning to make the male gaze their own.

While The Real World is in the documentary realm, the male gaze may not be at play on the small screen of reality. Andrejevic (2002) argues that “audience members gain meaningful control over the content of television programming when the programming becomes ‘real’” (p. 261). As such, do female viewers recognize a particular bias in the framing of Real World “characters” or “stories?” In the case of The Real World, MTV has created a viewer looking to tune in to “real life experiences of young people negotiating a particular set of relationships” (Orbe, 1998, p. 32). How do these “real life” experiences measure against producer manipulation?

In 1992 Newsweek reported of the first season of The Real World that “sexual conversations among cast members, for example, begin with questions from a book called Love and Sex planted in the loft” (Leland, p. 85). In his research on the reality presented in The Real World, Bagley (2001) argues that while the use of documentary techniques establishes the text as unarguably real, the admissions of cast members and executives of a “manipulated production environment” (p.74) compromise reality in its truest sense of the word. A true assessment of the reality of the program, though, specifically, its representation of female sex, lies in audience interpretation.

Methodology

In the traditional sense of television drama production, Hall (1980) argues that at one determinate moment, production constructs the message. However, Hall also ushered in the active audience theory—the idea that television viewers, guided by their own experiences of race, class and gender, but also bound by certain production constraints—interpret televisual messages in a myriad of ways. While the encoding of a so-called reality text may differ from a traditional television drama production, the meaning of reality texts is that much more crucial. This study acknowledges the multiplicity of readings of sexuality and meanings of young adulthood and seeks to understand how women make meaning of The Real World.

While textual analysis or political economy examinations may uncover patterns of patriarchy or dominant ideologies, audience analysis provides opportunities to strip away these limitations (Hall, 1980; Meehan, 1986). To work toward a more complete understanding of the reality of television, this study relied on a female discussion group. Justin Lewis (1991) has examined various methods of
reception studies. He finds that discussion groups allow researchers to incorporate a reasonably diverse number of people into a sample to explore the meaning of a text in a more public setting. Media consumption is a social activity that involves people interacting with and relating to other people (Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998). As such, the discussion of television should also be interactive, allowing for subjects to share ideas and generate discussion. Rockler (1999) argues for feminist analyses that balance critiques of patriarchy with explication of women’s “lived experiences” (p. 8). Likewise, Denzin (1992) argues for examinations of “how interacting individuals connect their lived experiences to the cultural representations of those experiences” (p. 35).

Women who had viewed The Real World previously were recruited from a mid-size public university in the Midwest via e-mail and word-of-mouth to participate in a small discussion group about portrayals of sexuality in the series. In all, a total of seven women participated, aged 19 to 34. Information regarding the women’s ages, ethnicity and viewing history were collected via a brief questionnaire. Confidentiality was assured through the assignment of pseudonyms to each participant. Four of the women, one aged 19, Lisa; two aged 20, Julia and Casey; and one aged 21, Nicole, had viewed all fourteen seasons of the series, for this study was conducted during season fourteen. The other 19-year-old, Zoe, had viewed since season six, while the 24-year-old, Alice, had seen episodes from seasons eight, nine, eleven and twelve. Finally, the 34-year-old woman, Kelly, had watched all but seasons three, seven, and the fourteenth season. All of the women who responded to the focus group announcements were Caucasian and only one, Kelly, was out of college. She was also the only participant not originally from the Midwest. Rather, Kelly is from Miami, Fla. Five women, Zoe, Nicole, Lisa, Casey and Julia, were undergraduates, while Alice was completing her master’s degree in special education, and Kelly was a librarian. Respondents received no compensation. I facilitated the approximately 90-minute discussion with a list of questions to begin and redirect conversation. The discussion was audio taped with the permission of participants.

Real Women Discuss The Real World

The majority of the women in the discussion group identified The Real World as one of their favorite television programs. Only the two “older” students, Alice and Kelly, were critical of it as a purveyor of misconstrued reality, in that the program presents an idea of their generation as lazy partiers concerned only with appearances. When asked if they were offended by TRW’s portrayal of women, or rather, in the groups’ words—the way Real World women present themselves—the women had this to say:

Julia: Not at all.

Lisa: It’s not representing all women. It’s just them. They’re the ones making fools out of themselves.

Julia: I think it’s their choice to do the things they do.

Kelly: I think the women fit roles that you set, or the types that they allow. It makes it less interesting. The older I’ve gotten, I mean I was the age of the first season people when they were in the first season. The older I’ve gotten, the less interested I am in watching the whole season. It seems to be so homogenized. They’re the same people, but they’re also like rich kids on a four-month spring break.

Lisa: They’re all pretty decent looking.

Kelly: It gets narrower and narrower. I think compared to the beginning, even though there seem to be a lot of different roles, there’s really a small number compared to all the people in the world and how they are. I think it is much more, I don’t want to say offensive. It’s stupid and like, if you’re the bitch you’re always the bitch. It’s stupid how limited they have to be to get the right reaction, to get the raise.

Alice: I think I’m more offended by how it represents my age group rather than my gender. It portrays young people as all we can do is party and are concerned about ourselves and who’s hooking up with who. It’s really limited, like you were saying on the first season. They had to deal with all these different issues. Now it’s less and less about like, “Oh, let’s discuss race or let’s discuss whatever our differences are,” to this
really narrow view of sex. And both genders are guilty of it, so I think it’s more offensive to me that I’m like a Real World generation person. I feel like that’s more offensive than my gender.

Casey: I wouldn’t use the word offensive. It’s more annoying, the fact that when you’re dealing with ignorant people, ignorant viewers. It’s actually with older viewers, like parents older. Like some people actually watch this and completely take it all out of context. Like, “All these young people do are just get tanked and go and have sex and do that. So, that must be what my daughter’s doing.”

Julia: A lot of the time it is. That’s what we do.

Casey: I know, but not like to the extent. I think that just comes with viewers’ ignorance. That comes with anything. When they stereotype this age group, 18 to 25 or whatever, as just...well most of them are like out of control. But they have to realize a lot of it is played up for the camera. But when some people watch that and think, “My 21-year-old daughter doesn’t have a job. She’s not ever gonna have a job. She’s going to spend the rest of her life drinking because that’s what they do.” That’s annoying that some people take that to heart.

Kelly: But they don’t also show them the consequences. Like calling in to say, “I’m too hung over to come into work, and oh, I got fired.” If a parent’s like, “Oh my gosh. All you do is drink and hook up with everybody.” But it’s like, “Yeah and I go to class, I fill out my forms and I go to this lecture.” You can’t do that 24/7, and that’s how it looks on the show. Because they focus on the most exciting things. They never show people all sitting around.

Julia: Exactly. Who wants to see the real world, like real life?

Kelly: Who wants to watch us doing what we’re doing right now?


Kelly: Unless we all looked like Trishelle and took our tops off at the end of the show.

Kelly’s statement about Trishelle, the “slut” of the Las Vegas season, was brought up again later by Lisa when I asked about what the group thought was most outrageous, or unbelievable, about the show.

Lisa: One big [thing] I know is Trishelle sleeps with everyone and their brother. Every episode—when she was on Las Vegas it was her and Stephen and she would use this other guy to make him jealous. And then on like, the challenges and stuff, she was with Mike.

But the rest of the group was quick to defend MTV’s role in perpetuating the myth of the slut.

Zoe: I think it’s just society. I don’t think it’s MTV’s editing. I think it’s the way society views women in general. Trishelle, she sleeps around. But Mike does, too. Nobody talks about him.

Lisa: Yeah, like everybody calls Trishelle a slut.

Kelly: People will be like, “She’s a slut.” And that’s something that’s in society that’s never gonna change.

Zoe: I don’t think people should blame MTV.

Nicole: They’re just perpetuating the stereotypes.

Kelly: They’re magnifying and reflecting it as much as they’re creating it.

Hence, all of the women named stereotypes and shock value as evidence of the non-reality of the program. Specifically the women pointed to the cast members as evolving from truly original people to potential stars playing for the camera.

Julia: And like, it’s called The Real World, but it’s a complete suspension of reality.
Research In Depth

Moderator: Do you all agree with that statement?

(Yesses all around.)

Casey: And, like, what you were saying—how it’s changed so much. If you look at the first season and then compare it to Las Vegas...Like the first season, it was new, so no one really knew what to do. And now it’s like you have to one up what they do, and get more face time. Everyone is so concerned with getting face time that you’ll have three girls making out in a hot tub, completely acting like asses, and they know it. When they wake up in the morning, it’s like, “I just...” Yeah right—not my 15 minutes, but my 20 minutes.

Julia: [Casey] always says that when people go on these shows that they’re just doing it to get famous. You see them whenever they move on, after The Real World. They’re doing these challenge shows and they’re all wearing their web site on their T-shirt, like promoting themselves.

Kelly: Yeah, a lot of them want to be actors or actresses afterwards. They didn’t necessarily have any aspiration in that direction or even any particular talent. But the fame, they want to continue.

Casey: They’re very self-promoting.

The topic came up again later in the discussion.

Julia: I think each person knows their role. Each person wants to be this certain person. Like, “Oh, I saw this girl on season four and I want to be like her when I’m on the show.”

Casey: You almost steer your self in that direction. You’re like, “I want to get on the show. I want to make my tape. What part of me do I...” I might not be the biggest partier that I’m playing myself out to be, but you want to put all that towards MTV and be like, “I am so crazy, and I go out and drink all the time.”

Lisa: You want to work in a bar.

Casey: It might be maximized like ten times what you really are, but you wanna steer everything into that role. It’s like you have to make a caricature of yourself.

Julia: Yeah, that’s what it is. Everybody plays a character on the show.

Kelly: Yes, it’s a caricature of yourself.

Julia: I think it really is a choice, too. I think you can...Like, I can play it off as a party girl. I can play it off as the bitch. You can play it off as the alternative one. You can do whatever you want.

Julia, the most vocal of the group, perpetuates the notion of autonomy, but others realized the artifice of The Real World, evidenced by Casey. “I just think they do a good job of editing.” However, Casey later agreed with Julia:

Julia: I don’t really think it’s how they’re portrayed. I think that’s how they’re putting themselves off. I think that’s what they’re (emphasis added by speaker) doing. They can’t just make this stuff up.

Casey: Like when they have the hot tub scene and like two girls would be making out with each other. You can’t edit them to do that. You can edit it out, but regardless of the fact that they’re doing it. That’s a lot of it, but sometimes these people that aren’t gay. They’re like “Oh, it’s fine. I’m drunk.” You know? Whatever.

Nicole and Lisa disagreed with these sentiments:

Nicole: But if you think about it. They’re there for like five or six months or something like that. And they might make out with people one time. Like I have friends who have made out with a girl like one time, do you know what I mean? I mean it makes it look like you’re watching ten episodes of something when they made out with a girl one time and show it four times in an episode.

Lisa: When they like put clips together to make it seem like they do it all the time, when in fact it could have happened over the whole span of the whole time they were there.

While the women had earlier said they were not
offended by the women of The Real World, I phrased the question a different way toward the latter part of the discussion and was surprised by some of the responses.

Moderator: If you could make your own description or definition of the reality of young women on MTV, on The Real World, what would it be?

Julia: I think it's pretty real. The people that I hang out with and being in college and the situations that I'm in, we're doing the same things they are. Maybe they have it a little easier than we do. They don't have the whole school thing or anything important really to do with their lives, but I think it's pretty accurate.

Casey: I agree with her. I don't think it's that far off base to say that it would be inaccurate. I guess some things don't hit the level, but that's just because we actually have a real life. Who's to say that if we were put in that situation, well take the cameras away, but that situation that we would spend all of our time doing what they're doing? Lisa: I would say that a part of them is like how I am, but it's just that part. It's not like that's what I revolve my life around is drinking and having a good time. While that very well may be a part of my life, it's not all. I have family problems. I have school problems or friend problems. And I have a job here, too. So it's not like all I do is sit around and drink or go out. I do, but it's not every thing I do.

Alice: I think though when I first saw it...I would have been in fifth grade, so I don't know which season that would have been, but it was like, "So that's what you do when you get into your twenties. You drink and you kiss boys and you wear cool clothes." It was all very superficial. I guess maybe it has to do now with every person gets younger and younger, it seems like they don't really have that much...Like you were saying. It is more like college, but maybe that's because the age is now more college age rather than 24, 25.

So despite earlier claims of the fractured reality and camera play by the TRW cast members, half of the group still pointed to the series as representative of young women's lives. Again, the two women beyond undergradu-ate school were the most critical of the show, which isn't that telling considering they have lived through and beyond the partying college years. As such, Kelly and Alice have also had more time removed from their viewing experience of the series. The majority of responses to why women are the way they are on television, especially The Real World, evoke barely a concern.

Julia: Yeah, I don't think it's just The Real World. In one of my classes we watched this video and I wish I could think of what it's called right now, but I cannot at all. But it's about how women are portrayed in music videos, in movies, in just regular life.

Kelly: Is it Killing Us Softly?

Julia: Yes. I was just saying how we're portrayed in everyday life. We're just so used to it.

Casey: People don't think of it as being exploited, because when you have something pounded into your head for so many years you forget that...

Nicole: You know that girls are gonna be in rap videos.

And later:

Lisa: Sex is interesting.

Julia: Yeah. If there's sex, there's drama. You need the drama. You couldn't have a show without it.

Most troubling to me, though, is the notion that the women of the focus group accept that there is little women can do to change things.

Julia: I just think that it's been like beat into your head so many times. You're kind of like numb to it. You don't even notice it anymore.

Casey: Exactly, that's a great word. Numb.

Kelly: Yeah. You don't even realize what you're seeing anymore.

Lisa: Yeah, and every rap video looks the same. It's not like I get offended every time I see a half-naked woman dancing around a camera. But it's like, well maybe there is something wrong with it. Why aren't guys...
Julia: Yeah, it's almost like we're almost getting bored with it now. But still, it's how it's always been.

Lisa: Since we've been around.

Casey: Well it's not like if you turn on, especially MTV, to a video that has these beautiful naked women on it, and you're not...It's not the first time you've ever seen that. You always have seen that. You've grown up with that.

Conclusion

Revisiting the research question, then, what does The Real World reflect about what it means to be a young woman in American society today?

According to the women of my discussion group, young women today are voyeurs who love to play for the camera as well as revel in its images. They know that sex sells and some of them even mentioned considering applying to be a cast member at times. Reality television is no doubt here to stay. The women of this study recognized The Real World's constructedness, but still saw it as a relatively “real” vehicle. Why?

On the surface reality television, like film, relies on women's subjugation of our own image. Film demands a male gaze. It has been argued that television was envisioned as a female medium, particularly with soap operas and relationship-driven dramas (Douglas, 1995; Meehan, 2002). But reality television has turned this on its head, for we view reality through the faux lens of documentary film. The gaze of sex-driven reality vehicles is also male. The male gaze identified by Mulvey (1975), while not overtly identified by these regular viewers of The Real World, appears to have been naturalized into a myth of entertainment.

On the other hand, the women of this study noted multiple times that cast members on The Real World play to the camera. These viewers revealed they are keen to the fake reality of the program and feel a sense of control over their viewing experience. But still, women of this generation, in our twenties and thirties, appear to be numb—as the group framed it—to stereotypical images of beautiful, sex-fueled bimbos. Even Alice, the most critical of the group, contends: “I guess I agree that the formula of the show would be a lot better [if it used so-called normal people with real problems], but maybe now that we're all used to it being a beautiful, hook-up time, that's just what we're gonna get.” However, this was one group of female viewers with similar demographics. Perhaps then young, white, Midwestern women view The Real World in this way.

Shome (2000) identifies problems with reception studies that have focused mostly on white, middle-class interpretations. More studies are needed, then, to assess the reality of the series as perceived by women of varying class and ethnic backgrounds. Fenton (2000) argues for the heavy task of integrating production, text and reception analyses within their respective global and socioeconomic realities. She recognizes problems in traditional, modern approaches to active audiences. While the economic structures and practices of television no doubt rob women of agency at times, there should also be no doubt that we as a generation of young, college-educated women can think for ourselves and interpret televisual images and stories in different ways. For that matter, women of all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds have and deserve their own voices. It is our job as critical researchers to continue examining patriarchal media through a feminist lens.

References


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National Public Radio reporter Emily Harris wrote about the challenges of being a reporter in Iraq earlier this year in Willamette Week, where she had interned at one time (www.weweek.com/story.php?story=5949). She said: “One advantage of being a female reporter is sometimes you get ignored. That might not seem like an advantage at first glance, but, for example, if you’re driving somewhere and only the two men in the front seat get asked for their ID, that’s not all bad. Also you get waved through checkpoints more frequently. In principle, being female can get you better access to females. Helps to have a female translator, though, which I don’t generally have. A disadvantage can be that there are some places women don’t generally go, like some tea shops or mosques. So trying to talk to people in such places can either cause extra hullabaloo that doesn’t help, or

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