

Priming and the Negative Effects of Viewing Reality Dating Shows

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Abstract

Reality dating tv shows are one of the most watched and popular forms of media today. Watching these shows comes with a lot of edutainment and priming. Previous studies have shown the effects of watching reality tv shows and how they can influence a person's judgement about certain topics, like how dating is perceived in these shows, how dating is perceived as a competition and how the contestants act towards one another, being vicious and aggressive. I am taking a look at the not so good side effects of watching the show The Bachelor and The Bachelorette. I will be showing participants a series of clips: One group that will be acting as our control group will be only exposed to happy content from the shows and the other group that will be our experiment group will only be exposed to negative clips from the show that shows fighting and arguing usually resulting in a breakup. All participants will receive a pre and post text survey to see if watching the controlled media will change their immediate attitude towards dating.

Introduction

Literature Review

In the world of media and television, shows and programs are something that is ever evolving. One of the latest and hottest trends of television nowadays is reality dating shows.

These shows portray nonactors in dating situations with the camera acting as an observer of real-time events. Viewers act as passengers, watching the edited dating situations as they happen as if they were filmed live. ABC's *The Bachelor* is a show where 25 women compete for one man/ woman's hand in marriage. Eliminating a few women every week until the very end where the Bachelor/ Bachelorette decides between two people choosing their husband/ wife.

(Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). These shows are solely based for entertainment but as we see the effects of viewing these shows we see that they are more than entertainment but rather edutainment. Drawing a primary audience of women aged 18–34 years (Freydkin, 2002), *The Bachelor* is one of the many reality dating shows in the United States geared toward young adults. The information that the viewers are receiving through watching these shows are directly related to priming. Priming exposure can be broken down into three steps: 1. Exposure to media that activates related nodes (concepts, thoughts, emotions) in the mind of the viewer, 2. Those related nodes remain active for a period of time, 3. The activation influences subsequent judgement or behaviors. (Iyengar, Peters, and Kender, 1982) Priming assumes that media can make certain issues or aspects of issues more accessible (i.e., easily recalled) for people and thereby influence the standards they use when forming attitudes about the media they are watching. (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) The main ideas that this form of media could be influencing the viewers are: sexual attitudes, aggressive behavior and that relationships are competitive. So why haven't we looked into the negative effects of watching reality dating shows?

In past studies they have found research on the positives of watching reality dating shows but no one has looked at the negative effects of watching a show like the bachelor has on the

viewers. By watching these reality dating shows this implies that dating is a game or a competition. Amber L. Ferris, Sandi W. Smith, Bradley S. Greenberg, & Stacy L. Smith. (2007)

This can be dangerous because the relationship, emotions and feelings are not a game and can seriously hurt people when those things are not taken seriously and are taken advantage of.

Dating is definitely not to be looked at as a game and reality dating shows are included in the subgenre that are: talent competitions, dating shows, real-life shows and makeover shows.

Ferguson, C. J., Salmond, K., & Modi, K. (2013) “Whether it is 25 men in tuxedos vying for one woman on *The Bachelorette* or two women in a hot tub trying to impress a man on *ElimiDate*, their goals are ultimately the same in both situations. Just as the competition-based reality shows mentioned above feature contestants willing to perform socially unacceptable behaviors in order to win, so are contestants on reality dating shows.” (Barton, 2007) We see behaviors on these shows that are both sexual and permissive and ultimately we have to look at what that is teaching the viewers. As these shows are shown on television anyone of any age can view this content. Are two women in a hot tub fighting over a man the example we want to be setting for our younger viewers?

Hypothesis

H1: Those in the manipulated group will have more negative attitudes towards dating than the people in the control group.

H2: The difference between groups will be stronger for those who think that reality dating shows are realistic.

Theory

Reality dating shows are not only filled with love and romance but also the vicious backstabbing, lying and deceitful behavior is something that viewers are also seeing. With the viewers watching and having a closer connection to the participants because they are not actors and actresses can lead them to believe that everyone is going to act in both those positive relationship emotions but also the negative ones. When seeing the negative aspects of dating displayed in something that you are watching for pleasure can cause some stress and worry about dating in the real world. Priming assumes that media can make certain issues or aspects of issues more accessible (i.e., easily recalled) for people and thereby influence the standards they use when forming attitudes about the media they are watching. (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007)

If someone is watching this type of content and the effects of priming are that they are learning, the standards of the dating would be miss leading. For adolescents and young adults who begin dating, norms are needed to guide expectations, with skewed expectations there are dangers that could associate with this like allowing abusive relationships, having a competitive mindset and overall knowledge of safety in a relationship. Some of the violent aspects of reality dating shows can involve grown men fist fighting over a girl, girls being vicious and creating rumors and lies in order to gain personal momentum in the show. This can lead viewers to think that all relationships involve some sort of violence and gossip and that is a reality in life that you may face, but isn't something that you should associate with being in a relationship and dating with. When someone sees the violence and drama of dating shows on a regular basis they are going to associate dating with those behaviors and can lead to them not even wanting to date in the first place.

Effects

In previous research we have found several effects on viewers that should be noted when looking at the topic of reality dating shows and how they prime the viewers. Past studies have found that, per-hour score for each dating attitude, the most expressed attitude was that women are sexual objects, the next was dating is a game and the third was men are sex driven when it comes to dating. (Amber L. Ferris¹, Sandi W. Smith², Bradley S. Greenberg², & Stacy L. Smith³, 2007). If we look at the effects of priming and the outcome of these results we can see a clear correlation between the attitudes of watching this kind of content and the outcomes.

In another study they also found that watching these types of shows leads to sexual attitudes and focus of one's appearance and sexual double standards. Ferguson, C. J., Salmond, K., & Modi, K. (2013) This is something that teaches young viewers that women are sexual objects and that men are always sex driven in their decisions and goals. For someone to be watching content like this that can lead to long lasting, unrealistic expectations of dating that will lead to very unsafe and dangerous relationship habits. The content that the women are sexual objects can lead to sexual abuse in a relationship which will lead to the long lasting damage and boundaries. This teaches young male viewers to treat women in a sexual manner and for young women to watch this content could lead them to dress more promiscuously and act in a sexual manner starting from a younger age. In the perspective of that the male viewers make their relationship decisions on solely sex driven in their decisions and goals, this would mean that they decide to be with someone based on looks and sexual connection instead of emotional

connection. Emotional connection is what young viewers need to learn is the most important aspect of being in a relationship.

Heavy exposure did predict how realistic the viewers perceived the reality dating shows to be. Bennett, M. E. (n.d.) In watching these shows we need to keep in mind that people who watch the shows on a regular basis are more likely to be affected by the show than the viewers who are only watching short clips in a single period of time. This leads me to believe that people who watch these shows and are invested in the time they spend watching them are more likely to believe that reality dating is realistic and just like the real world.

Method and Data Analysis

Participants

I would first gain participants' consent to participate in the experiment. I would propose to find a sample of individuals between the ages of 18 and 30. I would choose this age group because this is the primary age for dating, obviously people date younger and older but this is the primary age group. My total sample size would be between 100-150 people. I would find these individuals by posting an online forum and potentially incentivising individuals with small prizes after they had completed the required material. I would like to survey both males and females because both males and females watch the Bachelor and Bachelorette tv shows, which can lead to their attitudes towards dating depending on the gender of the viewer. I would also factor in an even amount of people who are in relationships and people who are not, trying to get this number to be 50/50. This can give us a look into whether or not the status of their personal relationships have anything to do with how they view the content they will be shown.

Procedure

I would first distribute a pre-experiment survey which would include questions about their dating history, their aggression levels and if they feel like reality dating shows are realistic and give good dating advice. I would then split the participants up into two random groups where they are shown three short clips from the bachelor and bachelorette one group which will be the sample group will view three clips of dates that are going well and the couple is happy and having a good time and the other group will view material that involves conflict and fighting between the couple which will result in a breakup, one happy date and one clip about drama between the contestants in the shows giving an example of lying and aggression of the competition. After they are done watching the clips that we would provide them, they would then answer another short survey of questions taken from the Attitudes Marriage scale that have been rephrased with the word “dating” instead of marriage. This scale asks them to rate the word dating on five 1-9 semantic scales with phrases that correlate to the emotions towards dating like (good-bad, undesirable-desirable, negative-positive, harmful-beneficial, strongly opposed-strongly favor.)

Stimuli

I would show the control group three clips of all the same content of there being civilized conversations that are not violent or have any drama involved. They will see three clips of this; the first clip will be from season 17 which was when Sean was the bachelor, episode 9. In this episode I would show them a 5 minute clip of Sean and Catherine in Thailand on the boat on their date. The second clip would be from season 23 episode 9, where Colton is the Bachelor and

he and Cassie are in Portugal exploring the city and are having a fun and romantic date. The last clip for the sample group will come from Bachelorette season 17 episode 5 where we see bachelorette Katie and Blake on a horseback riding date getting to know each other. In the non-sample group group I will show them The first negative clip of bachelorette Clair fighting with Yosef on Season 16 episode 3 of the bachelorette. The second clip that I would show to this group would be the clip from Bachelorette Season 15 episode 9, where Hannah B is on a date with Luke and they start arguing and she sends him home. The final clip to be shown to this group will be from Season 14 episode 10 in The Men Tell All episode that happens towards the end of every season, an argument between the men. I believe that by administering these clips we will be able to see a more negative approach to dating as a whole from the group that watched the more aggressive and violent clips of fighting and arguing than the sample group that watches only happy clips from the show.

Measures

In the pre-test the questions will be asked in the three categories of their dating history, their aggression levels and if they feel like reality dating shows are realistic and give good dating advice. These questions will be less involved than the post-test questions. These questions are just more information for us to know about their dating history to see if that would change their view on the realistic aspects of dating. Then in the second series of questions they would be asked about their aggression levels and how watching content like this in the past has made them relatively happy or upset. And the final series of pre-questions will be about how realistic they believe reality dating shows are. After viewing the clips they will then be administered the post-test questions. These questions will be derived from pre-existing surveys that are of several

different topics. Because we are looking at different areas that have not yet been studied like the aggression of dating and the effects of how and what people perceive things on tv to be realistic. Some examples of these questions would be: Q1: On a scale of 1-9 how angry did watching clip number 2 make you? There would be a series of these scale questions just like the pre-test. Other questions about perceived realism would be, Q2: On a scale of 1-9 how would you rate the shows dating to real life dating. These scales would show how the clips affected the viewers and what their outcomes of that behavior the witnessed left an impact on their decisions about dating in real life.

Results

I would then collect the surveys and compare the data that is found in both the pre-test and post-test surveys. I would then reduce the data and exclude any participants who are way off the graph compared to everyone else. I would then put the data into a system that can compute graphs and calculations to display the results. I would then compare my original hypothesis to the results and come to a conclusion whether or not my hypothesis was correct. Then I would compare my findings to other results from other studies to see if my hypothesis and results were similar or different. Now because no one has specifically looked at the priming effect on negative attitudes towards dating only the positive, we would be expecting to see drastic differences in the results and graphs, and would have to compare several different types of studies on both dating and aggression.

Discussion

I believe this is a study that should be conducted because when we think about reality tv shows we think about the relaxation aspect of watching the show and escaping from reality. However, those reality tv shows have a lot of negativity in them and as the viewer is watching that it is in a way priming them to believe that what is happening in the show is also what could happen in the real world which is just not likely. This sets people up for an unrealistic view of the world. Most research on this topic is about what information people can take away from these dating reality tv shows and most of these articles only focus on the positives. An example of this would be that you can fall madly in love in a short period of time, that dating is always a romantic dream date in some foreign country, and that in the end you will happily ever after. This is just not realistic. I am taking a deeper look into the negative effects on viewers and if watching this show would change their overall attitudes about dating. So you may be asking why does this matter? It matters because if your teens/ adults are watching this content they are more likely to be primed to believe that these shows are actually how relationships are supposed to work and function. A limitation of this study would be that it is not a longitudinal study therefore we are looking at the short term effects instead of the long term ones. This is something that, if the study was actually conducted, could maybe incorporate an entire season of watching and then survey in 6 months again to see if their attitudes remain the same as they were right after viewing the content.

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[Link to specific pages](#)

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