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The Perception of Intimacy: Are Dating Reality TV Shows Affecting Relationships?

Jojo Boateng[1]

Abstract

A common theme that has emerged in relationship literature is the effect that TV reality shows have on determining one's perception and engagement in intimacy. For instance, the introduction of technology has shifted the way we participate in courtship practices. Now, individuals use mediums, such as dating apps, to find a partner and engage in intimacy. However, this discussion has ignored other mediums, such as TV shows, that center intimacy and relationships. In this article, we explore how the emergence of dating reality TV shows has shaped the way we perceive intimacy and engage in dating behaviours, answering the question: how are dating reality TV shows affecting relationships?

Introduction

The introduction of technology into relationships via courtship practices, that is, the use of dating apps are being used by individuals to find a partner. However, we have yet to discuss how the emergence of mass media (i.e., reality TV shows) has shaped how we perceive intimacy and engage in dating behaviours. Today, the mass introduction of media into all aspects of our lives has caused a societal shift, as individuals revolutionize how they learn about social norms and adapt their behaviours accordingly. For example, the creation of dating reality TV shows (DRTS) has introduced us to a pervasive yet intimate way of viewing the development of intimacy. The audience is introduced to an edited and idealized version of relationships, and they accept what they see as being truthful, perfect,

[1] MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta.

and, most importantly, desirable. Furthermore, DRTS, such as "Love Is Blind", use reunion episodes to indicate how the viewer should have perceived the actions and behaviours of the participants, again trying to convince us of the realness and relatability of said relationships.

As a result, intimacy has pivoted from local and interpersonal interactions between partners to a global and intrapersonal event shared with the world, thus creating two indistinguishable realities and an entertaining commodity along the way. Consequently, we integrate and internalize the information presented on DRTS into our personal lives and social schemas. Taking society from a place of actual and physical knowledge to a place of abstractions and perceived knowledge, as we use DRTS as a guide for building our own relationships. DRTS gives us a glimpse into an idealistic version of life, while idealistic, it can present problems regarding how we view our personal lives and interpersonal relationships. This essay uses an example from "Love Is Blind" to explore if DRTS have negatively affected individuals' perception and engagement in intimacy.

Reality TV

Growing up as children, we are exposed to mediums (e.g., movies and TV shows) that depict a clear villain and hero. While the villain wants to watch the world burn, the hero always spoils their plans. It is important to note that the audience is never told why the villain is evil and why they want to destroy the world. Nonetheless, constant exposure to the idea of hero vs. villain causes a binary mindset of good vs. evil to be created. However, this mindset ignores that in the real world, things are not simple. Instead, there is a gradient, meaning we can not confidently say that events or people are inherently good or bad (Brown, 2021)**.** Today, DRTS have created a similar binary between reality (TV) (i.e., regular people participating in the same life events we do) and television (actors or known celebrities participating in skewed and dramatized versions of real life). That is to say, by creating content that mirrors real life, reality TV is blurring the lines between reality and television, thus affecting the development of social scripts and reinforcing a binary mindset between what is real and what is fake. For example, labeling a TV as a social experiment makes it seem like a reality, as the term social experiment implies their findings can be generalized to the general population. In contrast, labeling something as a soap opera indicates fiction and drama. While both can be defined as TV shows, the difference in their labels leads the audience to associate the first one as something based in reality while maintaining the belief that the other is not.

Before exploring the link between DRTS and relationships any deeper, we must define reality TV shows and their components. First, we must establish that reality and reality TV are not synonymous; rather, they are contradictory terms. For instance, reality

is created through preserving and modifying culture and history to fit one's present while reality TV is a manufactured commodity aimed at constructing an idealized and exaggerated version of life. Therefore, reality TV can be defined as "programming that documents allegedly unscripted real-life situations [usually starring] unknown people rather than professional actors." (Mr. Pop Culture, 2022) Rising to popularity in the late 1990s and the early 2000s with shows such as "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" and "The Real Housewives", reality TV shows have had a profound impact on the media landscape (Peek and Beresin, 2016). Reality TV creates an idealized version of life, drawing the audience into a space that maximizes their enjoyment and minimizes their pain, thus allowing people to participate in what seems like a gratifying reward instead of mundane acts of real life (Hill, 2006; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). According to Morreale (2005), reality TV shows have grown like viruses using a pre-existing form (i.e., the formats) of TV shows such as dramas, soap operas, and self-improvement shows to replicate themselves repeatedly. This has caused an alteration to our media space and our interactions with mass-mediated cultural forms, as they are now shaping our identity and altering who we are. Here, Morreale argues that due to the technological era we live in, people are developing feelings towards content which then is translated to real life, shaping the way we perceive and view the world.

Furthermore, reality TV shows feature real-life scenarios which garner feelings of sympathy and connectivity (i.e., emotional magnetism) (Hill, 2006). As such, reality TV shows depict a wide variety of new and old issues that the viewer has or might have to go through to reach a common goal. For example, since its popularization, reality TV has come to include a wide variety of content, including DRTS, that depict the creation and the development of relationships featuring "regular people" as they navigate the world of dating and undergo major transformation through emotions of love and loss (Peek & Beresin, 2016, p. 177). The addition of real-life scenarios causes the show to resemble real life. Thus, the events depicted in the show become relatable to the audience, as they can see their experiences and themselves reflected through a screen (i.e., they can put themselves in the participant's shoes). As such, individuals not only watch TV shows because their entertaining but they are "selecting content consistent with their personal needs" (Hill, 2006, p. 564). They may be experiencing a therapeutic effect as reality TV allows the audience to realize that they are not alone, because the people on TV are dealing with the same issues that they are (Cohen & Weimann, 2006). In other words, unlike other TV shows (e.g., dramas), the images and depictions in media, such as DRTS, promote the idea that "what is being portrayed on the screen is, in fact, reality. [Thus] television offers a skewed view of reality, and frequent exposure to these skewed images results in the internalization of values, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions that are consistent with the world as portrayed on TV," which comes to shape how we internalize ideas and schemas as well as our concept of reality (Peek & Bersein, 2016, pp. 177-178).

Reality TV and Intimacy

Intimacy, one of the main components of any relationship, is defined as "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and boundedness in a close relationship" (Aykutoğlu & Uysala, 2017, p. 1). Over time as we develop a greater understanding of our partner and ourselves through self-disclosure and discovery, the intimacy between partners deepens. When combined with passion-the psychological arousal that leads to a physical closeness and attraction (Aykutoğlu & Uysala, 2017), we are in a place of both excitement and familiarity that aids our relationship in developing and lasting. Today, the perception and expression of intimacy are changing. It has transformed from physical to digital with the development of DRTS. This means that the critical aspects of relationships are being transformed from an individual to a community level. Now we are invested not only in our own relationships, but we are becoming obsessed with the relationships of others. As a result, reality TV shows have us asking the question: how can I get that? That is to say, DRTS shows us something that we want and the ritualistic motives needed to acquire it (Vandenbiah & Eggermont, 2011)**.**

In other words, DRTS presents itself as a guide to helping us acquire the things we desire the most, such as intimacy. As we view DRTS more and more, we begin to internalize what we see, making mental notes about, and believing that to reach our goals, we need to follow what is shown to us. According to Peek and Beresin (2016) and Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2011), the more we see something, the more we believe it to be true. This exposure not only predicts ritualistic motives but also predicts television dependency. For example, Peek and Beresin (2016, p. 178) found that Girl Scouts that regularly watched reality TV shows believed fighting (i.e., treating others poorly) was normal because the franchise used fights to make the show more interesting. These girls were more likely to believe gossiping, being catty and competitive, and being wary of other girls were normal actions that would put them ahead in life than girls who did not watch the show. Thus, reality TV acts as a reality check as it shows us how the culture, society, and other individuals accept us as group members. In addition, it shows us what we should be doing to become socially literate (i.e., the behaviours and actions we should be integrating into our social vocabulary). We then become dependent on the TV guide to show us what comes next in life and the attitudes and behaviours we should use to navigate through it.

For instance, when watching DRTS, we are constantly confronted with the idea that love will conquer all, regardless of what hardships we face. This represents an ideal many people want to relate to, as we all crave love and intimacy to create a life worth living. Hence, DRTS take advantage of this human narrative, as they create shows that mirror real-life desires and make them available to us at all hours of the day via streaming apps like Netflix. In turn, manufacturing products resembles a journal or guide of one's journey for

intimacy rather than a show. However, the intimacy we see in real life and the intimacy we see in DRTS are different. The intimacy we see in real life is mysterious and private. While people know they are together, their life is lived behind closed doors regardless of our closeness to the couple.

For example, think of the relationships between parents. While we know they are together, for the most part, we are not witnesses to the raw emotions that take place between them. Their love remains a mystery as we are only given limited information about their love affairs. We only know that our parents have been together for a finite amount of time, and they appear happy. Intimacy, as seen on TV, takes the opposite approach, having participants display their most intimate moments for the purpose of allowing the world to see how and why their intimacy has developed as they engage in staged and filmed events. The intimacy we see on reality TV is a mirage, or rather, a misconception of what people experience in real life. It is love washed (similar to whitewashing), where the good is exaggerated, and the bad and uncertainty are downplayed or conflated into something less troublesome. For example, in "90 Day Fiancé" (2022), Jasmine is willing to stay in a relationship with Gino after he sends her nude photos to his ex-girlfriend. In her confessional clip, she states that she would rather stay with Gino than leave because he offers her love, which she perceives as rare. In other words, Jasmine is too in love with Gino to understand that his actions are incompatible with love. She downplays the bad, looking at it from an angle that makes her decision to stay with him more believable, relatable, and tangible (e.g., staying with him means she will experience love and intimacy).

In this regard, reality shows have become "a televisual Petri dish in which to observe the contemporary production of the self as commodity sign, inscribed by markers" of relationships and intimacy (Morreale, 2005, p. 2). They allow people to see life through an experimental or scientific point of view, causing us to think that what happens to them can and will happen to us. Therefore, there is a disconnect between reality and non-reality as we begin to put our future actions into the hands of complete strangers whom we have built a "community" and sense of "camaraderie" with (Peek & Beresin, 2016; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016). In that sense, DRTS allows us to explore love as if we are tourists. They show us what love could be, training us to accept and engage in particular actions and behaviours in our quest for intimacy. This creates the inability to separate reality from television. We believe the life presented on DRTS can be recreated if we absorb its content (i.e., the actions and behaviours of the participants) and reproduce them within our own lives (Peek & Beresin, 2016; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016). As such, we connect emotionally to false narratives that idealize life. For instance, in the example given above, Jasmine alludes to the idea that being too picky will cost her love. As we watch this content, we think about our past and present relationships and ask: "Am I missing out on love because I was too picky?" Thus, our thought processes surrounding intimacy become inextricably linked to what we see on TV. Which compromises our ability to understand

that love without a steady environment (i.e., reality) is just passion and emotion that fade. Shows like "Love Is Blind" showcase the idea of remaining blissfully ignorant to red flags, such as abusive tendencies, so we can be offered a glimpse at intimacy and love. In the next paragraph, we describe the most notable event in season three of "Love Is Blind" and analyze how it idealizes abusive tendencies.

An Analysis of 'Love Is Blind'

When thinking about a life plan, we can sometimes become overwhelmed with the fear of failing and wasting our lives pursuing something we desperately desire but have never achieved. This is a theme heavily focused on in DRTS, such as "Love Is Blind", where we see individuals gaining a second chance at finding intimacy after failing to do so the traditional way. Due to the context given in the first episode (Coelen et al., 2020/2022), the audience can conclude that these participants have been unable to find intimacy due to their unwillingness to look beyond the physical (i.e., looks) and get to know their partner on a deep and emotional level. Thus, this environment allows people to enter a natural space with producers and hosts willing to help them grow relationships that center intimacy rather than physicality. As such, the show takes on a profound and experimental way to help participants "become engaged before meeting in person." (Coelen et al., 2020/2022)

In this DRTS, reality and television become heavily blurred as the show focuses on a message (i.e., how can we find a long-lasting love) that everyone, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, can relate to. When watching the show, we are exposed to the participant's most intimate (e.g., getting engaged) and most painful (e.g., being rejected) moments. As a result, their journey becomes relatable, and we start rooting for them to find love, while simultaneously commenting on what they did wrong and right, and comparing our prior actions with theirs and noting how we can improve them for our own use. As a result, we fail to see that "Love Is Blind" operates within a controlled environment where the creators get to pick and choose what the public is privy to. The show fails to show us what happens when the camera crew leaves, and the participants must deal with their and their partner's choices and behaviours and the audience's opinions. In that sense, these relationships are unachievable because they are created in an unstable environment that reflects intimate feelings for others, the thrill of being on TV, and a glorification of what could happen outside the pods. In other words, "Love Is Blind" has commoditized intimacy. It has shown love within a hyperreality and through abstractions rather than reality, shifting intimacy towards something more salient than natural. Furthermore, it has diminished intimacy's authenticity by showcasing imperfections such as abuse as a bump in the road toward self-fulfillment. Below we will analyze the idealization of intimacy by using a scene from season three of "Love Is Blind".

The Matt Mistake refers to the biggest fight of the season between Colleen and Matt (Isabelle Morley, 2022). The fight centres around Colleen's conversation with Cole (another participant) earlier in the day. In their conversation, Colleen and Cole expressed that their relationship might have been something more if they had met in the real world. Upon hearing this, Matt flies into a rage telling his partner that she did not do enough to respect their relationship or him. For example, during the fight, Matt asserts, "We have four weeks to get married… but fuck me, right? You're gonna tell me you love me and shit, but fuck me, right?" (Coelen et al., 2020/2022, Season 3 Episode 5, 00:43:57- 00:48:40) As the fight continues to escalate Matt tells Colleen he is leaving her as she begs him to stay. Ultimately, the couple makes up, eventually getting married. However, this fighting pattern continues, that is; they fight, Matt threatens to leave, then they make up. According to Morley (2022), during the reunion (Coelen et al., 2020/2022, Season 3, Episode 12), this moment is rehashed as the hosts and participants put Colleen on trial to answer why she would almost ruin her's and Cole's relationships. However, Matt is not expected to answer for his actions that night because he "forgivingly described his behaviour when recalling the fight [saying] "I did kinda lose my cool a little bit." No one calls out his alarming and abusive behaviour" (Morley, 2022).

This recount of events indicates that "Love Is Blind" has allowed entertainment to supersede the creation of healthy relationships. By employing love washing, the show has conflated the abusive behaviour to be leftover emotions from Matt's ex-wife cheating on him and becoming pregnant with the other man's child (Coelen et al., 2020/2022). However, this narrative ignores the short and long-term effects of abuse, such as the (external) pressure one might feel to stay in a relationship (e.g., being filmed on their wedding day) (Morley, 2022). Therefore, by making this situation about cheating rather than abusive behaviours, we allow the fault and actions needed to repair the relationship to be easily identifiable, making the couple more relatable to the audience. Moreover, by ignoring Matt's abusive tendencies, the show does not need to acknowledge what abuse is or how it may look. For instance, the show ignores how Matt's actions may reflect the three aspects of the narcissistic abuse cycle. According to Saxena (2021), "the narcissistic abuse cycle is a pattern of highs and lows in which the narcissist confuses their partner through manipulation and calculated behaviors aimed at making their partner question themselves. The cycle has three specific phases: Idealization (e.g., discussing marriage), devaluation (e.g.,poor or lack of communication), and rejection (e.g., showing feelings of contempt and rage)." For example:

1. Idealization: In this phase of the relationship, Colleen was put on a pedestal and viewed as someone who would make the perfect wife. She could do no wrong, because they went through a process of vulnerability where they could share their deepest and darkest secrets while still being accepted by each other.

2. Devaluation: After being honest about her conversation with Cole to maintain honesty and openness in her relationship, Colleen is taken off the pedestal that she was once on (i.e., she can not be the perfect wife because she does not respect their relationship). As such, she is considered worthless to him, and he uses words to put her down (e.g., telling her she does not respect the relationship), ultimately making himself the victim.

3. Rejection: After being verbally aggressive, Matt tries to disengage from the relationship by rejecting her and saying that he is unable to be with some like her, someone that would do what she has done to him (Coelen et al., 2020/2022).

Furthermore, it shows the idealization of intimacy by ignoring the existence of abuse. Without providing aid or telling Matt that what he has done is wrong, the audience who has never been abused may perceive his actions as a sign of love, causing the audience to accept the action or commit similar actions in the future.

The analysis of "Love Is Blind" above showcases how DRTS engage in love washing by minimizing the negative aspects of each relationship and trying to pass them off as a bump in the road that helped the couple to participate in self-discovery. The scene showcases individuals participating and engaging in intimacy in an idealistic way. However, as pointed out above, while idealistic, it can present problems regarding how we view our personal lives and interpersonal relationships. It causes us to adopt narratives and schemas that are not true. In other words, by believing what we view on TV as true, we slip further and further away from being able to achieve intimacy (i.e., the media deflates the exact concept it tries to promote) (Peek & Beresin, 2016; Taylor et al., 2022). We begin to look for an edited version of intimacy rather than a realistic version of intimacy.

Conclusion

The age of technology is upon us, taking society towards a hyper-reality created by mass media. As a result, today, the perception and engagement of relationships and how they work are changing, as relationships transform from a local and interpersonal interaction between partners to a global and intrapersonal scale that creates an entertainment commodity. Today, the mass introduction of technology into all aspects of our lives has caused a societal shift, as individuals revolutionize how they learn about social norms and adapt their behaviours accordingly. For example, the creation of DRTS has introduced us to a passive yet intimate way of viewing the development of relationships. The audience is introduced to the good, bad, and ugly of all participants' relationships, and

they are supposed to accept these relationships as perfection and a desirable reality. In other words, reality shows are designed to make the real world indistinguishable from the world constructed on television. Thus, we integrate and internalize the information presented on them into our personal lives, values, and beliefs. Furthermore, they create a guide for what our lives ought to be, which insinuates that while reality TV shows give us a glimpse into an idealistic version of life. They can present problems regarding how we view our personal lives and interpersonal relationships, by sharing and creating unrealistic standards of how intimacy should be engaged in and perceived. This report used examples from "Love Is Blind" to explore how DRT has affected the dating process.

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