

*“I’m Sixteen and I’m Pregnant”*: A Rhetorical Analysis of *Teen Mom*

Viewer Influences and Pleasures

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved April 2012 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

April 2012

## ABSTRACT

Research literature and popular press articles were reviewed to uncover the influences and viewer pleasures received from watching reality television. A close semiotic analysis of the reality television program, *Teen Mom*, was conducted. The semiotic analysis looked at the characters, the structure of the show, and the show's use of graphics and audio to understand the show's influences on viewers. An analysis of the *Teen Mom* website and online forum was also conducted. Seventy-one viewer posts and 403 viewer responses were analyzed to uncover viewer reactions to the show. The results were significant in three ways. First, the producers of the show claim the show is meant to educate viewers on the effects of teen pregnancy. The analysis found that while the show sends educational messages, it also contradicts itself by glamorizing teen pregnancy. Second, the analysis of the online forum revealed the formation of close online communities among *Teen Mom* viewers. Third, the website analysis provided evidence of viewer pleasure resulting from voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies. It is plausible that *Teen Mom* viewers engage with the show for the opportunity to observe parts of other people's lives they would not normally be permitted to see. At the same time, viewers evaluate themselves in comparison to the *Teen Mom* cast members.

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When television was first introduced, no one could have predicted the extent to which it would develop and transform the daily lives of many people. Today, it is not uncommon for households to have one or more television sets throughout the home. Many people engage in watching television for entertainment purposes. That is to say, they derive some sort of pleasure from tuning in and watching a favorite program. This has caused scholars to turn their attention to understanding the attraction and effects of reality television.

For many years, scholars have been working to better understand the basis behind reality television and its influence on society and culture (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Murray & Ouellette, 2009). Over time, reality television developed into its own category of television programming. As a result, reality television has been investigated by scholars in various ways to discover its meaning and effects. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2004), authors of *Understanding Reality Television*, capture the complexity behind the concept of reality television when they wrote: “Reality TV is nevertheless complex . . . because of the range of programming to which the term ‘Reality TV’ has been applied, as well as the extent to which this has shifted over time with the emergence of further permutations in ‘reality-based’ text” (p. 2). The use of the all-encompassing general term in early scholarship, “reality television” made it difficult for scholars to identify a clear and mutually agreed upon definition. However, the explosion of reality television is partly responsible for it becoming its own genre.

Today, the number of reality television shows available for viewers to

watch is endless. Viewers can choose from crime shows such as *Cops* to dating shows like *The Bachelor* and every life interest in between. As a result of the reality television explosion, scholars have been working to better understand the influence reality television programs have on their viewers and the attraction of these viewers to reality television programs over fictional programs (Baruh, 2010; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Murray & Ouellette, 2009). In addition to the influence reality television has and the attraction viewers have to reality programs, online communities often form as a result of viewers interacting together in online forums. From a social perspective, reality television programs have the opportunity to influence viewers in different ways depending on the context of the show. The attraction to reality programs may be related to voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies in which viewers find pleasure. Voyeuristic tendencies relate to the opportunity for viewers to observe parts of people's lives they would not normally be permitted to see. Social comparison tendencies are understood as the evaluation process viewers participate in to better understand themselves. To understand the potential influences reality programs can have on audience members as well as the pleasures viewers may receive from engaging with reality programs, this thesis provides a detailed analysis of an until now overlooked reality television show, *Teen Mom*. Now preparing for its fifth season, *Teen Mom* quickly became one of MTV's most popular programs after it debuted in 2009. The show's premier drew in 3.65 million viewers, the highest in MTV's history (Thielman, 2011). Jennifer Armstrong (2010), a reporter for *Entertainment Weekly*, characterized the show as follows:

This scrappy series about real kids grappling with custody battles, waitressing jobs, midnight diaper runs and extreme family dysfunction is a best-of-both-worlds phenomenon for MTV: Not only is it a buzzy ratings hit, with an average of 3.4 million viewers and a barrage of recent celebrity-magazine covers focused on the teen stars, but it also serves to showcase the network's socially conscious side by leading the national discussion about birth control, abstinence, and adoption. (p. 54)

*Teen Mom* quickly became a popular choice for reality television viewers. As a result of the of the show's content, its purpose was soon called into question by critics with regard to the show's impact on viewers.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: first, it works to identify the show's influences on viewers and, second, it works uncover and identify the pleasure viewers take in watching the show. The analysis begins by contextualizing the show within the history and types of reality programs. It then moves into a close semiotic analysis that examines the characters, the structure of the show, and the show's use of graphics and audio to identify potential effects the show may have on its viewers. Next, the analysis provides an in-depth analysis of the show's related website to better understand viewer pleasure in watching the show. Finally, the analysis takes a close look at the show and its accompanying media in terms of voyeuristic and social comparison theory in order to speculate on the pleasures viewers receive from engaging with the program.



## Reality Television: A Brief History and Types

Discussing the explosion in reality television that began in approximately 1990, television and film director John Patterson (2001) pinpoints the beginning of reality programming. He wrote:

If I had been asked to define the term ‘reality TV’ a year ago I would have said it described footage of the Rodney King beating, or the kind of crime shows that rely on security camera footage. Apparently I’ve got it all wrong. What the networks dub reality TV comes at us with musical cues on the soundtrack, manipulating editing . . . and ill-managed anger, all enacted by a cast of wannabe models, actors and game-show hosts. (p.12)

For many commentators, the history of reality television dates back to 1948.

According to scholar Bradley Clissold (2004), *Candid Camera*, created and produced by Allen Funt, was the first non-scripted television show to broadcast.

In a time filled with anxiety over governmental surveillance due to the Cold War, Funt’s work was meant to ease society’s angst through humor. The show coined the famous phrase, “Smile! You’re on *Candid Camera*.” Clissold credited *Candid Camera* with beginning reality television: “*Candid Camera* set the industry standard for capturing individuals in unguarded moments using an unobtrusive camera, while it helped to reinforce and perpetuate a ‘poetics of the real,’ an aesthetic to which recent Reality TV programming is indebted” (p. 33). What Clissold means by a poetics of the real is that reality television captures seemingly real moments occurring in real time. Over time this phenomenon developed in a

variety of different ways that television viewers welcomed. Following *Candid Camera*, additional reality programs were created with the intent to capture real people, with real stories, in real time.

Michael Essany (2008), author of a how-to guide for developing reality television shows, *Reality Check: The Business and Art of Producing Reality TV*, offers excellent insight into the history and production of reality television programs. As an American comedian, talk show host, and writer, Essany speaks with expert knowledge from inside the world of reality television. Essany provides an outline of the significant milestones that took place in the development of reality television. After *Candid Camera*, the next breakthrough occurred in 1973 when *An American Family* debuted. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) aired twelve episodes that observed the daily life and interactions of a California family of seven, the Louds. Originally, the show was meant to be a narrative of the family's daily life but ended up becoming a revolutionary program that documented the separation of the two parents, Bill and Pat Loud. Additionally, one of their five children, Lance Loud, was a twenty-year-old gay man who became a legend among the gay and lesbian community, as well as one of mainstream America's first introductions to homosexuality and gay culture. The documentary had a great impact on society's views of the "normal" American family and permanently transformed the style of documentary reality television in the United States (Essany, 2008).

The next milestone in the development of reality television occurred with the Writers Guild of America strike of 1988. The strike was the result of failed

negotiations between members of the writers' guild and producers pertaining to a residual hike on hour-long shows, additional creative rights, and cost cuts. It was the longest and most devastating strike in television history. It lasted twenty-two weeks, cost the industry a reported five-hundred million dollars, and caused hardship for strikers (Hanson, 2008). During the nearly six month strike, shows had nothing substantial or entertaining to work with during air time. The desire for content became so desperate that on the set of *Late Night*, David Letterman filled fifty minutes of air time by allowing someone to shave him. The lack of entertaining material caused a long delay in the fall television season and forced networks to broadcast reruns. According to Jonathan Mandell (2009), a reporter for CBS News, most of the public stopped watching television and about ten percent of the viewers never returned. As a result of viewer decline, networks began airing shows that did not require a script in hopes of quickly producing shows that would draw viewers back. Producers turned to unscripted shows not only as a quick means of production but as a way to release new shows with never before seen content.

Essany claims the writers' strike was the impetus behind the development of a wide variety of new reality television shows. The first of these was *Cops*, aired by Fox during the strike on Saturday evenings to fill the airways with new entertainment. The reality show followed police officers while on the job. Police units were equipped with cameras that captured the intense and often dramatic moments police officers endure. The show quickly became popular among

television viewers, and after twenty-four seasons, *Cops* has become the longest running reality television show.

The writers' strike period was also a significant moment in television industry history for financial reasons. In addition to the consequences of the writer's strike, television networks faced massive budget cuts. Chad Raphael (2009), a communication scholar, outlines a number of reasons for the television industry's financial crisis in his essay, "The Political Economic Origins of Reality-TV." The first reason relates to the expansion in the number of video distribution channels. The expansion occurred due to the advancement of cable networks, VCRs, the FOX network, and local independent channels. Viewers had more choices to fulfill their entertainment desires. The second reason was perhaps a consequence of the video distribution expansion. Advertising earnings had to be divided among a greater number of distributors. As a result, cuts in advertising spending burdened broadcasters and cablecasters with the responsibility to cut per-program production costs. Finally, as a result of the distribution expansion, television audiences were scattered. Each network would have to come up with a way to win the attention of viewers in order to increase profits.

Reality television seemed to be the answer not only to television's content crisis but to its financial crisis as well. According to Raphael (2009), reality television was virtually the only category of prime-time programming unaffected during the financial crisis. Television dramas that lasted one hour and sitcoms that lasted thirty minutes lost a reported \$100,000 to \$300,000 per episode, while reality programs lost no money during the same year (Raphael, 2009). Hoping to

overcome the financial crisis, networks clung to the stability reality television seemed to offer. As Raphael explained, reality television was cheaper to produce because: “these programs largely did away with higher-priced stars and union talent . . . Reali-TV programs also cut costs by whole heartedly embracing low-end production values” (p. 128-130). The success of reality television positively addressed the industry’s budget crisis, which encouraged the development of additional reality television shows. Television networks began to draw viewers back in and did so at little cost.

Following the Writer’s Guild Strike, Fox began airing new entries in the reality television genre, including *America’s Most Wanted* in 1988 and *America’s Funniest Home Videos* in 1990. It was during this era that audience participation began. For example, *America’s Most Wanted* relied heavily on audience viewers to report information regarding fugitives to the show’s anonymous hotline and these audience tips often led to the capture of fugitives by law enforcement. Advances in technology, such as electronic voting, also allowed audience members to become part of the show. In *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, audience members voted on their favorite video to determine the winner of the show. The beginning of audience participation was another pivotal moment in reality television history. Audience participation connected viewers to reality programs in a new way that invited them to become part of the program. Scholars Estella Tincknell and Parvati Raghuram (2004) identified viewers that participated with reality programs as being an active audience, ultimately altering the passive role audiences traditionally played. Tincknell and Raghuram

suggested: “the development of new kinds of ‘interactive’ media texts makes the idea of the ‘active’ audience newly interesting, suggesting that such audiences may go beyond simply responding to a text—they may also help to change it” (p. 254). Never before had audience viewers played such an active role in changing the content of television programs. It is plausible that audiences felt empowered by their new role in transforming reality television programs.

Not long after the release of *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, MTV began broadcasting the reality television show *The Real World* in 1992. *The Real World* pushed the boundaries of reality television. This program differed from previous reality shows in that diverse groups of cast members were required to live together in a specific location and allow their lives to be taped. Producers then created a story line for each episode by editing the raw footage. Prior to *The Real World*, reality shows were not constructed by producers choosing a group of cast members to record in an unnatural environment. The structure of *The Real World* significantly transformed reality television. According to Essany (2008):

*The Real World* fused the emotional powder-keg elements of *An American Family* with the voyeuristic style of *Candid Camera* and presented a culturally and socially relevant program that wasn’t afraid to explore an assortment of issues facing American youth. (p. 21)

Over the course of eighteen seasons, *The Real World* documented and broadcast discussions about a wide range of social topics (Essany, 2008). In an effort to connect with audiences in a personal way never before seen, sex, alcohol, drugs, race, violence, and sexual orientation were all addressed by the show’s cast

members. Typically, each season the cast contains a gay and/or bi-sexual member, an African American cast member, a cast member who indulges in alcohol or drugs and typically loses control at some point during the season, and one or two members with conservative views. For example, the most recent season of *The Real World* aired in 2011. The cast was comprised of a conservative male and female, a lesbian, a bi-sexual male, a liberal African American female, a young carefree beach girl, and a male jock. Over the course of the season, this group of diverse individuals clashed, came together, grew apart, overcame moral and ethical issues, and formed romances. The conservative male and female became an item and decided to separate themselves because their morals clashed with some of the others' (mainly the bi-sexual male's overwhelming urge to push his beliefs onto the couple). Oddly enough, the conservative male eventually formed a friendship with the lesbian cast member. The bi-sexual male often indulged in too much alcohol, which resulted in conflicts with his roommates. *The Real World* producers were the first to hit upon a sure-fire formula for attracting a heterogeneous audience: a diverse group of cast members were chosen to attract a variety of viewers who can find at least one cast member to relate to on the show. The larger the viewing audience the show captured, then the higher the ratings. A diverse cast more opportunity for a wider range of viewers to experience pleasure by identifying with (or hating) individual cast members, an ingenious strategy to follow as television audiences continued to fragment throughout the 90's.

Since the early days of *Cops*, *America's Funniest Home Videos*, and *The Real World*, the explosion of reality television over the last decade has seen the

number and types of shows grow tremendously. Essany identifies multiple categories that have emerged: competition reality, celebrity reality, personal improvement and makeover reality, renovation and design reality, professional reality, forced environment reality, romance reality, aspiration reality, fear-based reality, sports reality, undercover reality, and documentary reality. The following section discusses each of these in turn the better to contextualize and situate *Teen Mom*.

### **Competition Reality**

Beginning in 1983, competition reality television made its debut with Ed McMahon's, *Star Search* (Essany, 2008). This form of reality television proffers the talents of young performers as they compete against their peers. Typically, the cast will be made up of a witty host and judges who rate the young performers. Competition reality programs are among the most popular forms of reality-based entertainment. *American Idol* is one of the more recent and most popular competition-based reality shows and is responsible for turning several unknown young singers into pop stars. Making its debut in the summer of 2002, *American Idol* is responsible for the stardom of Kelly Clarkson, Carrie Underwood, Taylor Hicks, and Jordin Sparks. In addition to these winners, a number of other runner-up's have also managed to parlay their appearances into careers. The cast members are not the only ones to earn fame and fortune on this show. The judges also consist of a number of celebrity comebacks including Paula Abdul, Simon Cowell, and Randy Jackson.



As mentioned earlier, audience participation transformed reality television. *American Idol* took this phenomena one step further. While the judges provide feedback on the contestants' performances, so does the audience. Not just the audiences present in the studio but audience members at home also have the opportunity to weigh in, in real time. This allows for viewers to become a part of the show and also contribute to the final outcome of the season.

### **Celebrity Reality**

Celebrity reality shows document the everyday lives of popular celebrities. The vast numbers of celebrity reality shows are due to the public's interest in the lives and families of famous people. *The Osbournes*, *The Anna Nichole Show*, and *Hogan Knows Best* are just few of the celebrity shows that have aired in recent years. Celebrity reality television differs from other forms in that the celebrity "plays" the character of him or herself. Essany (2008) argues that this type is the most removed from any actual reality. However, it seems to be among the most popular forms of reality television solely because of the public's interest in the lives of celebrities. It is plausible that viewers are attracted to these types of reality shows due to the pleasure they receive from watching the extravagant and wealthy lifestyles portrayed on these shows, while simultaneously witnessing the extremely dysfunctional lives of the celebrities.

### **Personal Improvement and Makeover Reality**

Personal improvement and makeover reality television shows are also among the most popular and inexpensive forms of reality television being produced (Essany, 2008). Viewers are extremely attracted to these shows mainly

because of the ability to relate to cast members based on the viewer's own desire for self-improvement. Jennifer Pozner (2010), a media scholar and author of *Reality Bites Back*, exposes the potential consequences that makeover television can have for its viewers. Pozner wrote: "In the fashion and makeover genre participants who reject the philosophy of consumer culture are aggressively scolded, shamed, and cajoled into 'correcting' their wardrobes, makeup, hair-care rituals, homes, and most important, their economic priorities" (p. 150). Like Pozner, Ouellette and Hay (2008) also critique the many ways in which these types of reality shows encourage viewers to improve their appearance and status within society through these types of conventional alterations.

While there are potential negative consequences like those identified above, many of the shows simultaneously are meant to improve the health of their contestants (Pozner, 2010; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). One of the most popular current shows in this genre is *The Biggest Loser*. This show requires contestants to live together while competing against each other to lose the most weight. There are two teams that compete in different challenges while hitting the gym and enjoying a healthy diet. At the end of each week the contestants are weighed in front of a studio audience. The team who lost the most is the winner for the week, while the losing team is forced to eliminate a team member. On one hand, personal improvement shows promote the obvious health benefits of losing weight, all be it in a controlled environment. There have been many successful life-changing stories as a result of being a contestant on the show. Season seven reportedly consisted of the heaviest and sickest group of contestants to ever be on

the show. And its conclusion, Helen Phillips, age forty-five, won the grand prize after losing a hundred and forty pounds or 54.47 percent of her body weight. On the other hand, personal improvement shows often degrade and judge contestants based on what society deems acceptable. Scholars, like Pozner, also criticize these types of shows for the various humiliation tactics used for entertainment and dramatization purposes. For example, during the contestants' weigh in sessions, they wear form-fitting spandex outfits without full coverage of their upper body. They are then called one by one to step on a huge scale as the entire world learns the exact weight of each person. At the end of each episode, those who did not lose enough weight are shamed and the team that won is praised. The mixed treatment of contestants creates the drama factor sought by viewers of this type of reality show.

### **Renovation and Design Reality**

Renovation and design reality is similar to makeover reality television; it sends a message about the need for improvement. The difference between the two genres is that renovation and design reality focuses on home as opposed to individual improvement (Essany, 2008). These reality programs include shows like *Design on a Dime* and *Designed to Sell* where an individual house is renovated on a small budget. Many of the shows that make up this genre feed on strict time constraints and high emotional levels. The limited amount of time and money calls for creativity from cast members, in turn, causing intense moments of stress and excitement for viewers throughout the design process. Possibly the best example of this is *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Debuting in 2003, the show

chooses a deserving family and remodels their home to accommodate some sort of special need, usually a physical disability. The cast recruits the family's community to pitch in while the family enjoys a week vacation at Walt Disney World. Another emotional component that this type of reality program illustrates includes the personal story of the chosen cast member. More often than not, the chosen cast member will have a heart-tugging story that plays on viewer emotions, creating the drama that attracts the viewers. These heartfelt stories make the homeowners appear especially deserving of the renovations. One of the most recent *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* was for families affected by the devastating tornadoes that hit Joplin, Missouri, in 2011. The families lost their home, security, and in some situations their loved ones. Most viewers would agree the selected family members are deserving of the renovations given what they have endured. This is a key element to the success of these shows: the emotional feelings viewers tend to feel when exposed to the trauma experienced by other people.

### **Professional Reality**

Professional reality television shows document a cast of people performing their professional career roles, such as *Cops*, *Miami Inc.*, and *American Chopper* (Essany, 2008). The first type of professional reality show focuses on a specific career field, for example, *Cops*. *Cops* consists of a camera crew riding along with on-duty police officers to capture the dangerous and difficult tasks that are required while on the job. Another, more recent example is *Deadliest Catch*. Produced by Original Productions for the Discovery Channel in

2005, *Deadliest Catch* documents the real life moments of fishermen during the Alaskan king crab and C. opilio crab fishing season. The show captures the dangerous conditions of the Bering Sea and below-freezing temperatures the crew must overcome to make a living. The storyline goes beyond the basic job responsibilities to depict the brotherhood shared amongst the fishing crew.

The second type of professional reality show follows individuals as they compete for their dream career. This can be seen on shows such as *The Apprentice* and *Making the Band*. *The Apprentice* requires professional business men and women to compete against each other to win a job working for Donald Trump. The show coined the famous phrase, “You’re fired,” which is used each time Trump eliminates a competitor. *Making the Band* is similar to *The Apprentice*, except instead of professional business men and women competing, rock groups compete against each other in the hopes of becoming the next famous band to make it big. Sean John Combs, now known as Diddy, oversees the bands and makes the final winning decision. These reality shows overlap with competitive reality television as many of these individuals compete for the same career path.

### **Forced-Environment Reality**

Forced-environment reality shows require cast members to reside in a specific location. The location is often the main theme of the reality show. While reality shows like *Big Brother* and *The Real World* also overlap other categories, they are also a part of this genre because cast members are required to live in a location chosen by producers. The location is obviously the most significant

component of this genre. For example, each season *The Real World* has moved to different locations, including Las Vegas, San Diego, and New Orleans. The location becomes a part of the show's storyline. For example, during the season of *The Real World: New Orleans*, cast member built a new house for a family affected by Hurricane Katrina. *Big Brother* is somewhat different from *The Real World* in that cast members reside in the same house every season, The Big Brother House. The house is also a main component of the show with rooms that are named after the main roles of the game. For example, there is an HOH room (Head of Household room) where the winner of the HOH lives for a week and is given special accommodations including their own room, bathroom, and pictures of their loved ones. There is also the Have Not's room. This is where members who have lost the "have not" competition reside and endure restricted privileges for a week.

Scholars Jon Kraszewski (2009) and Pozner (2010) criticize this type of reality show for forcing individuals from different cultures, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds to cohabitate merely for dramatic entertainment. Kraszewski (2009) argues that *The Real World* mediates and constructs racism through its production practices and location. He used an example of a season that was taped in New York City:

The reality encountered on the show was partially created through the casting decisions of the producers . . . who chose . . . three individuals who might who might have potential conflicts over race. The reality was also shaped by the decisions made about where to film. (p. 205-206)

Such constructed reality tends to push ethical boundaries within reality television while at the same time adding to the success of these shows. Another example of this occurred during the 2011 season of *The Real World* where, as stated earlier, a conservative cast member and a liberal bisexual cast member often found themselves in conflict. Because of their vastly different lifestyles and beliefs, the two fought and argued with each other during the entire season. Producers constructed the reality by carefully choosing cast members who held very different views. Here, such casting decisions not only ensure a diverse audience, they build in guaranteed conflicts and, hence, televised drama.

### **Romance Reality**

Dating back to *The Dating Game*, which first aired in 1965, romance reality has transformed over time and emerged in a new form with the premier of *The Bachelor* in 2001. *The Dating Game* consisted of a “bachelorette” asking three eligible bachelors a series of questions without being able to see what the men looked like. The bachelor who had the most appealing answers to the bachelorette won a date. The show also consisted of a bachelor interviewing three bachelorettes in the same fashion. *The Dating Game* is one the most famous reality shows of this genre. Over time, this genre has undergone several iterations, *The Bachelor* becoming the most popular version in recent years. This show consists of an attractive, often rich, single bachelor looking for love and a pool of single, attractive ladies who express their interest in dating or marrying the bachelor. The show requires the women to live in a house together while the bachelor dates the women, eliminating them over time. Drama in this series stems

from cat fights, deceptions, and dramatic, heart breaking eliminations that differ vastly from winning a single date like on *The Dating Game*. More often than not, romance reality shows are designed like game shows with the prize being an eligible bachelor or bachelorette. Since the release of *The Bachelor*, this has become the most popular genre of reality television (Essany, 2008). Romance reality television is expected to remain among the most popular forms in the future years as producers develop new and creative ways of match making.

### **Aspiration Reality**

Aspiration reality television is a unique category because it often combines more than one type of reality programming (Essany, 2008). More often than not, aspiration reality shows combine elements of competitive and professional reality television programs. This type of reality television calls for producers to select cast members after viewing their talents and skills prior to filming. Essany cautions readers against this type of reality program because producers will often choose untalented cast members strictly for entertainment value and a potential increase in ratings. An example of aspiration reality television is the popular show *America's Next Top Model*. Women submit live footage and photographs of themselves in the hope of being chosen to compete to become a professional supermodel. The women are chosen based on their talents, looks, and the capacity of their personal stories to serve as dramatic entertainment.

This genre differs from other reality shows in that there does not have to be a prize or a winner or a loser. The show's narrative can simply consist of a



contestant's talent and struggle to succeed. *Project Greenlight*, for example, was a reality series that focused on first-time film makers who were given the opportunity to direct a feature film. Contestants submitted screen plays to producers in hopes of being chosen to participate in constructing a feature film. The show ran only for three seasons but gave a few aspiring film directors a chance to launch their careers. While the chosen cast members were given an opportunity to contribute to the making of a featured film, there was no winner who won a tangible prize.

### **Fear-Based Reality**

The first fear-based reality television program, aptly named *Fear*, premiered on MTV in 2000 (Essany, 2008). *Fear* was created with a cast of contestants who were filmed while spending a weekend in what was believed to be a haunted house. While the program had extremely high ratings, it only lasted two seasons because of its high production costs. This did not discourage other networks from following in MTV's footsteps, however, since 2003, *Scare Tactics* was released, followed by NBC's *Fear Factor*. *Fear Factor* differed from *Scare Tactics* and MTV's *Fear* in that it was not based on horror tactics, ultimately making it less scary. *Fear Factor* consisted of teams who competed against each other to win money. The teams were required to complete a series of professional stunts and occasionally eat bizarre items, such as worms and animal intestines, in order to win a grand prize. The contestants who were too afraid to complete tasks lost the game. While fear-based reality programs are quite popular among

viewers, according to Essany, the future remains uncertain for these types of reality shows due to the high costs of producing the programs.

### **Sports Reality**

Sports reality television is one of the newest categories in a certain sense. It could be argued that professional sports such as basketball or football are reality television shows in their own right: real athletes form a team and compete for a championship. However, sports reality in its newest form consists of reality programs that film real people who are not professional athletes taking part in a well-known physical activity. Sports reality television is much like the competition reality genre. *The Contender*, for example, films amateur boxers competing against each other to win a grand prize. Sports reality shows often combine competitive and aspiration reality tactics over the course of a season to allow contestants the opportunity to compete for a prize of some sort. In addition to *The Contender*, *WWE's Tough Enough* and *UFC's Ultimate Fighter* have also become popular shows in this category. However, there has yet to be a sports reality show produced that is as popular as other reality shows in the different categories.

### **Undercover Reality**

As mentioned earlier, *Candid Camera* was the first reality television program and it remains perhaps the best example of undercover reality television. Undercover reality is best known for its humorous pranks and gags captured on film. A more recent example of this genre can be seen in MTV's *Jackass*. Produced in 2002, *Jackass* documented outrageous, dangerous, cruel, and at times

disgusting stunts and pranks performed by the show's hosts: Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, and Steve-O. As a result of the show's popularity, three *Jackass* films have been produced and released by MTV since 2002. While these reality shows were initially quite popular, this genre as a whole has become less popular among television viewers. As its viewership has declined, it has migrated to the internet, where primarily young men continue to prank unsuspecting victims and post the footage to YouTube (Essany, 2008).

### **Documentary Reality**

All of the above categories, in some way, can be said to emerge from the documentary film and television tradition. Documentaries are perhaps the most well known and true form of reality television (Essany, 2008; Corner, 2009; Murray, 2009). Documentaries are most often created to inform viewers of a significant issue. Typically, these documentaries hold a political or social position (Murray, 2009). *An American Family* is an excellent example of documentary in its traditional form (Essany, 2008). The show consisted of a camera crew filming the everyday struggles of a family in their natural setting. The main purpose of the documentary was to depict what a nuclear family looked like in America.

In Susan Murray's (2009) essay, "I Think We Need a New Name For It," she defines reality television by analyzing documentaries in relation to reality programs. Her title, "I Think We Need a New Name For It," calls for an additional term to be introduced in order to describe the shift that has occurred from traditional documentaries to modern day reality television documentaries. In her essay, she mentions the concept of "docusoap." A docusoap can be

considered a sub-category of documentaries and the definition is helpful when distinguishing between reality television programs and documentaries. A docusoap is a combination of a documentary and a soap opera. According to Murray (2009), docusoaps can be understood as:

the types of reality programs that share the most textual and aesthetic characteristics with documentaries [that] tend to focus on the everyday lives of their subjects in somewhat ‘natural’ settings without a game setup, use cinema verite techniques, and do not contain flagrantly commercial elements such as product placement or the promise of prizes. (p. 67)

This style of documentary goes beyond the traditional documentary discussed earlier. The storyline is created by editing raw footage to eliminate meaningless footage and expose the most dramatic occurrences for entertainment purposes. Scholar Stella Bruzzi (2000) also discusses docusoaps in great detail in her book, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. In her attempt to distinguish docusoaps from traditional documentaries, she wrote:

Docusoaps tend to comprise short sequences and to intercut different narrative strands, not necessarily to create a point through such juxtapositions, but rather to move the story along; they also frequently have opening sequences that introduce the audience to the ‘characters’ each episode will focus upon, closing sequences that anticipate the next episode and function hooks to maintain audience interest and often give each episode a title. (p. 78)

This definition is much different from the traditional “fly on the wall” documentary where the camera is merely there to observe the subject’s behavior. Docusoaps create and construct story lines for entertainment. MTV’s, *The Real World*, is an almost perfect example of a docusoap. This reality television show documents the everyday lives of its cast members without a promise of winning a prize or gaining something tangible. However, the cast members of *The Real World* are not filmed in their natural environment. Although, a better example of a docusoap is MTV’s newest hit reality show, *Teen Mom*. This new reality show documents the lives of teen mothers in their natural environment to share a story about their trials and tribulations with viewers. *Teen Mom* can be considered a docusoap in that a narrative is constructed from different sequences to portray a story that has opening introductions and closing sequences.

### **MTV and Reality Television**

MTV made its mark on reality television programming, producing several mega hit shows over the years. It is almost impossible to mention reality television without referencing the popular television network. MTV has produced a reality program that fits virtually every category. To gain further insight into the rise of MTV’s production of reality programming, the next section will explore the rise of the well-liked television network and its transformation from music to reality television.

MTV made its debut on August 1, 1981, as a new music channel that aired the latest hit music videos. Creator and president Robert Pittman began contemplating the television network in the late 1970’s (Liodice, 2010). Initially,

MTV was a music television channel with on-air hosts called VJ's or video jockeys. Over the last thirty years, MTV has radically transformed not only the music industry, but reality television programming as well. In 1987, which is often referred to as "a year of firsts," MTV launched *Week in Rock* which offered the latest trends in music, fashion, and pop culture. The network also premiered *MTV News*, and during this same year, became the first network to air an AIDS awareness campaign ("Billboard," 2006). Over the next several years, MTV began to transform its program offerings. Between 1999 and 2001, MTV reduced the amount of air time dedicated to music videos and began to broadcast MTV specials, including *MTV Uncensored* in 1999 and *MTV20: Live and Almost Legal* in 2001 ("Billboard," 2006).

MTV further shifted its focus from music videos to its first reality television programming. *The Real World* and *Road Rules* were MTV's first entries, and proved extremely popular with viewers. Both are still well-liked today. The popularity of these shows encouraged MTV to develop additional reality series. Over the last two decades MTV has produced several hit reality shows including: *Battle of the Exes*, *Jersey Shore*, *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, *Parent Control*, *Pranked*, *The Challenge*, *The Hills*, and *True Life*. In addition to these popular shows, *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* are two of the newest groundbreaking reality shows produced by MTV.

### ***16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom***

*16 and Pregnant* first aired on June 11, 2009. Produced by Morgan Freeman and Dia Savage, this reality television show follows the lives of teen

girls who are sixteen years old when they become pregnant. *16 and Pregnant* quickly became one of the most popular shows on television. Each season consists of a series of episodes that focus on a pregnant sixteen year old as she prepares for motherhood. The show captures the teen's personal struggles with her impending motherhood as well as her family, friends, and often the father of the baby. The show's episodes follow the teen all the way to the first few weeks following childbirth. As a result of the show's popularity, MTV produced a spinoff, *Teen Mom*, in December of 2009. The show drew in 3.65 million viewers (Thielman, 2011). For *Teen Mom* four of the girls from *16 and Pregnant* were chosen to have their most intimate moments in motherhood documented over a longer period of time. In *16 and Pregnant* only a few months of the girls' lives are filmed and each teen is given one episode to share her story. However, in *Teen Mom*, the teens' lives are filmed such that longer periods of their lives are shared. In addition to *Teen Mom*, producers also created *Teen Mom 2* in 2011. The show shares the same concept and structure as *Teen Mom*, only the cast consists of a different set of teen moms from a later season of *16 and Pregnant*.

### ***Teen Mom: The Debate***

There has been a long struggle in the United States to decrease teen pregnancy rates. Among Western industrialized countries, teen pregnancy and birth rates are highest in the United States (Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, Chen, & Fitzgerald, 2008). For many years, communication scholars have studied the relationship between sexual activity displayed in mass media, specifically television programs, and its effects on teen viewers. Many scholars argue that the

portrayal and depiction of teen sexuality on television can encourage teens to become and continue to be sexually active at a young age (Van Damme, 2010; Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008). While there are hundreds of different television channels available to viewers, MTV especially has been criticized as well as supported for its televised programs in this debate.

It is unusual for television networks to claim that a reality show is produced for a specific educational purpose. MTV is the only network to claim that the *Teen Mom* series is meant to educate teens on the realities of teen pregnancy. The producers of *Teen Mom* and MTV stand by their message that the series is meant to educate teens on the dangers of teen sex while promoting abstinence as a prominent source of birth control. In an interview with Armstrong (2010), Amy Kramer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy stated: "Being able to see this stuff close-up and in this gritty way is really powerful. It's not a happy ending, which is what real life is like" (p. 55). Producer Morgan Freeman similarly asserted: "Our mandate is to go in and get the unvarnished truth. Just getting to know these teens and letting this whole process breathe is extremely powerful television" (p. 55). Later, Freeman added that their mission is to document the "challenges of parenting at this age" (p. 55). In addition, MTV works closely with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. This organization provides teens with sex education online and in school. The campaign seems to fully support the television series as an effective educational medium for promoting safe sex.



The parents of the teen mothers and the teen moms of the series also argue that their goal and purpose in sharing their stories with others is educational. A mother of one of the teen moms stated: "I look at Maci as your all-American kid. Pregnancy is not something that happens to that kind of kid. I thought if she got her story out there, some of these kids would realize it can happen to them." Amber, one of the teen moms, also explained in frustration: "If you think it glamorizes on teen pregnancy, I don't know what's wrong with you . . . It shows these girls who want to have babies really young how hard it really is" (Armstrong, 2010, p. 54). The interviews conducted by Armstrong illustrate one side of the debate as expressed by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, the producers, the parents of the teen girls, and the teen moms themselves.

However, other critics argue that MTV is, in fact, promoting and glamorizing teen pregnancy. An article published in the *New York Post* on February 9, 2011, reported that MTV's *Teen Mom* reality series may be causing teens to become pregnant for the fame and attention, calling these teens "copycat moms." *The New York Post* reports, "Three of *Teen Mom 2* Jenelle Evan's friends have gotten pregnant within the past year, while 'Mom' Chelsea Houska's roommate, Megan Nelson, also has a bun in the oven." Megan Nelson then premiered on *Teen Mom 2* as Chelsea's roommate. This article raises a significant question: If close friends of these teen moms are not receiving the educational message, how well is the larger audience receiving it? *The New York Times* and *ABC News* also reported stories regarding the debate. In April 2011 *The New*

*York Times* discussed the controversy over high school teachers using the reality show as an example in parenting classes. Like *The New York Post*, *ABC News* questioned if the show is encouraging teen pregnancy for fame in February 2011.

Along with the fame and attention perceived by the so called “copycat moms,” money may be a motivator for teens to become pregnant. Reality “stars” are paid for being a part of a reality series. While the exact amount of income the *Teen Mom* cast members receive is unclear, there are reports that claim one of the teen moms, Amber Portland, is earning two hundred and eighty thousand dollars a year from MTV (Serpe, 2010). Her income was allegedly documented during a court hearing when the judge demanded Amber to report her annual income. Conversely, other cast members argue that they are not celebrities and there is little money coming in (Inbar, 2010; Armstrong, 2010). In addition to these reports, teens as young as fourteen can be found posting their desire to become pregnant in an online forum that allows viewers to post comments and engage in conversation with each other. Kenna, fourteen, posted in the online forum “Ok I’m 14 almost 15 and I want to get pregnant!” She goes on to explain that she is fully aware of the difficulties of waking up every two hours and that she has a boyfriend with whom she could potentially become pregnant. She also acknowledges in the post that it would be difficult if the father were not involved, but that she could manage the challenges either way (“Stay Teen,” 2011). Such comments support the concerns of the critics who claim the series glamorizes teen pregnancy.

The controversy over the messages sent to teens by the series calls attention to the educational benefits and potential consequences the series may or may not send. Additional research needs to be conducted on MTV as an educational forum in order to gauge the potential cost/benefits of such reality television series such as *Teen Mom*. To gain further insight into the hit series, this project now turns to an in-depth analysis of *Teen Mom* in order to better understand the messages that emerge and may be conveyed to different sets of viewers.

### **Teen Mom Analysis**

#### **Characters**

*Teen Mom* follows the lives of four teenagers as they adapt to their lives as teenage mothers. The series captures the most intimate moments and struggles of each teen as they settle into their new roles as young parents. There are two series: *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. Both are set up exactly the same, the only difference is that there are two different sets of teen mom cast members. *Teen Mom* has completed three seasons and *Teen Mom 2* has completed two.

Like their MTV reality television predecessors, the producers have done an excellent job of choosing a diverse group of teens from different parts of the United States, who have different backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and different struggles to overcome. While the *Teen Mom* cast members are diverse in these aspects, there is not diversity in the race of the cast members. All of the cast members are Caucasian. This is interesting because the cast members in *16 and Pregnant* are diverse with regard to race. MTV is also racially inclusive with

other shows like *The Real World*. It can be speculated that the producers choice to not be racially diverse was due to the potential dramatic stories the chosen cast members could produce. The diversity of the cast members in terms of background, economics and region allows for a wider audience to be reached as diverse viewers can each choose a different cast member with whom to identify. A larger audience obviously means higher ratings for the show and its profits. The main similarities among the girls are that they are all about the same age and overcoming similar challenges. The cast members for *Teen Mom* are Maci, Amber, Farrah, and Catelynn.

Maci Bookout lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee, with her boyfriend Kyle and her son Bentley. Ryan is the father of Bentley who also lives in the same town. Both parents come from an upper-middle-class family and have received emotional and financial support from their parents. Maci and Ryan share custody of their son and have struggled to develop a stable co-parenting relationship over the last two years. Maci is currently working on her degree in journalism and stays home with her son. Attending college has been a struggle for Maci. She is torn between the demands of motherhood and the responsibilities of attending college. Kyle, has been dating Maci for a little over a year, and he recently quit his job to move to Chattanooga. He is very involved in Bentley's life but is unsure about his and Maci's future together. The responsibility of being a stepparent and dealing with the issues between Ryan and Maci are a constant concern of his. The future of their relationship is unclear.

Amber Portwood lives in Anderson, Indiana, with her daughter Leah. Gary, the father of Leah, shares custody with Amber. Both Gary and Amber come from lower socioeconomic families and, with the exception of Gary's mother, have had little emotional and financial support from their families. Amber's experience with motherhood has been extremely difficult. After dropping out of high school, she struggles to receive her GED and has yet to pass the test. Her relationship with Gary has also been dysfunctional, to say the least. Amber and Gary have had a tumultuous on-again-off-again relationship. Recently, Amber was brought up on domestic abuse charges after the show aired a scene where Amber verbally and physically attacked Gary in front of Leah. As a result of media backlash and criticism, the state of Indiana arrested and charged Amber with three felony counts of domestic abuse. Following the arrest, Child Protective Services (CPS) was forced to step in. Amber and Gary were issued a no-contact order, and Amber was unable to keep Leah in her home. After several months, the no-contact order was lifted, Amber moved into her own home, and CPS continues to monitor Amber's progress. The couple is currently separated and the future of their relationship also remains uncertain.

Farah Abraham is from Council Bluffs, Iowa, and is mother to Sophia. Tragically, Sophia's father, Derek Underwood, died in a car accident before Sophia was born. Farrah has had a substantial amount of emotional and financial support from her mom and stepdad but little support from Derek's family. Farrah's experience with motherhood has been different from the other teen moms due to the unique and unfortunate circumstances surrounding the death of

Derek. Her mother, Debra, has been an important figure in Sophia's life despite the rocky relationship between Debra and Farrah. Over the last two years, the relationship has improved through therapy; however, the two continue to have disagreements on and off the show. Farrah has gone the furthest in her education of any of the other cast members. She graduated with her associate's degree in culinary arts and is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree from a university that caused her to relocate to another state. While she has excelled in her studies, she has faced criticism from viewers for her unpleasant attitude towards her parents. The most recent topic of criticism from viewers came from her consideration of leaving Sophia with her mother while she completed her bachelor's degree. Farrah has struggled with whether she will take Sophia with her or not and the final decision has not been publicized. She continues to work, attend college, and raise Sophia as a single mother.

Catelynn Lowell lives in Port Huron, Michigan, and is birth mother to a little girl named Carly. Tyler, the father of Carly, and Catelynn decided to give their daughter up for adoption after realizing they were not ready to raise a child. Like Amber Portwood, Tyler and Catelynn come from lower socioeconomic families. Tyler's mother is very involved in his life, but his father has been in and out of prison Tyler's entire life. Catelynn's mother is married to Tyler's father and is an emotionally unstable parent. Catelynn and Tyler are technically stepbrother and sister. Catelynn's father lives in another state and visits rarely. Despite Catelynn's and Tyler's upbringings, they are perhaps the two most responsible cast members on the show. They are attuned to one another's emotional needs and

support each other in every way possible. They have graduated high school, planned for college, begun working, and bought a small home. Because they have an open adoption, they have had the opportunity to stay connected to Carly as she develops and grows. The couple is engaged and is currently planning their future together.

For *Teen Mom 2*, the following teen moms were selected to participate and have their lives taped: Janelle, Chelsea, Kaiylin, and Leah. Each of the four girls starred in *16 and Pregnant* prior to being cast in the spin off, *Teen Mom 2*. Janelle Evans, nineteen, lives in Oak Island, North Carolina, with her mother, her mother's boyfriend, and her son, Jace. With limited finances and Jace's father completely out of her life, she struggles with motherhood. She seems to be more interested in partying and having romantic relationships than being a mother to her son. As a result, she has a rocky relationship with her mother, who gained temporary custody of Jace after Janelle signed over her parental rights. Janelle is one of the more troubled teen moms on the show. Over the course of the second season, she was arrested twice, caught stealing her mother's credit cards, and even became homeless at times. She relies heavily on her mom to help raise her son and struggles to prove that she can be a responsible parent and maintain her independence at the same time. While Janelle often finds herself in trouble with the law and out of work, she is enrolled in college courses. She seems to value education and excels in her studies, when she focuses on studying instead of partying. Viewers often criticize Janelle for her partying and poor decisions in online discussion forums. Over the course of the season, Janelle's character

depicts the difficulties of behaving like a carefree teenager and the consequences of making irresponsible decisions as a young mom.

Chelsea Houska, nineteen, lives in Vermillion, South Dakota, and comes from a middle-class family. She lives in a house that her father rents for her and her daughter, Aubree. Chelsea is in a constant on-again, off-again relationship with Aubree's father, Adam. The young couple has a difficult relationship and they struggle with trust issues, emotional abuse, lack of ambition, and other family issues. While Chelsea is a good mother to Aubree, she has trouble motivating herself to obtain her GED and enroll in beauty school. She has an extremely supportive family and network of friends but seems to rely on her father for all of her financial needs. Chelsea understands the trouble and difficulties in having a romantic relationship with Adam but, despite these, she is determined to try and keep her family together even if she has to sacrifice other close relationships. Chelsea's character over the season shows teens the struggles of obtaining a stable relationship with the father of her daughter but also paints an unrealistic financial picture. Without the financial support of her father, Chelsea and Aubree would not be able to afford a house of their own. In addition, were she self-supporting, Chelsea would have trouble affording the many extravagant shopping and spa days with her teenage friends. Chelsea's story fails to stress the realities of being a high school dropout as a young teen mom, especially in today's economy.

Kailyn Lowry, eighteen, lives in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, with her son, Isaac. Kailyn is an extremely responsible young woman with a lot of ambition and



is working to become a dental hygienist. Unlike the other teen moms, Kailyn was in an interracial relationship with her son's father, Jo, who is Hispanic. She has had a difficult time since she and Jo found out they were pregnant. For the majority of her pregnancy, she lived with Jo's family after her relationship with her mother grew extremely difficult. After Isaac was born, the couple tried to raise their baby together but because of the stress that comes with parenting, the couple was unsuccessful and ended their relationship. Still living with Jo's parents, Kailyn moved into the basement with her son and ended up having to leave the home after Jo and his family discovered she was dating someone new. With nowhere to go, Kailyn and Isaac moved into her mother's home. Kailyn realizes that she is the only person she can depend on to raise her son in a stable household and began working two jobs while attending the community college full time. She reached out to a service for teen moms with low incomes and was able to receive housing assistance for herself and Isaac. Like Chelsea, her relationship with Jo is rocky. At times he has a tendency to be emotionally abusive towards Kailyn whenever he becomes upset with her. However, while they struggle to maintain a healthy relationship, the two are very much involved with raising their son. Kailyn's character on the show is an important one. Her story shows teens the reality of being a single teen mom with very little support. She manages to juggle two jobs, a full load of school, and a boyfriend while being a fulltime mother.

Leah Simms, eighteen, lives in Elkview, West Virginia, with her husband, Corey, and their twin daughters, Ali and Aleeah. Leah, a former cheerleader,

sacrificed her time with her teenage friends and position on the cheerleading squad to graduate high school and be a full-time mother to her twin girls. At first, Leah and Corey had a challenging relationship. They did not know each other very long before Leah became pregnant and, as a result, Leah was not sure if she wanted to be in a romantic relationship with Corey. The young couple was separated for the first few months of their daughters' lives until the two discovered that Ali was developing much slower than Aleeah. As a result the two came together and formed a strong intimate bond. Within months of reuniting as a couple, Corey proposed to Leah and the two were married. The two became a traditional all-American young family: Leah stayed at home with their children and Corey worked full time to support his family. While they seem to be the perfect young family, raising twins is a difficult task, especially when one may be disabled. Leah's character is very different from the other teen moms. She and Corey support their family as a couple, they have two babies that they take care of instead of one, and one of the babies has potential handicaps. While popular media critics argue that the producers sent unrealistic message to teen viewers by glamorizing the teens' wedding, others argue that producers sent the message of the potential difficulties of raising twins as well as the emotional and physical challenges of raising a baby with special needs.

For both *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, producers chose a diverse group of teen mothers to follow. The various character types attract a wide range of viewers. The different dramatic tensions send mixed messages to viewers concerning teen pregnancy, and refute as well as reinforce different stereotypes.

The producers of both shows have been able to attract a wide demographic: females ranging from twelve to thirty-four years old. This is partly due to each cast member appealing to a different type of viewer. Both *Teen Mom* series cast members encompass the full range of U.S. demographics: they each have poor, middle-class, or wealthy families, different employment statuses, various educational goals, and make irresponsible or responsible choices. This range allows viewers to relate to the teen moms on various levels. Amber, Catelynn, Leah, Janelle, and Kailyn each come from lower socioeconomic families that depict different financial struggles than Maci, Farrah, and Chelsea who come from higher socioeconomic families. This gives viewers from lower or higher socioeconomic statuses the opportunity to relate with a cast member that complements their status. Viewers who struggle financially may be able to relate more with Kailynn who works two jobs and attends college full time than with Farrah who has financial support. Likewise, a viewer who does not struggle financially may be able to relate with Chelsea who lives in a nice house and indulges in spa days.

The employment status of each teen mom varies depending on their unique set of circumstances and offers viewers the opportunity to relate with the one most like them. Farrah, Catelynn, and Kailyn each hold a steady job, while Maci, Janelle, Chelsea, Leah, and Amber do not. The cast members who do not have steady jobs have worked at times but not on a consistent basis. Being a working mother is much different from being a stay-at-home mother. Often, working mothers suffer high stress and struggle to find adequate childcare. They

usually do not have a choice and have to work in order to support their children. Stay-at-home mothers have the opportunity to care personally for their children and do not have to worry about childcare. They usually have financial support from a significant other or family member. Viewers will relate to the cast member that best complements their working status. For example, a viewer who is a working mother can relate and better understand the struggles the working *Teen Mom* cast members experience, while a viewer who has the opportunity to stay home with their children will relate more with the stay-at-home teen moms. Although the cast members who do not work seem to have more opportunities to raise their children, there are a few who should be working but choose not to. For example, Janelle is expected to hold a job but chooses to party instead of working. This is another example of the struggles of being a teenage mother.

In addition to the different employment statuses held by the cast members, some of the teen moms are in school and some are not. Maci, Farrah, Catelynn, Janelle, and Kailyn all attend college, while Amber, Chelsea, and Leah do not. The cast members attending college tend to have unique struggles that differ from one another. For example, Farrah has completed an associate's degree, while Maci struggles to complete a full semester. Their level of ambition and success vary, offering an additional opportunity for a wider range of viewers to relate to the cast members. The cast members who are not in school also struggle in different ways. For example, Amber and Chelsea are both trying to pass the GED test in lieu of completing high school. The different circumstances illustrated by each cast member attract a broader audience.

The *Teen Mom* cast members also demonstrate different levels of responsibility. The level of responsibility is illustrated by the choices the cast members make. Some of them are very responsible and some are not. For example, Kailyn works two jobs, attends college full time, lives on her own, and is the primary caretaker of her son. She exemplifies what a responsible young mother might look like. Janelle, on the contrary, does not work, attends school periodically, lost custody of her son, faces various legal issues, parties regularly, and has been homeless at times. Janelle exemplifies what an irresponsible young mother might look like. Viewers are able to relate with the cast members based on the decisions and the consequences of those decisions, whether positive or negative. The wide range of character types created by the choices the cast members make influence the dramatic tensions that also attract a broader audience.

There are a wide range of dramatic tensions that develop between the cast members on the show and viewers who watch the show. This is likely a reason for attracting such a broad audience. The tensions develop as the viewer watches the lives of each cast member unfold. Viewers tend to have approving or disapproving opinions about the decisions the cast members make. For example, Catelynn and Tyler made the decision to move in together and find employment. This is usually seen as a major milestone in a young person's life. Because of the secure relationship portrayed by the couple on the show, viewers seemed to approve of the couple's decision to move forward in their relationship and begin working. Many viewers are able to relate to the experiences of Catelynn and Tyler

in a positive way. Viewers are also attracted to the show when they have the opportunity to disapprove of cast members' decisions and in some cases viewers despise cast members for their poor choices. For example, Janelle was arrested on drug charges and breaking-and-entering after she followed her boyfriend to a beach house that did not belong to either of them. This resulted in Janelle serving time in jail as well as being placed on probation. Despite the negative consequences for her irresponsible decision, she continued to have a relationship with her boyfriend. Viewers were outraged by Janelle's poor choices. Viewers not only disagreed with her choices, they despised her. Such negative feelings created tension between the viewer and the cast member. These tensions, whether positive or negative, seem to capture a wide array of viewers due to the dramatic events that unfold.

When looking at the diversity of the cast members and their individual circumstances, it seems that there are mixed messages being sent to viewers in regard to teen sex and pregnancy. On one side, the show seems to warn viewers of the struggles teen moms face, and on the other side, the show seems to paint unrealistic outcomes surrounding teen pregnancy. For example, Kailyn and Janelle struggle financially. While Janelle and Kailyn are very different in the way they parent, the burden is on them to step up and support themselves or suffer the consequences. Their financial circumstances warn viewers about the significant costs that come with parenting. Chelsea and Leah, on the other hand, do not work and do not attend school. Chelsea is financially supported by her father and Leah by her family and her husband, Corey. Both of these girls are

taped shopping with their friends and getting their nails done over the course of the season. This type of behavior depicts an unrealistic view of what a typical teen mother faces from a financial standpoint. In addition to the mixed messages sent to viewers, there are stereotypes that the character types portray.

The wide range of character types portrayed on the show confirms and refutes stereotypes. Stereotypes that are overturned typically attract viewers as they are able to witness something unique. It is typically speculated that one's economic status will correlate with the choices one makes. This stereotype is confirmed when looking at Janelle from *Teen Mom 2* and Amber from *Teen Mom*. Both Janelle and Amber come from poor families and both have made irresponsible choices. A consequence for both teen moms resulted in serious issues with the law and custody battles. However, Kailyn has proven this stereotype to be false. She also comes from a poor family and has very little emotional support from her family. Unlike Amber and Janelle who face similar circumstances, Kailyn works two jobs while attending college fulltime. In addition, she is the primary care taker for her son. She has managed to overturn the stereotypes forced upon her to improve her and Isaac's lot in life. The diversity among the cast members' character types not only drew in a broad audience, but also challenged and invalidated typical stereotypes.

### **Organizational Structure of Each Episode**

The producers organize the structure of the series in a way that holds the attention of its viewers and keeps the viewer eagerly anticipating the next scene. The introduction of each episode begins with two previews. First, there is a

preview of what viewers can expect to watch in the upcoming episode. Following this preview, the second preview recaps the events that occurred on the previous episode. These two previews are filled with the most dramatic highlights of each episode in order to fuel excitement and capture the attention of viewers debating whether to stay at the station and watch the show or move elsewhere. Each episode consists of about forty-five minutes of air time, which is not a lot considering the series is following the lives of four teen moms, including the relationships with their family and friends. The organization of each episode tells a story and highlights the life lessons learned by each teen. Each episode has a title that emphasizes a life lesson that the teen moms learn. For example, episode two in season two of *Teen Mom 2* is titled “Curveball.” The title of this episode signifies the unexpected twists and turns life can take without warning. In this episode, the cast members experience difficult moments in growing up and making adult decisions. The remainder of this section will turn to this episode in order to illustrate the organizational structure of each episode.

In every episode, each scene is structured in the same manner. This allows for a consistent and predictable structure for viewers to follow. Each episode begins with an introduction of the teens, their baby, and depending on the relationship, the father of the child. This introduction is animated in a digital baby book with childlike music playing in the background that is connected to the baby book. The baby book is an important artifact in the series and will be discussed in more detail later in the analysis.



The first scene begins with the pages of the baby book flipping to the teen that will begin the episode. Acting as the narrator, the first teen begins by introducing herself. This narration is given in a mature fashion and is told in first person. For example, in the episode “Curveball,” Kailyn begins by narrating an update of her life. She briefly explains her reasons for having to move in with her mother and then gives an update on the difficulties she is experiencing as a result of living with her mother. She tells the story in an adult-like tone, almost as if she were reading from a story book. Following the narration, the scene illustrates the key points of her description. The illustration consists of real footage captured to give viewers an intimate and personal view of the teen’s situation for that episode. For instance, as Kailyn’s audio narration plays, the visuals present images of her leaving her old house and living in her new house. At the end of the scene, the teen provides a concluding narrative similar to the narration of the introduction and then one of two things follow: either the baby book snaps a picture exemplifying the importance of the life changing moment, or the scene will transition to the next teen mom following the conclusion. At times both a picture will be snapped and then the transition will occur. In this case, Kailyn ends her narration by explaining her concern about continuing to live at her mother’s house. Then a picture of her crying is snapped and the scene transitions to Janelle.

The next scene introduces the next mother through the baby book or with text displayed on the screen. Janelle is introduced in this scene by text. Each scene has an introduction, illustration, and conclusion. Each teen mom is introduced and then, for the remainder of the episode, the footage focuses on one story at a time,

progressing in this same fashion between each cast member. This is significant because four different stories are told within one large context. Typically, the forty-five minutes of footage is divided up equally among each of the teen moms. At times, one mom may receive more air time if there is a significant event taking place in her life. In effect, there are four stories within one story; not an easy task with only forty-five minutes of air time. In this episode, each of the cast members was given equal time as there is not a major life changing event taking place. Additionally, the short amount of time allows the producers to focus only on the most dramatic moments captured on film, which keep audience members hooked through dramatic visuals. For example, in this episode, producers focus on Kailyn's living situation, Janelle living in her car, Chelsea's relationship with Adam, and Leah's stresses in relation to Ali needing an MRI of her brain. Each scene is illustrated for viewers to observe the chaotic moments.

The middle of the story is where the climax of the larger story takes place. The climax of the story illustrates a problem or a struggle and each one of the four smaller stories has its own mini-climax. In this episode the four mini-climaxes include: Kailyn reaching out to a public service association that assists teen mothers in finding affordable housing, Janelle and her boyfriend's tumultuous relationship, Chelsea finding out that she needs to have knee surgery, and Leah who continues to wait for answers regarding her baby's medical condition. Each cast member is experiencing uncertainty in their lives. The four mini-climaxes seen here create the larger climax of the show. Essentially, each episode has five climaxes that produce several emotional highpoints for viewers to experience.

As in every well thought out story, a conclusion must follow the climax and offer resolution. At the end of each episode each small story is concluded by each character. The organizational structure stays consistent; each teen mom narrates the beginning of the final scene, real footage illustrates the narration, and the teen mom narrates the conclusion for the final scene that also concludes her story for that particular episode. For example, Kailyn concludes her portion of the show by narrating her opportunity to move into her own apartment. The scene shows her and Isaac standing in the unfurnished apartment as Kailyn narrates her hopes of providing a stable home for her and her son. Following Kailyn, Janelle narrates the uncertainty of her future with her boyfriend as the scene shows the two in a physical altercation. Next, Chelsea concludes her story by narrating her decision to stay with her mom until her surgery and her satisfaction with Adam's efforts to try and win her back. As Chelsea is narrating, the scene shows Adam helping her with their daughter while at Chelsea's mom's house. Finally, Leah concludes her story by expressing her fears of not knowing the possible medical condition of her daughter. The scene shows the small family together as they express feelings of hope. Each of ending scene leaves a classic cliffhanger to draw viewers in for the next week's show.

Following the end of each of the character's final scenes, a photo is stamped in the digital baby book that emphasizes the events displayed in that episode and, in a sense, adds a deeper meaning to the conclusion of the story. After each character's final scene is completed and concluded for the episode, a theme song for the entire episode plays as the baby book flips through photos of

the babies with their parents. For example, at the end of this episode a slow song about “promising to make it” played as the camera recapped each of the cast members. Then a photo of Leah with an uncertain look was captured and placed in the baby book. The baby book displays photos that exemplify the emotions of each teen mom, baby, father or caregiver (sometimes a grandmother or grandfather may be shown, depending on the role they played in the episode). The theme song for the end of each episode seems to be chosen based on the overall emotions of the episode. For example, this episode was about unexpected events or curveballs. The theme song sang about “promising to make it in the world” which correlates with the episode’s theme. This is significant because it is meant to intensify the emotions felt by viewers and provides music exposure for songs played elsewhere in MTV’s lineup.

The organizational structure of each episode is designed to persuade viewers to buy into the message the producers are sending as well as intrigue viewers to continue watching the series. In this case, the message illustrated uncertain moments in each of the teen’s lives and the stresses that result when life throws “curveballs.” If we are to believe MTV’s producers, they hope to send an educational message to viewers regarding the difficult realities teen moms face and the unexpected moments life can provide.

### **Self-Introductions and Conclusions**

The self-introductions and conclusions provided by the teen moms in each scene over the course of the episodes are an important part of the structural process of the series. They are to some extent the structural backbone or

foundation of the stories shared in each episode. They guide the viewer throughout each episode, marking where one scene begins and where it ends. For example, Kailyn's introduction tells the viewer that the upcoming scene will focus on her story. Kailyn's conclusion of the scene guides the viewer's attention to the next story. These narrations function in several ways; they work to set up the story, close the story, and emphasize the perceptions, feelings, and emotions from the mother's perspective.

Perhaps the most powerful and meaningful fact regarding these introductions and conclusions is that they are told by the teen moms. This allows for the teen moms to share their perspectives, thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams in each of the stories whereas the fathers of the story are never given the same opportunity. The focus on the mothers over the fathers seems to be a purposeful act by the producers. With it, the producers are able to draw in an extremely wide demographic of female audience members. While the fathers are occasionally included in the story, the major portion of each episode focuses solely on the teen moms. On occasion, the father will have a scene without the mom. For example, in season three, Adam, Chelsea's ex-boyfriend, was given about a thirty-second scene where he expressed his thoughts and feelings regarding the two teens' constant custody battle. Prior to that short clip, the opinions and perceptions of the teens' relationship with one another were expressed by Chelsea. This is significant to the stories' context in that there are other parts to the story being captured by producers but that are not shared with viewers. This is most likely a consequence of the short amount of air time as well

as related to the content that the viewing demographic wants to watch. Only sharing one-sided perceptions has a powerful influence on the story and the viewers' perceptions of the events that unfold over the course of each episode.

While the self-introductions serve an excellent organizational and structural purpose, there is a strong possibility that they create a biased component that adds to the mixed messages. For example, Chelsea's point of view of her relationship with Adam and the struggles of parenthood dominate the story that the viewers are given to create meaning from. From the viewer's standpoint, a possible perception of this couples' situation is that there is not a major role for the father to fulfill and that the mother holds the power to allow the father to be involved. While the parent with full custody may have more influence in the decisions made with regard to a child, it is not typically true that the other parent has no rights. With respect to this example, the program is misleading viewers by not revealing the full story and all its truth.

### **Baby Book**

The digital baby book is a significant artifact used in each episode. In western society a baby book is a precious and sacred memento that tells a person's childhood story. All the first moments, milestones, and accomplishments are recorded in a baby book to signify the importance of a child's first experiences in the world. *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* use a digital baby book in a similar but slightly different manner. The digital baby book is used to guide the order of the story, emphasize major life moments, and capture the milestones of the teens in relation to their baby. The baby book is used to introduce each of the teen moms

in the beginning of each episode and to conclude each episode. It is also used throughout each episode to lead viewers to a commercial break as well as to transition them back from a break. The baby book allows for clear structure and organization over the course of an episode. The baby book also adds meaning to the story and the messages portrayed.

To add meaning and to emphasize the emotional experiences that occur in each of the teen's lives, a picture is snapped of an emotional moment, it is stamped in a page of the book, and an animation is added to highlight the importance of the life-changing moment. For example, when there is an issue between one of the teen moms and the father of the baby, a photo of both will be snapped and then the picture will tear, separating the father from the mom and baby digitally. This demonstrates the couple splitting up. While it seems that more sad and upsetting moments are documented in the digital baby book, happy and exciting moments are also placed in the book. One of the couples on the second season decided to get married and raise their twin girls as a family. The producers snapped happy moments of the couple as they planned their wedding together and added illustrations to highlight the meaningfulness of the ceremony.

An interesting element of the baby book relates to the producers who capture the photos and select which ones should be advertised in the book. Traditionally, mothers select meaningful moments in babies' lives to look back on for years to come. A baby book is typically filled with photos and keepsakes that belong specifically to the baby. Here, however, producers (third parties) are selecting happy and unhappy moments of the babies and the parents to place in

the book. At a social level there are two things taking place. First, the baby book is being misused with respect to the unhappy and dysfunctional moments that occur with the parents. Second, the parents are being placed in a book that portrays them as infants themselves. Since a baby book is meant for “babies” it can be speculated that the teen moms and dads are themselves being depicted as infants when their first parental mishaps and breakthroughs are placed in the baby book.

The digital baby book sends messages to the viewers regarding the realities of being a teen mom. While most of the moments are sad, emotional, and even dysfunctional, some of these moments are happy. Since the show portrays reality, there are bound to be happy moments. Viewers would not find the show to be “Reality TV” if only negative moments happened. This is important to both sides of the argument concerning the debate regarding the show’s influence on viewers. On one hand, the show is emphasizing the difficulties of being a teen mom by stamping emotionally stressful moments in the baby book. On the other hand, happy and exciting moments are also stamped in the book. The difficult moment’s support the producers’ claims that the show is meant to educate teens on the realities of teen motherhood. However, the happy moments could be perceived as glamorization like that of the teen wedding. After all, many young girls have the fantasy of getting married, having babies, and living happily ever after. Some critics could argue that a teen wedding plays into this perception and as result glamorizes teen pregnancy.



## **Audio and Music**

The audio used in this reality series is of rather high quality. There are rare times when it is difficult to hear a conversation; however, the producers use captions to depict the conversation taking place. Like other reality television series, the goal is to capture all conversations and interactions worth editing and watching. Most cell phone conversations are held on speaker, captioning is used if it is difficult to hear a conversation, and all characters are required to wear an electronic microphone during filming. The sharing of every intimate detail by use of speakers, captioning, and microphones add a voyeuristic component to the show. Viewers are allowed to observe every intimate moment and conversation that they would not normally be permitted to see. Voyeurism is a significant source of the viewer pleasure and will be discussed in greater detail later on.

Music is a powerful tool used throughout each episode. The series has theme music used in relation to the baby book and additional music is chosen per episode. Typically, a popular pop song will be used to emphasize the emotional feelings the producers want the viewers to experience. The times in which music is played are consistent from episode to episode. For example, the theme song is always played in the beginning of the episode, in relation with the baby book, and at the end of each episode during the concluding moments. Music will also be used to complement each episode's theme and the specific songs are available for viewers to download on the *Teen Mom* website. For example, in the show "Curveball" music was used to describe life's unpredictable moments. "Curveball" was the theme of that episode and at the end it was illustrated in a

popular hit song familiar to most teens. The song, “Until We Head into the Stars,” by Dave Junior, played in the background as the footage focused in on each one of the babies. Rhetorically speaking, the music playing in relation to the babies and uneasiness of their mothers was meant to send a message and create a specific feeling for its viewers. Also, the music chosen to play in each episode belongs to musical artists that MTV supports. The music acts in two significant ways. First, the music used in the show enhances the powerful emotions, feelings, and messages which producers want to send to audience members. Second, the use of the music advertises other MTV products.

### **Editing**

One of the most attractive components of reality television for viewers is its ability to capture real and factual events for its audience to view, causing viewers to be more attracted to these programs than other fictional television programs (Barsam, 1976; Braudy & Mast, 1999; Nichols, 1991; Renov, 1993; Winton, 1995; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004). While it is impossible to know the exact reasons for the attraction to reality television over fictional television, scholars have been working to explain why audiences are more attracted to reality programs (Hall, 2009). An attractive component of reality programs seems to be the opportunity to observe real people behaving in non-scripted or non-predetermined ways (Hall, 2009). Some scholars indicate that the viewers are aware that reality shows are constructed and that reality cast members act out for the camera, creating inauthentic moments (Hill, 2005; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003). The editing that occurs to create stories out of raw footage calls into

question the authenticity of reality television programs. To explore the notion of authenticity as it relates to reality programming, it is appropriate to turn to scholar Alice Hall.

Hall (2009) explored the concept of authenticity as it connected to reality programming and viewer perceptions to determine viewer perceptions of reality programs' authenticity. A main goal of the study was to determine the perceived authenticity of producer manipulation associated with viewer involvement, enjoyment, and perceived learning. Producer manipulation refers to the editing of the footage to create a story by producers. Hall speculated that audience perceptions of authenticity with regard to producer manipulation may contribute to viewer involvement and enjoyment of reality programs. However, Hall discovered that while there was a positive relationship between perceptions of authenticity and producer manipulation with cognitive involvement, there was a negative correlation with viewer enjoyment. Hall further speculated that the negative correlation may be related to the viewer being left to determine which parts of the show are inauthentic. Meaning, that while viewers enjoy contemplating moments of authenticity while viewing a reality show, they are disappointed that they are left to guess which moments are authentic. Taking Hall's findings into consideration, it is appropriate to investigate the authenticity of producer manipulation and the correlation with viewer involvement and enjoyment with regard to *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*.

As a reality television series, the producers film several hours of raw footage in order to capture events of each teen's life. With limited air time, they

are required to sort through all of the footage and piece together edited material into a clear, organized, and coherent storyline. Each episode has a theme that sends a message to viewers. This causes an additional task for producers when manipulating or editing the material. They are required to form a story that speaks to the theme of a particular episode. For example, recall the episode of *Teen Mom* 2, titled “Curveball,” discussed in the previous section. The producers included footage that illustrated unexpected life events for which each cast member were unprepared. Each of the cast members were viewed experiencing a “curveball” thrown at them by life. The theme of the show complemented the footage that was constructed by producers. In the production of *Teen Mom*, there are three vital components that raise the question of authenticity with regard to producer manipulation.

First, the edits are made according to the story line with a focus mainly on the teen moms. To form a cohesive story into a forty-five minute segment requires producers to delete or leave out a substantial amount of raw footage that is deemed meaningless to that segment. Typically, producers will pull the most dramatic moments and piece them together to form the most dramatic story possible. This exemplifies the process of producer manipulation. According to Hall’s findings, producer manipulation causes viewers to become more cognitively involved. Because viewers are unaware of the footage being left out, they are left to guess which sections of the episodes are authentic. When viewers distinguish the authentic moments from the inauthentic moments, they are engaging with the program cognitively. Therefore, viewers spend time

contemplating the authenticity of the data being presented and mentally engage with the program. It is plausible that the process of engaging with the text in this way produces some form of pleasure for the viewer and provides them with information about the world. It is unlikely that a person would voluntarily occupy moments of free time with an unpleasant experience. The pleasure comes from the opportunity to engage in some form of cognitive relationship with the show and its cast members. While cognitive involvement allows for viewers to participate with the show, it can also provide information about the world. Hall indicated that: “authenticity perceptions would be associated with the sense that one has gained valid insights about the world” (p. 519). This means that if viewers perceive the edited storylines about the teen moms to be authentic, then the viewer’s gain knowledge about the world through the story developed by producers.

In addition to editing and condensing raw footage to fit a theme, the second significant component is that the collected footage is biased. This bias is based on the fact the producers choose the material that will be used to create each episode. These biases are then revealed as one-sided perceptions of the story are told and further encouraged when the most dramatic footage is chosen over the less dramatic footage by producers. In this case, the storyline is constructed based on the mother’s perception of the events taking place. While the show is geared toward females and is meant to show them the potential consequences of becoming a teen mom, it is important to note that the fathers that are present are also major parts of the story. Telling one side of the story by omitting the other

side alters the story's context. When editing alters the context of a situation, it adds to the inauthentic moments. As a result, it leaves the audience disappointed as they are left with the responsibility to determine the authenticity of the context. However, while viewers may be disappointed with the task of determining the authenticity of a show, it may be the case that they find pleasure from engaging with the show cognitively.

The context of any situation can be altered whenever editing takes place. A third component that potentially alters the context relates to producers coaching characters. Coaching can be beneficial for providing clarity but it can compromise the appearance of authenticity reality programs hope to promote. For example, at times *Teen Mom* producers ask the cast members to add clarification if the cast member is unclear. However, the episodes never indicate that the producers or camera crew have ever coached a cast member to explain the meaning behind a specific statement or action. This leads viewers to believe that all of the footage is raw. On one hand, some of the coverage is raw and on the other hand, some of the conversations are coached. One could argue that coaching cast members on what to say contradicts the authenticity that reality television programs claim. In fact, the producers could have potential storylines already planned and coach their cast members according to their agenda. It should be noted that there is no clear evidence of such agenda setting. The only coaching that has been documented in this series was observed during a "behind the scenes" episode and related directly to clarification of a statement or action.

The process of editing or manipulating the captured material is perhaps one of the most significant structural components of creating a reality television program. The producers are responsible for sorting through hours of video to form a cohesive story that is attractive to viewers. A limited amount of air time makes it impossible to include all of the conversations, arguments, and struggles recorded. It also prevents producers from including the tedious moments encountered while caring for a baby as well as the monotony many parents experience. It is reasonable to question why MTV does not follow one teen mother over a period of time and produce a documentary that was a few hours long if they wanted ensure they were cautioning teens on pregnancy. However, because of ratings and air time, the producers must choose pieces that will boost ratings and keep audience members interested. This is where the use of creating episode themes is developed. Editing in this form is much different than the traditional form of documentary and tends to complement docusoaps. Recall docusoaps focus on audience entertainment more so than providing meaningful information, allowing for *Teen Mom* to be placed in this category. Lastly, editing for entertainment compromises the authenticity of the reality while at the same time causing viewers to engage in deciphering what is and is not real.

### ***Teen Mom Website***

*Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* host a website in correlation with the reality program. The website invites viewers to participate in online activities such as the online discussion forum in addition to watching the series. Viewers seem to be exceptionally attracted to the website and the resources available to them. To

explore the website and its importance, this section will begin with a detailed analysis of the website and its implications for teen viewers with regard to the social debate currently taking place (see Figure 1 & Figure 2). The analysis will be followed by an explication of the current research concerning reality television viewers and the use of online forums to investigate the possible motivations for the increased use by viewers of online forums in relation to reality television programs.

The *Teen Mom* link is on the MTV homepage and leads to a separate webpage. The background of the webpage is made up of photos of each teen mom with her child as well as cartoon images of yellow rubber ducks, pacifiers, safety pins, rattles, and red hearts wrapped in orange ribbon. These are similar to the images on the baby book the show uses as its main artifact throughout each episode. Webpage users can access blogs pertaining to the lives of the cast members, the season schedule, footage from each episode, photos of each episode, and an after-show that provides additional footage of each episode. The “Highlights” section of the webpage provides links to the following websites: “get help now,” “stayteen.org,” “changing diapers,” “changing lives,” “it’s your sex life,” “on your feet,” and “16 and Pregnant.” Under the highlights section is a list of songs from the show that can be downloaded as well as a synopsis of the upcoming season. Next to the synopsis is a Facebook link for the show that web users with Facebook accounts can “like.” Toward the bottom of the web page is a list of sponsored links, which include: “In Joint Custody: Divorce,” “Custody or Child Support Help,” “Qualified SpeedDating: We Prescreen & Qualify All



Singles Learn About SpeedDating Events,” “Natural Fertility Tips: How To Get Pregnant Fast,” “Comfortable SpeedDating: Comfortably Meet Phoenix Singles In Our SpeedDating Singles Events,” “Online Dating for Men: Meet with 1000's of Local Women! Real Man Have The Right To Choose!” and “Joint Custody: Free Consultation & Low Cost Legal Help.”

The main page of the Teen Mom site has several links located on the left. Some of these can also be found in the “Highlights” section. There is “Related Links” where users can buy episodes of the series on iTunes and “Ask an Expert” where users are directed to “itsyoursexlife.com” to read “Preventing Pregnancy FAQs” webpage. In addition, there are three additional websites for users to visit. The first website is “itsyoursexlife.com.” This site promotes the safety of teen sex through open communication, education tools, personal stories, sex education campaigns, blogs, and a discussion board. The website’s intent is to allow teens the opportunity to take control of their sex life by educating themselves on the consequences and risks of sexual intercourse. The second website is “stayteen.org.” Like “itsyoursexlife.com,” this website works to educate teens but with a slightly different message. This site encourages teens to “stay young” by embracing abstinence and spending their teen years educating themselves about sex. What is unique about this site is that it informs teens through online games, videos, and the use of open communication. The third website is “parentsconnect.com.” Unlike the previous two sites, this website targets parents providing answers to parenting questions and parenting ideas. Perhaps, the most

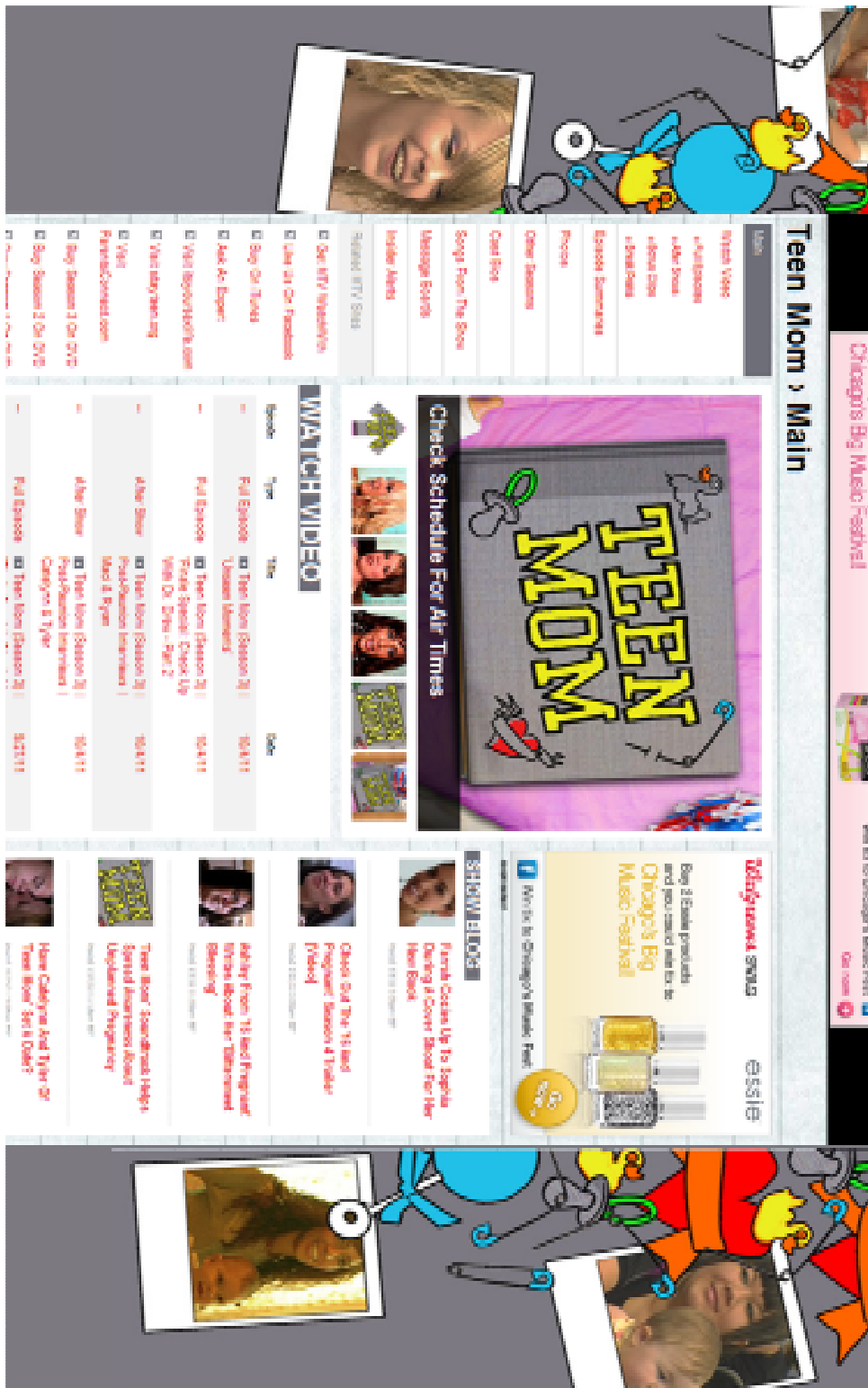


Figure 1



important section of the Teen Mom website is the “Message Board.” This online message board is where viewers can discuss the show and other topics relating to it. In addition, viewers can also share their personal stories. The message board will be discussed in greater detail later on. First, it is appropriate to discuss the components of the website and the possible implications these elements can have for teen viewers.

The *Teen Mom* website is designed to attract viewers to its colorful images, photos, and variety of resources. Many of the links provided on the website are geared toward connecting teens with resources and information appropriate for their age group. The websites “stayteen.org” and “itsyoursexlife.com” are both geared toward connecting teenagers to a community of peers that are dealing with similar issues. There are question and answer sheets that provide teens with facts about sexual activity. There are also discussion boards available for teens to discuss important issues together. However, while these resources are useful, there are several elements of the website cause concern.

First, the intended audience is unclear. Is this website meant for teenage use or adult use? The main messages producers emphasize are the educational tools available for teens. However, the sponsors of the webpage, “Natural Fertility Tips and Online Dating for Men,” for example, are not appropriate education resources for teenagers. Sponsors like “Natural Fertility Tips” are intended to provide information on how to become pregnant. This sponsor contradicts the producer’s educational message as teens should not be learning natural ways of

becoming pregnant. “Online Dating for Men” also contradicts the educational messages producers claim to send to teens. This sponsor is geared for adult men looking for a relationship, not for teens learning about the risks of teen pregnancy.

In addition to the sponsors, the website links are also conflicting in terms of the intended audience. “Stay Teen” and “Parents Connect” are meant for two completely different audiences. “Stay Teen” is geared toward teenagers and “Parents Connect” towards adults with children. While “Parents Connect” is not promoting fast pregnancy tips like “Natural Fertility Tips,” the links seem to send conflicting messages to audience members, especially teen users. To explore further implications of the elements available for viewers to take advantage of, it is appropriate to analyze the message board mentioned earlier.

The message board allows viewers to communicate with each other about the show and share their personal stories. There are two sections where viewers can post comments: personal stories and comments about the show. The first section allows viewers to post their personal experiences with teen pregnancy, parenting, and relationships. On November 11, 2011, 71 viewer posts and 403 viewer responses were pulled from about 2500 posts from the online message board.<sup>1</sup> Each post was randomly pulled. Then each post was categorized based on the content of the message. Six categories emerged under the first section: general stories, positive dialogue, negative dialogue, special stories, attitudes about the show, and advertisers.

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<sup>1</sup> “Given the nature of the online forum posting, it is always possible that people are either misrepresenting themselves or their stories, or that MTV itself is feeding the website to create controversy, however, this thesis assumes the postings referenced are factual.

General stories consist of personal experiences posted by viewers and make up the largest section of posts. A majority of these stories are posted by women who had children during their teen years. While each category is comprised of postings from young mothers, general stories have not yet developed into an online discussion. They are simply single stories shared in the online forum. Under this category there are stories of current teen moms and adult parents who gave birth as teens. The stories typically include their experience from the time they found out they were pregnant to their current situation. For example, Courtni is a nineteen-year-old mother of a two-year-old daughter. In her post she explains the unstable relationship between her and her daughter's father, the challenges of finishing school, and feelings of emptiness. Courtni wrote: "i just feel like some thing is missing like evalina's dad want to try to be nice . . . it's not what he did in the past cuz i forgive him for the pain he gave me, but i feel empty inside" ("MTV," 2011).<sup>2</sup>

Such stories are significant as many of these teens are reaching out to others who may understand their trials and tribulations. Another viewer, Rosette, 26, shares her story. She began having kids at just 14. She now has five children, is married to their father, and is working on her master's degree. She shared her story to encourage other teen moms to succeed. The women who post as former teen moms will typically share words of encouragement for readers as well as words of wisdom. Rosette, for example, wrote: "If my story encourages at least one young mother to succeed, I would be happy" ("MTV," 2011). A majority of

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<sup>2</sup> The online quotes are verbatim. Given the number of errors in the originals, I have forgone the use of [sic].

posts fall under this category. The intent of the women who post their stories is to reach out to other young mothers who share common experiences.

General stories that have developed into conversation can be categorized into positive dialogue, negative dialogue, and special stories. Positive dialogue is defined as any discussion taking place in the online forum that demonstrates a constructive conversation among viewers and is the second most popular section. This often means offering words of encouragement and understanding. For example, a seventeen-year-old anonymous teen who has recently found out she was pregnant shares her difficult relationship with the father of her unborn baby. She shares her struggles to accept his decision to not be involved with her romantically and his wish to only communicate about their child. Her story received a significant number of responses from other teen mothers who have experienced similar situations. The responses are supportive, encouraging, and understanding in nature. One response read: “People show their true colors when situations arise sometimes. I know exactly what you are going through. Just stay strong” (“MTV,” 2011). Positive dialogue among viewers reveals the message board can be a useful tool for people hoping to relate to others and encourage each other. It creates a place for people to come together and build a supportive community through meaningful communication. Unfortunately, not all dialogue taking place reveals itself in such a positive light.

Negative dialogue is defined as any discussion among viewers that can be perceived as derogatory, critical, or offensive to the individuals participating in the online conversation. It is important to mention that negative dialogue does not

constitute the majority of conversations taking place in the online forum.

However, it is important to acknowledge its existence as it does show itself periodically. A typical example is the conversation provoked by a posting from Ashley. Ashley is an eighteen-year-old mother of three. At thirteen, she writes that she became pregnant after a rape. She then met a young man who fathered her second child when she was sixteen and then another young man who fathered her third child at eighteen. After sharing her story she wrote: “I want to audition for the teen mom I think I would be perfect for the show” (“MTV,” 2011). The responses to Ashley’s story were significant in number and none of them were positive. Many of the responses mocked Ashley for becoming pregnant three times, ridiculed her for her lack of education, two of the responses questioned her about being raped, and the others criticized her for wanting to audition for the show. For example, various viewers wrote similar responses, such as:

I’m pretty sure that sleeping around with at LEAST three different men, while not using protection, and not having anything more than a 7<sup>th</sup> grade education is considered a ‘rong’ choice . . . what corporate business would even hire you? How could you possibly fill out a job application when you can’t form a coherent sentence!! (“MTV,” 2011)

The unpleasant and malicious responses directed at Ashley caused her to respond in a defensive manner. For example, Ashley wrote: “Noone said I made the correc choices but who has the say so to say I made the rong onces either” (“MTV,” 2011). Negative dialogue prevents constructive conversation from occurring, which can be emotionally damaging to the individuals participating in the



conversation. Negative dialogue taking place on the message board reveals the possibility that it is used as a destructive tool. Furthermore, it illustrates the various ways viewers are comparing themselves to each other by evaluating their experiences in relation to others.

In addition to positive and negative dialogue, special stories are also conversations that take place following a posted story. Special stories are different from positive and negative dialogue in that the subject is unique and often more serious than the general stories shared. This section has the least number of postings but tend to develop into large conversations among groups of viewers. These can be defined as stories that are unique and uncommon when compared to the majority of stories shared by viewers. For example, Amber, seventeen, shared her and her boyfriend's struggle to decide if adoption is the best decision for them to make after Amber gives birth to their child. The overwhelming number of responses to Amber's story was positive and supportive. Many of the responses encourage Amber to explore all of her options and describe adoption as a loving and acceptable decision. Another viewer, Tiffany, is a teen mom who miscarried during her second pregnancy. She shared concerns of the possibility of not being able to conceive another child following her miscarriage. Like Amber, the responses to her story were positive and supportive. A number of viewers shared similar stories of being able to conceive after experiencing a miscarriage. The tone of special stories is typically supportive and encouraging. The young women who share special stories are looking for people to connect to and find hope from. These stories also open a space for a community to form communicatively.

While a majority of viewers post their stories in an effort to connect to other viewers, some share their stories as evidence to support their negative opinion of the show. Statistically, teen moms face extraordinary difficulties both financially and emotionally over the course of parenthood, and many of the stories posted in the online forum support this statistic. However, there are always exceptions. In fact, some teens actually get married and plan their pregnancies. They describe their life as wonderful and fulfilling. Their comments often include a critique of *Teen Mom* for giving teenage mothers a bad reputation. For example, an anonymous seventeen-year-old viewer wrote: “I think this show gives off a bad message for girls likemyself . . . I wanted my son from day 1 of my pregnancy . . . Not all Teen Moms are silly or immature” (“MTV,” 2011). Such viewers want others to know that not all teen pregnancies are unplanned and not all teen moms are unprepared. While these viewers disagree with the show’s depiction of teenage mothers, they seem to perceive the message of the show as one that cautions teens about pregnancy and the hardships teenage mothers endure.

In contrast, there are viewers who believe the show provides unrealistic expectations for teen viewers. Many viewers question the authenticity of the show’s messages to viewers due to financial gains. One viewer wrote:

I do not doubt that these girls go through struggles on a daily basis, I myself had my first child at 16 but I was not paid \$10, 000 per episode to be able to support my child either. I do not think the show actually shows the true struggles of taking care of a child. (“MTV,” 2011)

While the specific amount of income earned cannot be confirmed, there are many reports indicating that *Teen Mom* cast members make a significant amount of money for each episode. This can be seen in the comfortable living conditions in which many of mothers live. The financial gains that the cast members receive may be justified for the entertainment sacrifices they endure by sharing their most intimate and private moments with the world. However, it does call into question the authenticity of the show and the actual messages the show sends to teen viewers.

The content of the last category shown under the personal stories section of the *Teen Mom* message board is not provided by viewers. These postings are from advertisers recruiting teens who fit specific criteria. For example, one advertiser posted an ad looking for teen moms who were planning a wedding. The advertisement claimed that it wanted to share teen stories and offer support to those in need of help. Another advertiser was looking for teens with family issues that need solving. These advertisements show up often throughout the online forum and are significant. Since the advertisements are posted within the dialogue displayed on the online forum, there is no way for viewers to know the legitimacy of the advertisements. Teens experiencing issues that meet the criteria should be careful in answering ads like these as they could be exploited, misled, or possibly jeopardize their safety. In addition to not knowing the legitimacy of these ads, these ads call into question MTV's stated intention for producing the show. MTV claims the show is a public service program that educates teenagers on teen pregnancy. However, these advertisements suggest that it primarily is a

commercial program where producers can make a profit off teenagers willing to share their personal stories.

The second section of the online message board allows viewers to communicate explicitly about the show. This online forum receives about four times the number of postings than the first section, personal stories. Four categories emerged under this section: general comments, validity, social topics, and personal attacks.

The general category encompasses all online postings that indicate a viewer's opinion about the show or a specific cast member and again hold the most postings. The general postings make up a majority of this online section and are presented from a positive or negative perspective. In addition, viewers will often write directly to the cast members. For example, one viewer writes to Maci and Kyle expressing that she agrees with a scene from an episode in which Maci told Ryan that he needs to spend more time with Bentley or she will not allow him to have Bentley at all. The viewer also expresses her appreciation for Kyle and his willingness to parent Bentley. There are quite a number of viewers who post similar statements that are positive in nature and speak directly to the cast members.

However, some viewers are judgmental and harsh when they post comments that speak to cast members. These statements will often question the cast member's integrity, choices, and offer options to correct the behavior in question. For example, one viewer wrote: "Catelynn and Ty could have kept their baby" ("MTV," 2011). This claim comes from the rumors concerning the salaries

received by the show participants. The viewer believes that with their current income they could afford to raise their child and should have kept their baby. There were an overwhelming number of responses to this post with regard to adoption and the rights of parents to choose what they believe is best for their child. The general category is important to the overall conversation taking place about the show. It allows viewers the opportunity to engage with topics and feel personally connected with the cast members on the show.

General comments that transition into larger conversations that hold social significance make up the social topics category. While this category had the least amount of postings, there were large conversations taking place around the topics. These go beyond general opinions, comments, or ideas to offer the opportunity for meaningful dialogue to occur about an important social topic. For example, a viewer comments about the teens that live with their parents and asks other viewers' opinions on the appropriate age to move out of a parent's house based on today's challenging economic times. Another viewer calls in to question the appropriate age to marry based on today's traditions. There were a significant number of viewers who chimed in and gave their thoughts on the topics.

The next category is one that seems to be a common theme in the online discussions. This category is made up of viewers who question the show's validity in terms of realness. This category is the second most popular topic under this section. These viewers are hesitant to believe the show is authentic in its message. Their suspicion is based on the rumors concerning the financial payment the cast members are receiving. According to these viewers, the teen moms do not

seem to be struggling. One viewer wrote: “These girls are not struggling . . . they have their houses, cars, etc. and only one has an actual job” (“MTV,” 2011).

Another viewer posted:

Maci gets \$1000.00 a month beautiful apartment and doesn't work. Cate and Tyler decide to move out. Farrah gets a boob job, braces, takes a bunch of trips, buys a dog, and is now moving to Florida. What real teen moms can do this? (“MTV,” 2011)

These are excellent points that these viewers raise. Statistics reveal that teen moms are likely to struggle financially, have difficulties graduating from high school and college, and typically work multiple low-income jobs. The *Teen Mom* cast members seem to be an exception to these statistics. Many have vehicles, exceptionally nice homes, and money to do things like travel or receive plastic surgery. While, again, it cannot be proven where these teen moms receive the finances to support a comfortable lifestyle, it is important to raise these questions. The producers of the reality series claim that the show was created to give teens real insight into the struggles teenage mothers face. While the show does capture personal struggles experienced by the *Teen Mom* cast members, it seems to be failing to illustrate the financial troubles teenage mothers face based on statistics.

The last category to show itself in this section is personal attacks on cast members. Some viewers are critical of and angry at the cast. These postings attack the cast members for their emotional issues, characters, and work ethic. For example, an anonymous viewer criticizes Catelynn for the emotional issues she has experienced after giving up her baby for adoption when she wrote:

Catelynn I am sick of you and your issues! . . . all the other girls were able to get back into shape except her-when she of all people had plenty of time to work out with not having to raise her child and all. (“MTV,” 2011)

Another viewer expressed that she is disgusted by Farrah’s attitude toward others and that Catelynn needs to “get over her issues with herself” (“MTV,” 2011).

These types of comments often spark negative responses to the authors by other viewers. Often, responders will defend the teen mom cast members and personally attack the viewer who posted the comment. For instance, a viewer responded to the comment about Farrah and argued: “I think Farrah can be a bit mouthy at times what teen isn’t with their parent i think she is in alot of pain and i think she is a good mother” (“MTV,” 2011). In another conversation regarding Catelynn, a viewer refuted: “Who are you to judge . . . if you are so smart you should know that you never start a sentence with because and the beginning of your sentences should be CAPITALIZED!” (“MTV,” 2011). Sometimes responders agree with the posts of viewers attacking the cast members. This suggests that viewers will attach themselves to either the viewer posting a comment or to the cast member the comment is attacking.

The online forum is a significant component of the reality television series. It works in a variety of ways. First, it opens a space for viewers to come together and communicate about their personal experiences, opinions, and ideas. More often than not, it allows for an online community to be created where viewers receive support from other viewers. As seen through some of the categories revealed, it also allows for negative dialogue to appear. But perhaps

one of the most important items the online forums suggest is the effect of the show on its viewers. It is quite obvious through the extensive number of posts that the viewers are highly invested in the stories shared by the cast members. While some call in to question the validity of the show, others find an opportunity to relate to the teen moms based their past experiences. In addition, some viewers find the show to be educational while others find it to be just the opposite. The number of different effects uncovered by the online forum is ambiguous but significant at the same time. The *Teen Mom* website analysis also calls for additional conversation as it reveals potential motivations for why viewers participate in online discussion forums regarding reality programs.

Recent scholarship has examined the increasing relationship between television viewers and their use of online forums. While there is a limited amount of research on this relationship, several scholars have identified a new phenomenon developing between television watching and the usage of television network web forums among viewers. The current research offers three concepts worth exploring for meaningful insight between *Teen Mom* viewers and the online forums in which these viewers participate. The concepts that emerge are intimacy, community, and connectedness. To conceptualize each term, it is appropriate to explore the research developed by scholars Tracy Bowen, Anthony Patino, Velitchka Kalthcheva, and Michael Smith.

Historically, television watching was a way for people to escape from their everyday lives and enter into an imaginary world. The computer now offers a new entryway for individuals to do something similar. Bowen (2008), author of



“Romancing the Screen: An Examination of Moving from Television to the World Wide Web in a Quest for Quasi-Intimacy,” wrote: “The computer screen is the gateway to new forms of negotiation and relationship building by enabling individual imaginations to meet with the collective imaginings of others through various online communities of television fans” (p. 569). Bowen’s research explores the level of intimate communication created between television viewers who take part in online discussions related to a specific television show. While Bowen’s research focuses on this relationship with regard to fictional shows, her findings are applicable to reality television as well.

The term intimacy is redefined in Bowen’s research as new way of connecting with others through a machine, in this case a computer. Bowen pointed out that people “interact with others who can only be imagined beyond the glass-fronted screen and engage in a metaphoric romance with their computers” (p. 570). These “romantic” relationships are developed through online television web forums where individuals partake in substantive and meaningful dialogue with compatible television fans. Furthermore, it is a television show that draws these individuals together and television networks that develop an online space for these individuals to communicate. As a result of the intimate relationships built on online forums, a sense of community is established among participants. This thesis speculates that in addition to intimacy, the sense of community that participants become a part of relates to the continued use of online forums. Bowen’s work illustrates a clear connection between viewers that watch television shows and that participate in intimate online communities.

In addition to Bowen's research, Patino, Kalthcheva, and Smith (2011) explore the level of connectedness among teens and reality shows. Their research goes beyond the simple task of viewing reality shows to include teen participation in online forums and social networks. Patino et al. conceptualized the term connectedness as the "level of intensity of the relationship(s) that a viewer develops with the characters and contextual settings of a program in the para-social television environment" (p. 289). The level of connectedness teens have with reality television programs was positively associated with the popularity and physical attractiveness of the characters. Also, teens that had a high level of connectedness with the reality show were more likely to participate in online forums and social networks. The online forums and social networks increased their level of connectedness to the show. The conceptualization of connectedness developed in this research is significant in its ability to provide additional support to the relationship developing between reality television viewers and their use of online reality television forums. To investigate how these concepts function in relation to the *Teen Mom* website, it is appropriate to turn to the analysis of the online forum discussed earlier.

Bowen (2008) discussed the term intimacy as it correlates with one's identity. Basically, intimate relationships between viewers in online forums tend to develop between viewers who can identify with each other. Identity can be experienced on any level but tends to be more of an emotional level which correlates with intimacy. This relates with the common idea that people are attracted to people who are like them. Once there is an attraction then a

relationship can form. This can be seen time and again on the *Teen Mom* online forum. A viewer will write something about themselves or give a personal opinion and another viewer will identify with that person's experience or opinion. For example, recall the story that belonged to viewer Amber. Amber and her boyfriend were contemplating giving their baby up for adoption. This was a very serious decision the young couple faced. There were ten very detailed responses to Amber's post. Many of the posts were from other teen moms who had either experienced adoption or contemplated adoption as an option. For example, a responder wrote: "i was 17 when i got pregnant the first time i thought about adoption but i just couldn't do it . . . it is really up too u more then anyone else" ("MTV," 2011). Amber's initial post resulted in an intimate form of communication where other viewers comforted her emotional worries of whether adoption was the best option. The responses also disclosed personal information in hopes of connecting to Amber on an intimate level. Amber has created many intimate relationships with other viewers by sharing her story. She, along with several others, is a major online "poster" on *Teen Mom's* forum. According to Bowen, these relationships symbolize a rhetorical "romantic" relationship based on the level of intimacy experienced. By "romantic" Bowen means an intimate connection that develops between viewers. These intimate relationships do not have to be "romantic" in its traditional sense. They can be between two people that form a close intimate friendship, like Amber has done with many other *Teen Mom* fans.

Bowen (2008) explained the process of online intimate relationships transforming into online communities. Online communities offer a space for viewers to share genuine dialogue. Bowen clarified:

Unlike the technology of television, which has affected social relations and maintained our place within domestic spaces, the Web is allowing people, virtual strangers, to connect and interact through common interest and desires by participating in online communities. (p. 587)

The connection between reality television shows and the use of online forums moves beyond the traditional television watching experience and creates a place for people to connect and form meaningful relationships. The *Teen Mom* online forum acts as a place where viewers can connect with others. The forum can be seen as a place where dialogue occurs between viewers. Viewers alike discuss personal triumphs, achievements, concerns, hopes, and experiences with one another in order relate and feel connected to each other. Groups of teen moms come together to form relationships with other teen moms. Teens protecting themselves from early and unplanned pregnancy communicate about their personal beliefs and experiences together. Almost all of the viewers who post participate in conversations directly related to show. This is the basis for the online community formed on the *Teen Mom* web forum. The forum also connects viewers with other online communities such as [stayteen.com](http://stayteen.com) and [parentsconnect.com](http://parentsconnect.com). Both of these websites are geared toward a specific set of viewers to form a community that relates to their individual circumstances. Online

communities, like the ones discussed here, are likely to continue to grow and develop as technology continues to become a part of everyday use.

Like Bowen, Patino et al. (2011) looked at the intimate connections that developed between viewers and television programs as a result of participating in online forums. Patino et al. found that teen reality television viewers connected with reality programs more when viewers participated in online discussion forums associated with a specific program. This thesis speculates that feeling connected to a reality program as a result of online forums results from participating in intimate online communities. Connectedness can be seen in the discussion forum developed for viewers to discuss the show. For example, recall the viewer who expresses her appreciation for Kyle helping Maci raise her son. This viewer demonstrates a connection with the show through the online discussion forum. However, connectedness goes beyond the relationship between the viewer and the program. In addition to the connection viewers have with the program, there is also a sense of connectedness with the viewers participating in the online discussion. This can be understood when viewers begin to relate to one another by sharing personal experiences. For example, Tiffany expressed her fears of not being able to have another child following a miscarriage. Several viewers shared their personal experiences with miscarrying to calm her fears of infertility. Tiffany expressed her gratitude for the responses and shared experiences. These viewers demonstrate connectedness through their ability to relate and feel close to one another when sharing their experiences with one another. In effect, the show causes viewers to form intimate online communities.

Intimacy, community, and connectedness emerge as a result of online reality television programs. Viewers seem to find a sense of pleasure and enjoyment from communicating with people who share similar interests and ideas with one another. While there needs to be further research in this area, there is evidence of intimate communities forming and developing a connection with one another as a result of online reality television forums.

### **Viewer Pleasure from Reality Television:**

#### **Social Comparison and Voyeurism**

Discovering the pleasures viewers experience from watching reality television is an important component of this essay. Most people can recall at least one moment in time in which they have asked themselves, “Why am I watching this?” There seems to be many potential reasons why people fill their free time watching certain television shows, in this case reality shows. As mentioned earlier, *Teen Mom* has quickly become one of the most popular reality shows on cable television with an astounding 3.65 million viewers (Thielman, 2011). The show has been ranked number two telecast for Tuesday evenings and is rated highest among women between the ages of twelve to thirty-four. With 3.65 million viewers, there is something about the reality series that viewers are finding extremely pleasurable. This sense of pleasure continues to draw them back episode after episode. While such a phenomenon cannot be broken down or understood scientifically, it is possible to speculate about the potential reasons why such a wide range of viewers tune in every Tuesday night. This section will first explore potential motivators, based on age, that cause viewers to find

pleasure in watching the reality program. It will turn to Leon Festinger's social comparison theory and Lemi Baruh's application of social comparison and voyeuristic tendencies for additional insights into viewer pleasures.

In general, there are many different reasons one would be attracted to a reality television show. Before looking at the potential reasons based on age, it is necessary to understand potential motivators for viewers who tune into the reality television show *Teen Mom*. Potential reasons may include a fascination with conflict and an emotional connection with cast members by way of identification. Each of these potential motivators can relate to a pleasurable experience for television viewers whether positive or negative. While many people may hesitate to admit a personal fascination with conflict, it is apparent that this is a reason for watching the television series. For example, many viewers posted critical and disparaging comments regarding the domestic abuse charges Amber faced. Further evidence of this claim can be found by turning to the online discussion board where viewers have the opportunity to discuss the show. There are an overwhelming number of viewers who post comments regarding the conflicts that occur during each episode. These comments demonstrate a clear fascination with the conflict the teen moms experience as their lives unfold publicly. The problems that arise in each episode cause many viewers to continue watching the television series.

Along with the fascination with conflict, viewers may also identify with the struggles and achievements the cast members' experience, causing them to feel emotionally connected in some way. By turning to the online forum, it is

possible to also see this connection unfold. For example, a young female viewer posted:

I got pregnant right out of high school and I don't think it ruined my life. I am about to get my associate degree and without my little boy I probably wouldn't have met my fiancé. Teen Mom and 16 and pregnant came out after I was pregnant. I didn't see the first episode until after I had my son. (“MTV,” 2009)

From her post we can see that she identifies with the show by comparing her personal experiences to the experiences observed on the show. Her experience allows her to connect with the different stories unfolding over the course of the television series. In addition to this young woman, another young woman wrote:

I'm 23 years old, and from Michigan. I think the best decision I've ever made was . . . not making a baby while I was a teenager (I didn't even lose my virginity until I was 20). I knew I wasn't ready for a baby then, and I'm not ready for a baby now, which is why I use 2 forms of birth control. My question for the teen moms is this: Why do you watch shows like Teen Mom and 16 and Pregnant, see all the struggles the mothers face, and still choose to get pregnant? (“MTV,” 2011)

This young woman watches the show through a different lens than the other woman causing her to identify with the show differently. For this young female, it seems difficult to understand the struggles the teen moms experience because she chose a different path and has led a different life. Her way of connecting with the show from this position may be credited to her attempt to understand the struggles



teen moms experience and reasons for not preventing pregnancy as a teen. Both of these young women connect with the cast members in different ways by identifying with the stories revealed throughout the television series. To understand the reasons viewers repeatedly tune in, it is appropriate to look at the potential motivators based on age. This is important because the driving force behind a twelve-year-old girl watching the show and a thirty-four-year-old woman are much different. Because of the extensive age demographic among viewers, twelve to thirty-four, the age range has been split into three sections.

The first age group ranges from twelve to seventeen years old. This is typically referred to as the adolescent stage. Two potential pleasures girls experience within this age group may be in connection with curiosity and their ability to relate to the teen cast members' experiences. Girls within this age group are inexperienced with topics such as sex, pregnancy, and intimate relationships. It is during this time in a young girl's life where curiosity about their sense of self in relation to others begins to develop. *Teen Mom* touches on the issues that this demographic is usually curious about: sex, pregnancy, and intimate relationships. The show has the potential to address topics and answer questions that they may not be as comfortable discussing with an adult or a peer. While many will argue that it is a parent's responsibility to educate his or her teen on these important topics, it is not uncommon for these topics to not be discussed. Often teenagers will look elsewhere to gain knowledge and fulfill their curiosity. In addition to their curiosity, teens often relate to each other's feelings and emotions during these years. For example, a teenage viewer observing a misunderstanding between

a teen cast member and their parent may feel a sense of connection through a similar misunderstanding they have experienced with their parent or guardian.

Additionally, other *Teen Mom* viewers have the opportunity to relate to teens in similar circumstances. One teen viewer wrote in the online forum: “I didn't choose to get pregnant, it was my first time having sex, and I got caught up in the moment. I watch these shows because I can relate” (“MTV,” 2011). The curiosity and ability to relate with the teen cast members seems to be a potential pleasure experienced by young female viewers.

The second group of female viewers ranges from eighteen to twenty-three-years-old. This age group tends to be maturing into young adulthood. They typically have been exposed to topics including sex, pregnancy, and intimate relationships. Many young women in this age group will have experienced some degree of intimacy with a partner whether sexual, emotional, or both, and some may have had a pregnancy. A potential pleasure women in this age group may receive from watching *Teen Mom* may stem from the ability to look at what their lives could have been had they become pregnant during their adolescent years. Earlier, a twenty-three-year-old Michigan woman was discussed. In the online forum she expressed her inability to comprehend a teen mom's struggles and wondered why young adolescent girls would risk the possibility of becoming pregnant. These viewers may find pleasure in feeling superior to teenage moms in that they did not choose to become pregnant at a young age. For example, the twenty-three-year-old viewer wrote: “When I was in high school, my boyfriend and I were both holding down decent jobs that paid for cars and clothes . . . we

certainly didn't make enough to support a child" ("MTV," 2011). By comparing herself to teen moms, she demonstrates a level of superiority in her choice to not become pregnant as a teenager as well as in the level of responsibility she had as a teenager.

On the other hand, there are teen mom viewers in this age group who find pleasure in watching the show because they are able to relate and empathize with the teen mom's struggles that unfold during the show. For example, Nicole is a twenty-year-old teen mother who wrote: "Farrah i understand how you feel and i am always open to talk with you or any teen moms that need help or someone to speak to" ("MTV," 2011). This viewer finds pleasure from the show by relating to the experiences of the cast members. Since she was a teen mom herself, she is able to identify, relate, and evaluate herself differently from viewers who were not teen mothers.

The third group ranges from twenty-four to thirty-four-year-old. This age group tends to consist of fully matured adults who have had experience with love, sex, and possibly pregnancy. Typically, the world view of this age group will differ from that of the other two groups from a maturity standpoint. Women who fit in this age demographic most likely find pleasure in the show by analyzing the life experiences of the teen mom through a different lens and for educational purposes. One of the ways one can interact with a television series is by analyzing the different situations that occur and how these situations relate to one's past experience. One woman from this age group posted the following in the online forum:

Maci complains that she cannot do school and be a mom? Give me a serious break. I was a 22 year old single mom when I divorced my abusive husband and I was going to college taking no less than 15-18 hours a semester, doing unpaid clinical [research] for my college paramedic program (800 hours in 5 semesters) I was in. I worked 2-3 jobs around my schooling and clinical schedule. I used to take cat naps leaning in a doorway to survive this schedule and I didn't enjoy any of these luxuries. (“MTV,” 2011)

While this viewer is frustrated and angry with the comfortable life she perceives Maci to be living, it is clear this woman is taking the time to analyze and relate to the show based on her past experiences as young working mother. Finding pleasure in something does not always reveal itself through positive statements. Instead, finding pleasure in something can come from engaging, analyzing, and relating to, like this viewer and the young viewer from Michigan who found pleasure in feeling superior to teenage mothers demonstrate.

Some women in this age group may find pleasure in this show from an educational standpoint. Finding pleasure from an educational standpoint can be appreciated by women who seek knowledge in the world view teenagers’ experience. The same woman who commented on Maci’s struggles with juggling school and being a teen mother also wrote, “I asked my teen daughter’s friends about their thoughts on the show and many of them now have the opinion that being a teen mom or single mother isn't that rough” (“MTV,” 2011). Education through social media can be a powerful tool especially in cases like these. This

woman was able to gain knowledge by watching the same show teens watch, relate to her teenagers and use it as opportunity to teach teens about the important consequences of teen parenthood. Ultimately, pleasure can be understood within this demographic through analyzing situations based on past experiences and from an educational standpoint.

What is most significant about *Teen Mom* as a reality television show is that it is able to capture such a wide audience in terms of age demographics. One must ask; what does a twelve year old girl have in common with a thirty-four-year-old woman in terms of television programs? In this case, the answer would be *Teen Mom*. However, the pleasures received among the viewers may differ based on life experience. The show is based on struggles, challenges, and real life issues that women in particular face. There is an element of curiosity to see how these young girls cope and survive the challenges. Within the show there is also an element of disbelief for how ill equipped and emotionally immature these young girls often are. For additional insight to *Teen Mom* viewer pleasure, it is appropriate to turn to Festinger's social comparison theory and Baruh's application of social comparison and voyeuristic tendencies.

Social comparison theory was developed by Festinger in 1954, but the ideas date back to classic contributors to Western philosophy including Plato and Aristotle (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Social comparison theory is based on the notion that individuals look to outside images to develop a self-understanding (Festinger, 1954). While Festinger did not claim this theory to

be definitive, he proved it to lead to testable derivations in his essay, “A Theory of Social Comparison Processes.”

Festinger developed a number of hypotheses to formulate the social comparison theory. Festinger believed that human beings have a drive to self-evaluate personal opinions and abilities by relating to others for a better understanding of themselves. The theory suggests that one’s evaluation of his or her abilities is contingent on the opinions others have of his or her abilities and performances. For example, Festinger (1954) explained: “A person’s evaluation of his ability to write poetry will depend to a large extent on the opinions which others have of his ability to write poetry” (p.118). This example illustrates the process in which individuals look to others in order to evaluate themselves.

Festinger also indicated that the process of comparison is selective. Festinger came to the conclusion that: “There is selectivity in comparison on abilities and opinions and that one major factor governing the selectivity is simply the discrepancy between the person’s own opinion or ability and that of another person” (p.121). In other words, if other’s abilities and opinions are too different from each other, then a person’s tendency to evaluate themselves decreases. This can occur whether the other is perceived as being too unlike oneself from a higher or lower perspective. Higher and lower, or above and below, is conceptualized by where the one evaluating relates to the other to whom they compare themselves. For example, a lower-class person can compare their economic status with that of a person with middle-class status or to that of a person with an elite status. Festinger also indicates that when one compares him or herself to someone

perceived as being higher he or she not only evaluates his or herself but also strives to reach a status similar to that of the “higher” person. He referred to this process as an upward drive to accomplish greater abilities. However, if the person with the higher status seems unattainable or un-relatable by the person with the lower status, then the one evaluating will not select that person to compare with socially. Over time the theory moved from using others for self-evaluation into an expansive area of research that stretched across various approaches and applications.

To see how social comparison tendencies among reality show viewers are portrayed it is appropriate to turn to Baruh, a media scholar who also appreciates voyeurism in a similar style. In her essay, “Mediated Voyeurism and the Guilty Pleasure of Consuming Reality Television,” Baruh (2010) explored the relationship between social comparison and voyeuristic tendencies and the consumption of reality television. This article is an expansion of a previous article published by Baruh in 2009. In the 2009 article, “Publicized Intimacies on Reality Television: An Analysis of Voyeuristic Content and Its Contribution to the Appeal of Reality Programming,” Baruh discovered a positive correlation between the appeal to reality television and both social comparison tendencies and voyeurism. In her most recent essay, published in 2010, she took a slightly different approach and controlled viewer demographics and hours of television consumption. Using a multivariate analysis, the results of the study revealed a positive correlation between voyeurism and reality television consumption as well as a positive consumption between social comparison tendencies and fictional

television consumption. While the results of the most recent study differ from the results of the first, Baruh's conceptualization of voyeurism and social comparison tendencies reveal potential pleasures received when consuming reality television.

Voyeurism from a psychological perspective is a mental illness where one finds sexual pleasure from observing a preferred gender, especially in secret, in the nude or while engaging in sexual acts (Freund, Watson, & Rienzo, 1988; Metzl, 2004; Posner & Silbaugh, 1996). Baruh indicates that there are two elements of this definition that reality television may not fulfill. First, the idea that the viewer enjoys observing another person secretly is not satisfied. This is due to the fact that the reality show participants are often aware that they are being observed. Second, reality programs often cannot fulfill the sexual desires of voyeur. Removing the sexual tendencies, Baruh conceptualized voyeurism as the:

Foremost characterized by the pleasure derived from seeing what one is not supposed to see, this form of voyeurism diverges from pathological voyeurism in that the common voyeur will seek sanctioned and less risky means through which the desire to take a peek at what should not be accessible can be satisfied . . . rather than compulsively seeking opportunities to satisfy his or her voyeurism, the common voyeur is opportunistic, acting when sources of private moments, expressions or information becomes readily available for easy and safe consumption.

(Baruh, 2010, p. 204)



From this definition, reality television viewers may find pleasure in viewing what would not normally be available to them as well as viewing private moments of other people's lives that one would not normally see.

Baruh indicates that the act of viewing other people may be related to a drive to learn about other people. This is where social comparison tendencies emerge. Turning to Festinger, Baruh (2010) suggested that "social comparison may require effortful observation oriented toward the interpretation of manifest behavior" (p. 206). Meaning that through observing and interpreting the obvious acts of others, social comparison allows for the observer to evaluate themselves. Furthermore, observing what is not supposed to be seen connects social comparison tendencies to voyeurism. Baruh explained:

It is this nature of the process of social comparison that makes it conceptually similar to voyeurism and operationally relevant to the consumption of reality programming; that is, an important part of the curtains-left-slightly-open appeal of reality programming—the careful scrutiny of a partially presented collage of personal information to make inferences about the participant is related to individuals' desire to seek information about others in order to evaluate themselves through social comparison. (p. 206)

This conceptualization of voyeurism and social comparison tendencies suggest that reality television viewers are attracted to these shows as they are given the opportunity to observe parts of people's lives that they would not normally be given permission to see. In addition, these viewers find pleasure in the "curtains-

left-slightly-open appeal” as well as in the evaluation process experienced through social comparison. To explore these two concepts further as they relate to the pleasures experienced by reality television viewers, this essay will apply both concepts to the viewers of *Teen Mom*.

Voyeuristic tendencies of reality television viewers, defined by Baruh, are the moments when viewers observe private moments in other people’s lives that they would not normally be permitted to view. It can be said then that all viewers who watch the reality show display voyeuristic tendencies due to the fact that they tune in to the reality program episode after episode. It can also be said that the voyeuristic experience is therefore pleasurable, that is if they continue to watch the show regularly. While this is a bold claim to make, it can be argued that the mere act of observing private moments and experiencing any feeling of pleasure makes reality television viewers voyeurs, in this sense of the word. What is interesting about the viewers of this show is that voyeuristic tendencies can be seen in two ways. First, voyeurism shows itself in the relationship between the viewer and the program and second between the reality viewers who communicate in the online forum.

Viewers who watch the show are permitted to see the private moments of the teen moms’ lives that they would not normally be allowed to view. For example, normally people privatize arguments with loved ones, break-ups with significant others, parenting issues, run-ins with the law, and other personal moments. However, viewers are given permission to watch all of these private moments unfold during this reality series. It is speculated that voyeuristic

tendencies cause some sort of pleasure for viewers who continue to watch the show. In addition to observing private moments revealed on the show, viewers tend to criticize the teens for their poor choices. For example, a viewer criticized Catelyn and Tyler for their decision to give their baby up for adoption. This viewer argued that the show would have provided the two with plenty of financial resources to raise a child. This example illustrates voyeuristic tendencies that go beyond basic observation into social comparison tendencies. Before discussing the social comparison tendencies that are evident, it is important to further understand the voyeuristic tendencies among viewers.

So far, voyeuristic tendencies have been understood as the act of observing the private moments in other peoples' lives that would not normally be available to see and experiencing pleasure from the "curtain-left-slightly-open" effect. While viewers are unable to physically observe private moments of other viewers, they are able to read the postings where personal experiences are shared. Like the cast members, these viewers are willingly sharing their private and personal moments. However, *Teen Mom* reality viewers are posting them online for anyone to read. It can be speculated that viewers who are reading these private and personal experiences for pleasure display voyeuristic tendencies as well. They are experiencing something similar to the "curtain-left-slightly-open" effect. Though, these viewers are experiencing it by reading online posts instead of watching a reality show. Recall, for example, Ashley who posted her unimaginable experience of being raped and conceiving a child as a young teen. This would typically be considered a very private and personal event. However,

she shares it with other *Teen Mom* viewers and many of the viewers were interested in her post. Like many of the *Teen Mom* cast members, Ashley received an exceptional amount of criticism for her post. While Ashley's story was exceptionally horrific, it illustrates voyeuristic tendencies among viewers who participate in the online discussion forum because they are able to observe the private moments of viewers. However, those who are observing may choose to evaluate and form a response. Meaning, these voyeuristic tendencies go beyond the act of observing and into the evaluation process of social comparison.

Social comparison tendencies are the act of observing, interpreting, and evaluating other people's experiences to gain knowledge about the self. Social comparison tendencies among viewers may cause some sort of pleasure in viewers as they go through the evaluation process with the *Teen Mom* cast members they select. Like voyeurism, social comparison tendencies emerge in the relationships between viewers and the show as well as between viewers who participated in the online discussion forum.

Social comparison tendencies can be seen among viewers in relation to the program when viewers evaluate themselves in relation to the experiences the teen moms present. These tendencies emerge from various aspects of the show. Recall Courtni, a nineteen-year-old teen mom of a two-year-old little girl. She shared the personal triumphs and tribulations that she was forced to overcome as teen mom. She related to the teen moms on the show and their troubles with relationships as well as their challenges of going to school while being a young mother. It is evident that while Courtni was watching the show, she went through an

evaluation process in order to relate to the teen moms and gain understanding about her circumstances as well as herself. She expressed her ability to empathize with the challenges the teen moms were experiencing and found hope in their ability to overcome such difficulties. Also remember Rosette, a twenty-six-year old graduate student with five children. She had her first child at the age of fourteen. Like Courtni, Rosette displayed social comparison tendencies when watching the program as she reminisced about the challenges she too experienced as a young teen mom. Unlike Courtni and the teen moms on the show, Rosette evaluated herself from a different lens to gain self-understanding from observing the experiences of the teen moms. She realized the achievements she had managed to accomplish over the years and identified with the challenges the teen moms were facing.

Social comparison tendencies are also evident on a larger social scale in relation to the show. For example, after two episodes that discussed the teens moving out and getting married, viewers discussed the appropriate age for young people to move out of their parent's house as well as the appropriate age to marry. These viewers observed these occurrences on the show and evaluated them in order to form a personal opinion. The social comparison tendencies displayed among viewers in relation to the reality program and the pleasure they received through the social comparison process help clarify reasons behind their attraction to the reality series and the pleasure achieved.

As mentioned earlier, social comparison tendencies are also evident among viewers who participate in the online forum. These viewers interpret the

experiences of other forum participants and evaluate them to uncover a deeper understanding of themselves and their opinions. For example, a seventeen-year-old who recently found out she was pregnant discussed her difficulties in getting along with the father of her baby. Other viewers posted their similar experiences and gave opinions on how she should cope with such difficulties. The seventeen year old was given the opportunity to evaluate her personal challenges to gain insight about herself and her situation. The social comparison tendencies in this example go both ways. The viewers who responded also evaluated themselves to gain further understanding about themselves from her experiences. Social comparison tendencies also emerged during conversations related to special circumstances. Recall Amber, who was contemplating giving her baby up for adoption. This is a controversial social topic with a variety of opinions. Viewers quickly chimed in and discussed this option with Amber. The discussion forum, in this case, gave viewers the opportunity to evaluate themselves and their opinion through other people's experiences. The process of social comparison tendencies among viewers in relation to the show and in the online forum reveals a pleasurable experience related to learning about the self through the evaluation process.

### **Conclusion**

The thesis sought to examine the potential influences *Teen Mom* had on viewers as well as to uncover the pleasures the show gave viewers. The debate regarding the show's influences is an ambiguous one. Supporters argue that the series is educational and critics claim that it glamorizes teen pregnancy. It is

certainly clear that the producers of this show have constructed each episode to tell a story illustrating the real life struggles and decisions that can result from becoming a teenage mother. Turning back to the analysis can help explain where potential mixed messages have occurred. Recall Leah, the mother of two twin girls. Her wedding was broadcast during the third season of *Teen Mom 2*. It seemed as though she and Corey were experiencing the American dream: a happy young couple raising two small, beautiful twin girls. Because the season ended shortly after their wedding, the series was not able to broadcast that Leah filed for divorce six months after the couple's wedding. It is plausible that the wedding glamorized teen pregnancy and painted an unrealistic picture. This is just one of many examples in which mixed messages are sent to viewers when only parts of the story are shared.

Other components of the analysis seem to support both sides of the argument. For example, the baby book and music emphasize overwhelming and emotional experiences as well as happy and exciting moments. The diversity in the cast members chosen by the producers is meant to demonstrate the difficulties of being a teen mom regardless of one's financial status or support system. While the difficulties certainly emerge throughout each of the teen mom's individual stories, one could argue that some of the teen's experiences are unrealistic and can send the wrong message to teen viewers. For example, remember Chelsea and Kailyn. Chelsea is financially supported by her father, stays in her own house with Aubree, and spends more hours getting her nails done with her friends than finishing high school. Kailyn on the other hand, works two jobs, attends college

full time, lives on her own, and is a single mother to Isaac. These two teens live very opposite lives which results in mixed messages being sent to young viewers.

In addition to the structural components of the show, the media reports and *Teen Mom* website also produce evidence that the show influences viewers in different ways. For example, there are reports of “copycat moms” in search of fame and money. These “copycat moms” are getting pregnant on purpose while in their teens. Based on these reports, it is plausible the show is sending messages to young viewers that glamorize teen pregnancy. The *Teen Mom* website also sends mixed messages to viewers which supports both sides of the debate. On one hand, the website provides educational resources for teenagers to take advantage of. On the other hand, the website promotes sponsors like “Natural Fertility Tips,” which contradicts the producers’ message to inform and protect teenagers against the risks of teen pregnancy. It is reasonable that while some of the show’s content and online tools work to educate teenage viewers, it also sends contradictory messages that can have damaging effects on young viewers.

A vital point the debate draws into question relates to the responsibility regarding teen pregnancy. Over time, the United States has adopted a neoliberal belief or the belief that one is responsible for every aspect of his or her life (Oullette, 2009). Neoliberalism separates responsibility from the public sector or community and places it solely on the individual. This means that individuals are accountable for their destiny in every sense. According to Oullette, this worldview began to emerge in the 1980’s and is transmitted in many ways to the public, including reality television programs. This worldview becomes a concern



when trying to ascertain who is responsible for teenage pregnancy, especially as concerns the reality series *Teen Mom*.

A major reason this analysis of *Teen Mom* was undertaken was to discover if MTV was responsible for encouraging teen pregnancy. Because teen pregnancy is stigmatized, people seek to place blame on someone or something for either encouraging it or causing it. Throughout the series the blame for becoming pregnant is placed squarely on the teen girls, and sometimes on the teen fathers, themselves. This is not surprising given the neoliberal views increasingly held by our society. However, what if it were not solely a teenager's responsibility to prevent unplanned pregnancy? What if it were parents, the community, and the social programs teenagers participate in that were also responsible for helping prevent unplanned pregnancy? This is an uncomfortable thought for many people who hold neoliberal views, and one that *Teen Mom* never asks viewers to consider

However, there is clearly a current lack of educational resources available for parents and teenagers regarding sex education. The level of sex education that students receive in many schools throughout the United States is insignificant. There is also a shortage of resources available to teens to acquire in order to practice safe sex. When the teen cast members were filmed in *16 and Pregnant*, many admitted that they were too embarrassed to buy condoms and decided not to use any form of birth control. Here, neoliberal beliefs tells society that it is the teenagers' fault for being too embarrassed to buy birth control in order to practice safe sex. They made the decision to risk pregnancy and, therefore, they are

responsible for the consequences. Additionally, the thinking goes, they have the same opportunity as everyone else to make a good life for themselves and their child.

However, there is a larger issue taking place other than a teenager's fear of buying a form of birth control and having the same opportunities as anyone else. First, if there were stronger resources available for practicing safe sex, then there would be less of a chance for teens to become pregnant. Second, the socioeconomic status of the teenager and the teenager's family will typically dictate the level of opportunity the teenager has. This was seen throughout the series among the diverse *Teen Mom* cast members and their financial circumstances. In addition to the debate and the neoliberal worldview held among society, MTV is also responsible for confirming and valorizing neoliberal ideas.

MTV presents the *Teen Mom* cast members in a way that sends the message to viewers that it is the individual's responsibility and obligation to rise above their challenges, support their family, attend school, and start a career. The producers present each teen cast member as an individual with sole responsibility of their destiny. Any help that is given to the teen cast member is a bonus that they should appreciate. The teen cast members who fail to rise above their circumstances are criticized and scorned for their poor choices. Amber and Janelle are perfect examples of this. The cast members who do rise to the challenge, such as Kailyn, are praised by viewers for taking responsibility. This is not to say that individuals should not be held accountable for their choices. However, the neoliberal worldview held by society and portrayed in the media removes all

responsibility from the community and places it completely on the teen moms. It is plausible that the responsibility to educate teens should be the responsibility of the entire community.

In addition to the debate, the online web forum provided by the *Teen Mom* website shows evidence of online communities forming around the show. The forums allow viewers to feel connected to the show and each other. There are also moments of superiority portrayed on the online forums among viewers. These conversations are critical and degrading to viewers who post stories that reveal poor choices. Viewers seemed to find pleasure from being a part of the intimate communities and from feeling superior to viewers who made irresponsible decisions.

To uncover the pleasures viewers experienced from watching the show, this thesis explored the effects of producer manipulation as well as voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies. Hall (2010) claimed that producer manipulation caused viewers to become more involved cognitively with reality television programs. The attraction to reality programs over fictional programs is the process of deciding which parts of the episode is real or not real. Decoding a reality television program for moments of authenticity causes viewers to mentally engage with the text. It is reasonable that becoming cognitively involved with the reality show in this way produces viewer pleasure. Additional viewer pleasures come from voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies.

Social comparison tendencies derived from Festinger's social comparison theory. These tendencies are understood through the evaluation process one

experiences when relating to another individual. When viewers engage with the reality program, they participate in this evaluation process to better understand themselves and the world around them. Baruh (2010) conceptualized social comparison tendencies in relation to voyeuristic tendencies. She conceptualized voyeurism as the opportunity to view parts of people's lives that they would not normally be permitted to. Baruh claimed that because of the "curtains-left-slightly-opened" appeal, viewers have a desire to seek out information out about other people to evaluate themselves through social comparison. By turning to the *Teen Mom* online forum it was possible to uncover voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies not only between viewers and the *Teen Mom* cast members but also between viewers themselves. This thesis claims that through the evaluation process, required for social comparison tendencies, viewers find pleasure in seeking information about themselves by comparing and evaluating themselves with *Teen Mom* cast members as well as with other *Teen Mom* viewers. In addition, it is plausible that viewers find pleasure from voyeuristic tendencies when they are given the opportunity to observe private moments that would normally not be available to see.

It is clear that people find pleasure in watching reality television programs in the hope of getting a sneak-peak into other people's "real" moments. The findings of this thesis uncovered the possible influences the show had on young viewers and the intimate online communities that were developed in relation to the show, where voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies were displayed. These tendencies were also present in the viewers who engaged in the series. The

online forums that complement reality television shows are a new phenomenon that calls for future research in order to gain insight into the social relationships and networks that are being formed. It is yet to be known the exact effects reality television shows such as *Teen Mom* have on both modern society and culture and these should continue to be explored in order to gain understanding on how the show impacts viewers.

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