The Way Conflict Is Portrayed In Reality TV

Kelsey Moore

James Madison University
Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the conflict management strategies that are portrayed and can be learned through watching reality TV. This study examines three reality shows that represent conflict management strategies: *The Real World, Dance Mom’s and HGTV Showdowns*. These programs will be content analyzed to identify the conflict management strategies characters in reality television demonstrate. The benefit of this study is to reveal the most commonly used conflict management style portrayed on reality TV. As well as, raise awareness to viewers about the misleading nature of reality TV in relation to perceived realism and stereotyping.
This research proposal is centered on the role that conflict plays in reality TV. Andrejevic (2004) has found that “reality television has become a leading prime-time program staple, often dominating the ratings in numerous coveted time slots” (p. 46). Potter (1988) describes reality shows as unscripted programs, with nonprofessional actors as participants in a variety of situations that claim to present reality. This representation of reality on reality TV may mislead viewers to believe that what they see is real (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007b). This perceived realism leads to the concern that viewers might learn and take away lessons from watching reality TV (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). Whether learning is conscious or subconscious, the concern is the same- reality TV audiences might learn conflict management styles from reality TV. This leads to the main research question of this paper, what kind of conflict management strategies do reality TV shows portray? This question is important for three reasons. First, reality TV is such a prevalent genre in today’s society its extreme popularity reaches a large audience. Second, how the media portrays conflict management might influence the audience. Third, conflict that arises out of the ability reality TV might reinforce stereotypes in society.

One reason to study conflict and reality TV is because reality TV is an increasingly popular genre in America. According to Collins and Fernandez (2004), even the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences has recognized the genre to be legitimate and created two categories of awards for reality shows (para.6). According to Sikula and Anderson (2006), some have suggested that a reality TV network should be created because of its popularity. Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland (2006) note that reality TV is popular because it is perceived to be “somehow more real than scripted programming” (p. 445). Thus, the proposed research will examine a medium that might be influential in this society because of its popularity.
A second reason to research this topic is because conflict appears to be an important factor in the popularity of these programs. “Some reality television series may focus viewer attention more squarely on issues of conflict and competition” (Lauzen et al., 2006, p.446). It also appears that viewers who may be frustrated about issues in their own lives can relate to the conflict expressed in reality TV. “Television contains unresolved conflict and contradictions that we frame around our own experiences” (Bell-Jordan, 2008, p.355). Thus, according to Busselle’s (2001) research, some researchers say media portrayals of conflict can influence viewers’ judgments. When applying this concept to reality TV, it can be assumed that the way it communicates conflict strategies can lead to judgments about appropriate conflict styles. Thus, the proposed research project can see if viewers are being encouraged to manage conflict with particular approaches due to the media’s influence.

Finally, this topic is important to explore because reality TV appears to create conflict by exploiting stereotypes. According to the New York Times, producers look for people who will cause a sensation on reality TV (Pozner, 2012). They want stereotypes that their target audience can identify with. From bad boy to rebel to the sweetheart, TV is able to create conflict. “Media portrayals construct such stereotypes to provide viewers with highly recognizable characters” (Lauzen et al., 2006, p.446). Through these stereotypes reality TV is exploiting minorities, women and children (Pozner, 2012). Thus, the proposed research might increase awareness of stereotypes being communicated on reality TV.

The overall purpose of this proposal is to study the types of conflict management strategies TV viewers might take away from reality TV. This research proposal will be organized into two main sections - the literature review and the methodology. The literature review will explain research about reality TV, conflict, and discuss the ethical ramifications of watching
reality TV. The methodology section will discuss how the reality TV programs will be analyzed for conflict.

**Literature Review**

In order to conduct the proposed study, research in the areas of popularity of reality TV, conflict management styles, and communication of conflict in the media, was reviewed. Research was collected through Communication and Mass Media Complete, ABI Inform, Academic Search Complete, Sage, Gale, and Google Scholar databases using key words such as “conflict and reality TV,” “media influences,” “Realism and Reality,” “conflict talk,” “conflict styles and management,” stereotypes and ethics of reality TV,” and “conflict resolution.” The literature review focuses mainly on how conflict and conflict resolutions are managed based on issues relating to moral conflicts, political conflict, and stereotypes. This literature review is organized into three main sections. These sections include research on reality TV, stereotyping, and conflict.

**Research on Reality TV**

To study reality TV, researchers have had to define it. Murray and Ouellette (2009) define reality TV as “an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (p. 3). Godlewska and Perse (2010) define reality TV as unscripted programs, with nonprofessional actors who participants in a variety of situations that claim to present reality. A common characteristic found in these definitions is the claim that reality TV is depicting realism in society. Some examples of reality TV shows that researchers have studied include *What Not to Wear, The Real World, Joe Millionaire, and Survivor* (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Godlewska & McRobbie, 2004; Park, 2009; Perse, 2010; and Sgroi, 2006).
Researchers have been interested in how viewers perceive reality TV. For example Lauzen et al., (2006) conducted a content analysis of prime time television and researched claims about reality TV audience’s beliefs on what the shows represented. They found that viewers believed reality television is a better representation of actual society and societal values than scripted programs. Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007a) studied how individuals reacted to depictions of reality on reality TV using the Perceived Realism Scale. They found that viewers who perceived the TV content to be more realistic were more likely to watch the show for entertainment and relaxation purposes. Busselle (2001) also studied perceived realism in reality TV using Shrum’s heuristic processing model of cultivation. He surveyed 197 people and found that accessibility can be a link between television exposure and social judgments. Meaning perceived realism could influence judgments through a source monitoring process. Godlewsiki and Perse (2010) also conducted surveys on perceived realism in reality TV, specifically audience’s activity in reality Television. Godlewsiki and Perse’s research lead them to the conclusion that social learning and cognitive and emotional involvement was reached when viewers watched reality television. For example engaging in online activities after watching reality TV was figured out by elaboration and feeling negative emotion. So, overall, research indicates that viewer’s perceive reality TV as “real” and are influenced by reality TV.

**Stereotyping**

Other researchers have focused on reality TV and stereotyping. According to Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008) “Stereotyping is not a new phenomenon … modern media have tremendous power to create and perpetuate stereotypes” (p. 185). For example, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen studied the ethical dilemma and harmful nature of stereotyping on reality TV. They proposed a way to deal with and avoid ethical conflict through the use of a decision tree. This
tool can be used to aid producers in creating ethical portrayals of participants and maintaining audiences’ attentions without using negative stereotypes (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008).

In the literature researched, several studies have been conducted that explain how reality TV as a part of pop culture promoted stereotypes and class divisions. Sgroi (2006) studied the effects of stereotyping and focused on how shows like *Joe Millionaire* can cause class divisions among women because of the strengthened stereotypes that are portrayed on reality TV. She transcribed the show’s dialogue and disclosures and found that the way women were portrayed on the show increased stereotypical views of the women, which created conflict and lead to a divide in social classes among women. McRobbie (2004) also examined how reality shows, like TLC’s *What Not to Wear*, created class divisions based on appearance. McRobbie observed that social class division portrayed on reality TV may reinforce societal stereotypes. She also concluded from her qualitative observations of reality TV that people of recognized taste and expertise are perceived to be from a superior social class compared to people of little or no taste (McRobbie, 2004). Lastly, Colston (2012) studied the reality of media perceptions and the depiction of women public relations practitioners in reality television. Colston conducted a content analysis that compared positive and negative images of female Public Relations professionals as portrayed in reality television. Colston found shows that depicted negative characteristics offered unrealistic depictions of women in the PR field and reinforced stereotypes in society (Colston, 2012).

Although, stereotypes are normally seen to be negative, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008) critically studied the ethical dilemmas of stereotyping Appalachians in entertainment media and said they are sometimes needed because they can help people to identify and sort through living in the modern world today. They used theories from Levians, Kant, and Aristotle
to explore the ethics of stereotyping and found that producers of reality TV are able to perpetuate negative stereotypes and it seems to be important that they adhere to high ethical standards. Johnson and Graves (2011) also conducted research on reality TV and their study used genre criticism to compare and contrast reality TV shows. They observed planning sessions and town meetings for Kansas City’s local government with a reality TV formula and found that they could use reality TV to create ethical spectacles on planning issues. Their study concluded that reality TV planners should avoid the exploitation and manipulation of participants which gives special importance to drama and conflict over realism and ethical considerations.

Conflicts

A few researchers have examined conflict on reality TV. For example, Volcic and Andrejevic (2009) explored the way reality TV shows manage political and economic conflict by projecting them into the personal sphere through reality TV. They conducted a study on the first pan-Balkan reality show called, To Sam Ja with a Big Brother styled plot. In their research they concluded a paradoxical result, “that our so-called common humanity takes on the character of an abstraction: it is what would allow us all to get along if only we did not live in society, with all its associated historical baggage” (p. 21). Their findings created a critique of mass society and how society deals with its conflict.

Another example is Park’s (2009) research on racial conflict. He examined the ideological implications of MTV’s hit show The Real World (Park, 2009). Park (2009) argued, “Reality TV has granted itself a privilege to bring racially charged confrontation between people of different races to the forefront of the audience’s attention.” (p.168). His research study discussed the positive outcomes of displaying racial, political and social issues on reality TV.
Although, his research does not provide a solution to social problems, it does support the claim that displaying major issues on reality will spark open discussions and make the issues a focal point in society. Potentially helping viewers of reality television to be aware of the importance of open communication when dealing with conflicts and teaching viewers conflict resolution and management strategies. Bell-Jordan (2008) also rhetorically analyzed MTV’s The Real World and the way race is constructed on reality TV. She found, through observation, that reality TV highlights the racial struggle over the meaning of race and discovered that society creates meaning in ways that reinforce or correspond to our own social and cultural reality. Her research has the potential to greatly influence the way society thinks about conflict in relation to racial issues (Bell-Jordan, 2008).

Although researchers have examined some types of conflict portrayed on reality TV, they appear not to have examined the kinds of conflict management styles portrayed. Many types of conflict management styles have been identified by researchers. For example De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Naut (2001) conducted a study on interpersonal conflict at work. They researched Van de Vliert’s Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH) and found that the DUTCH was a reliable test that should be used in the work place to measure conflict management strategies (De Dreu et al., 2001). Kilmann and Thomas (1975) studied and reinterpreted Blake and Mouton’s five interpersonal conflict-handling modes competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. According to Kilmann and Thomas (1975) competing is assertive and uncooperative, a power-oriented mode where an individual puts own concerns at the expense of others. Accommodating is unassertive and cooperative, the opposite of competing. An individual neglects his or her own needs to satisfy others. Avoiding is unassertive and cooperative. The individual does not address the conflict. Collaborating is both
assertive and cooperative, the opposite of avoiding. The individual attempts to work with the other person to find a solution that fits the needs of both parties involved. Compromising is also assertive and cooperative, but not on the same level as compromising. A mutual solution is agreed on, but it only partially satisfies both parties involved. Their studies suggest that thinking and feeling functions, and attitudes of introversion and extraversion may play an influential role on conflict-handling behavior (Kilmann & Thomas, 1975).

Overall, a reoccurring theme in the literature is the ability of reality TV to shed light on issues of conflict in society. The researchers suggest that reality TV can depict realism in society, give false perceptions of reality, and reinforce stereotypes through pop culture. In addition they’ve studied conflict from economic and racial perspectives, but not from a conflict management approach. These key ideas all connect back to the research question that was first discussed in the introduction of this research proposal. What kind of conflict management strategies do reality TV shows portray?

**Methodology**

This research proposal will analyze three different types of reality TV shows and how they deal with conflict management. The proposed study will involve watching episodes from MTV’s *The Real World*, Bravo’s *Dance Moms*, and HGTV’s *HGTV Showdown*. These shows were chosen because they were ranked among the top reality shows for 2012 according to IMDb’s popular reality-TV serious list (http://www.imdb.com). The shows are all very popular, and represent a variety of categories in the reality TV genre. These shows will be prerecorded and then watched and analyzed so they can be coded. The purpose of this study is to observe what kind of conflict management strategies are portrayed on reality TV shows.
Data Selection

This study will conduct a content analysis of reality TV shows and will code the data using a generic coding sheet and questionnaire. A content analysis according to Merrigan and Huston (2009) is defined as “a primarily quantitative method of categorizing and describing communication messages in specific contexts” (p. 297). Merrigan and Huston (2009) state it is used to categorize messages and compare the frequency to different categories of messages and track how often these differences occur.

The shows range from 30 minute to 60 minute episodes. The amount of time spent watching each show however, will be the same. If a show is 30 minutes long two episodes will be watched so that the same amount observation time is being conducted for all of the shows. In total the sample size will be no less than 30 episodes watched, at least 10 episodes from each show. A random sample will be collected from each program. These show all have a full season from 2012 available online, allowing for the 30 episodes to be randomly selected. Below is an example of a coding sheet that will be used to keep track of the episodes viewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th># of episodes in a season</th>
<th># of episodes to be randomly selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Real World</td>
<td>60 mins</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance Mom’s</td>
<td>30 mins</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGTV Showdown</td>
<td>60 mins</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding Instrument Procedures

The coding instruments created for this study include several different criteria used to analyze the three reality TV shows (figure 1). The complete coding sheet consists of three
questions and list of “key terms” both assertive and cooperative, which are related to conflict management styles. The questions are important to this study because it helps the researcher to identify what show is being viewed and the main conflict that is depicted.

The kind of information that will be explored and coded first deals with demographic information the name, the length, the number of episodes in the season, and the number of episodes to be randomly selected. This information is important to code because it helps to keep track of the exact order the episodes were watched and incase future research is conducted on the topic. Secondly, what exactly will be observed and coded for each show is the character or characters involved with the conflict and attributes like sex and age. The verbal and nonverbal messages that are observed throughout the conflict will also be coded. This information will help to identify patterns of conflict management strategies. An example of the coding sheet is located in the appendix.

While watching the different episodes from each show the coder will be looking for verbal and nonverbal messages that they can tally up. There are specific attributes verbal and nonverbal that represents the five different conflict management styles. Competing is assertive and uncooperative, a power-oriented mode where an individual puts their own concerns first at the expense of others. For example this person will verbally and nonverbally assert their opinions in a situation. Avoidance is unassertive and cooperative the individual does not address the conflict. For example a person can either verbally change the subject in a conversation or they could nonverbally avoid the other person. Accommodating is unassertive and cooperative, the opposite of competing, where an individual neglects their own needs to satisfy others. For example this person will verbally give into the other person or nonverbally nod their head and pretend to agree. Collaborating is assertive and cooperative, the opposite of avoiding. The
individual attempts to work with the other person to find a solution that fits the needs of both parties. For example the person will verbally or nonverbally consider the other person’s views.

Compromising is assertive and cooperative, a mutual solution is agreed on, but only partially satisfies both parties. For example this person could nonverbally consider mutual concerns or verbally try to develop areas of common ground (Kilmann & Thomas, 1975). The coder will be looking for actions from the characters viewed and will tally these in either verbal or nonverbal on the coding sheet. At the end of the episode the tallies will be added up and the conflict style with the most tallies will be checked off.

Some episodes might need to be watched more than once so that all characters involved in the conflict can be coded. The characters selected to be observed will vary depending on the show. For shows with long term characters like the Real World or Dance Moms, those characters present throughout the entire season will be the ones considered for coding. For example in the Real World all seven of the roommates could potentially be observed if they demonstrated actions that coincide with the conflict management styles. For Dance Moms, Abby Lee, the head of the dance studio will most likely be observed and coded. As well as, the mothers of the dancers who often are in conflict with Abby or amongst each other. However, for HGTV Showdown the characters coded will be the carpenters and designers who are paired up and competing against another group of carpenters and designers. This show is a little different from The Real World or Dance Moms because the carpenters and designers will change depending on what episode is selected. Overall, the characters will all be equally evaluated and coded based on their actions and how they reflect the conflict management styles.

The coding sheet is modeled after Colston (2012) on the reality of media perceptions and the depiction of women public relations practitioners in reality television. The study was very
successful and the data has aided in providing a model to help create the coding instruments for this study. For the purpose of understanding the methodology, the attributes associated with conflict resolution styles are given. The attributes for coding, come from Kilmann and Thomas’s (1975) five conflict-handling modes, competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising. In addition, aggressive conflict, when individual seeks to intentionally harm the opposing individual in the conflict, will also be analyzed.

Analysis

Once the coding sheets are filled out separately for each episode the data will then be compiled and the information will be transformed into numbers that can be formulated into precise and quantitative results.

Before an analysis can be truly compiled it is important to conduct a pretesting of the coding sheet. For this particular study pretesting will occur and be tested at least three times before actual coding takes place. This pretesting will involve watching one to two episodes from each show depending on the length of the episode and following the actions of the characters who are involved in a conflict. The coders will be looking for verbal or nonverbal actions the character displays and from there will determine the conflict management style that is most dominant. Multiple coders will be utilized in this step and together they will develop and refine the coding sheet. The pretest is necessary to work out any issues before actual coding takes place.

When coding takes place the coders will code by spending several days watching 10 to 20 episodes depending on the length of the show. The coders will be looking for verbal and nonverbal actions of the main characters in each episode. The coders will be looking for specific attributes or actions that coincide with keywords and examples in the appendix. As the coders are
watching they will tally the verbal or nonverbal attributes that are associated with the conflict management style that the character best portrays.

To establish intercoder reliability it will be necessary for two or more coders to agree on the coding of the content. A sample of 20% of everything that’s been coded thus far, a rough sample size of eight episodes that will be used and two to three coders will compare their findings. The 20% correlation coefficient will be used to measure how close the coding of each coder’s results match. At least 70% of the coding will need to match and the coders will need to agree on how they coded the programs.

When looking for differences in the data, for example differences in which conflict management strategy is shown the most on reality TV, the Chi Square method is used to determine if there is a difference. The Chi Squared test will compare the five different conflict management strategies competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising. The Chi Square results will hopefully reveal to the coders a significant different and allow them to learn which conflict management strategy is most often used in reality television to deal with conflict. However, if there is no significant difference the coders will fail to reject the hypothesis and it will be clear that there is no conflict management strategy that is used most often. If this were to be the case the findings could still be relevant and reveal that there are multiple strategies that are predominantly used in reality TV shows.

**Ethics and Permission**

Ethics also needs to be considered when conducting a research study. For example this study can benefit reality TV viewers and inform them of conflict management strategies. An ethical consideration that should be taken into account when doing this research is the expediency over beneficence. For example using a pen or pencil for coding is less expedient but
may result in more reliable results and can create an audit trail for the data analysis. It is also important to consider how the study might affect people’s freedoms. However, in the particular study human participants are not need for research and therefore permission is not need. Lastly, it is necessary to remain ethical when reporting the results and make efforts to correct or retract any falsely published research.

Limitations

Along with ethics there may also be some limitations that may be encountered while conducting this study. For example there were aspects of the study that could have been altered to make the results more widespread. If the coders had more time, shows or episodes to examine they could have had a more detailed result. If an entire season or series could have been coded then a more detailed analysis of each character could have been compiled and a progression of conflict resolutions could have been observed. Another limitation that could affect the study is the lack of conflict management strategies portrayed on the shows because the episodes selected were a poor representation of the conflict in the shows. Lastly, a limitation with in content analysis is that the coding might not capture conflict management styles as well as expected and the coders might also disagree on how to code a certain episode.

Conclusion

Reality TV is a popular and prevalent genre of television in society today and depicts perceptions of reality, reinforces stereotypes, and portrays conflict. There has been little research on how reality TV can aid in conflict management strategies. This lack of research and knowledge about the way conflict is portrayed on reality TV explains why a study like this is needed. With that being said, I would like to request permission from Dr. Opt for this research proposal.
References


Appendix

Key Terms for identification:

- Verbal – action that is communicated to another person through spoken language.
  - (Ex) conversation or argument

- Nonverbal – action that is communicated to another person without spoken language.
  - (Ex) hand gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, physical touch

- Competing - assertive and uncooperative, a power-oriented mode where an individual puts own concerns first at the expense of others.
  - Made sure they are understood
  - Likely to argue
  - Firmly pursues own opinion until they are heard
  - Strongly asserts opinion

- Accommodating- unassertive and cooperative, the opposite of competing, where an individual neglects own needs to satisfy others.
  - Admit that they were wrong
  - Give into the other person
  - Pretends to agree
  - Sympathize with the other

- Avoiding-unassertive and cooperative the individual does not address the conflict.
  - Prefer to let it go, not worth it
  - Tries to change the subject
  - Lighten it up or joke about it
• Avoid the other person

• Collaborating- assertive and cooperative, the opposite of avoiding, the individual attempts to work with the other person to find a solution that fits the needs of both parties.
  • Takes other point of view into account, as well as their own
  • Shares decision making with others on important issues
  • Tries to get all concerns aired
  • Tries to find a new solution that both parties find acceptable

• Compromising- assertive and cooperative, not on the same level as compromising, a mutual solution is agreed on, but only partially satisfies.
  • Identifies mutual concerns
  • Tries to reach a compromise
  • Gives in a little and tries to encourage the other to do the same
  • Tries to develop areas of common ground

• Aggressive Conflict – an individual seeks to intentionally harm the opposing individual in the conflict

Figure 1: Coding Instruments: Question Sheet

1. Which television show is being viewed? (Select one)
   1) ___ The Real World   2) ___ Dance Mom’s   3) ___ HGTV showdown

2. Identify the conflict management strategy that appears the most throughout the episode?
   (select one) 1) ___ Competing   2) ___ Accommodating   3) ___ Avoiding
   4) ___ Collaborating   5) ___ Compromising
3. Fill in the table below with the necessary information regarding the character(s) portraying conflict management strategies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Male or Female</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Aggressive conflict witnessed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes ___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No ___</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Verbal Example</th>
<th>Nonverbal Example</th>
<th>Total:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tally the examples of the conflict management strategies. The row with the most tallies, verbal or nonverbal, that episode will be labeled that conflict management strategy.