

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

Scripps Senior Theses

Scripps Student Scholarship

2021

College Students "Coupling Up" with Reality Dating Shows: The Interpersonal Relationships Fostered by Reality Dating Show Viewership

Juliana Romeo
Scripps College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Romeo, Juliana, "College Students "Coupling Up" with Reality Dating Shows: The Interpersonal Relationships Fostered by Reality Dating Show Viewership" (2021). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1655.
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/1655

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

**COLLEGE STUDENTS “COUPLING UP” WITH REALITY DATING SHOWS:
THE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS FOSTERED BY REALITY DATING
SHOW VIEWERSHIP**

by

JULIANA LOMBARDO ROMEO

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE
OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR SEO YOUNG PARK, SCRIPPS COLLEGE
PROFESSOR ALEXANDRA LIPPMAN, POMONA COLLEGE**

MAY 5, 2021

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Methods.....	6
Interlocutors	7
Positionality	8
Guiding Theory: Media, The Audience, & Social Interactions	10
Contextualizing College Students & Reality Dating Shows.....	12
Arguments.....	15
Chapter One: Conceptualizing the Audience and the Contestant of Reality TV	18
The Emergence of Reality TV in the US	19
New Relations between the Audience and Contestant	21
<i>Normative Contradictions</i>	23
<i>The Questionable “Reality” of the Reality TV Genre</i>	25
<i>Emotional Participation</i>	26
<i>The Audience Personified</i>	28
<i>Extended Engagement Via Social Media</i>	29
College Students’ Replication of Reality Dating Shows	31
Chapter Two: College Students’ Motivations for Reality Dating Show Viewership	37
Escape from Reality	39
The Social Experiment of Reality Dating Shows	41
Catalyst for New Social Life.....	46
Chapter Three: College Students’ Proxy Social Circle of Reality Dating Show Contestants	53
Parallels Between the College Student & the Contestant	55
Building Personal Networks with Reality Dating Show Contestants	56
Social Media: The Public Network of Reality Dating Show Contestants	62
<i>During the Show</i>	63
<i>After the Show</i>	66
Digital Media & the 21 st Century College Student.....	68
Conclusion	72
Works Cited	77

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my wonderful readers, Professor Seo Young Park and Professor Alexandra Lippman, thank you so much for your time and support of my work. Your insights and constructive feedback pushed me to deepen my analyses and showcase my ethnographic writing.

I requested Professor Park and Professor Lippman as my readers because they introduced me to two aspects of Anthropology that drew me to the major. In my first year at Scripps, I took Core II with Professor Park without knowing that she was a professor of the Anthropology department. I immediately fell in love with ethnography and was excited to start my own research project one day. In my junior year, I took Anthropology of Digital Culture with Professor Lippman. I was very interested in taking the course because of how well it aligned with my interests as an Anthropology major and Media Studies minor. I deeply enjoyed the content of the course as I learned how ethnographic methods could be applied to digital subjects. Through my work, I aspire to contribute to Media Anthropology and celebrate the cultural practices that are built through a variety of media forms.

I am very grateful for the support of my friends and family throughout this academically rigorous process. To my dear friend Alexa, thank you for introducing me to the fascinating world of reality dating shows and inviting me over to your New Hall suite our sophomore year to watch *The Bachelor*. Thank you to my friends for joining my many conversations and debates about what our favorite season of *Love Island* is. Thank you to my Mom, Dad, sister Bella, and dogs Dante and Peppe for becoming fans of reality dating shows and for watching *The Bachelor* every Monday with me “for research purposes.”

To my interlocutors, thank you so much for your time and willingness to share your experience “coupling up” with reality dating shows. I believe I will always nostalgically associate watching reality dating shows with my fond memories of college, and I hope that reading this research will inspire some fond memories for you too.

I want to acknowledge the difficulty of writing a thesis remotely during a global pandemic. As someone who was intimidated by writing a 10-page research paper before embarking on this thesis, I am proud of myself for overcoming my fears and pushing myself more than I ever have before academically. While I imagined myself writing and turning in my thesis on the Scripps campus, I am proud of myself for embracing the challenges of communicating with my professors and interlocutors remotely.

Warning: My thesis may contain spoilers for many seasons of *Love Island*, *The Bachelor*, and *The Bachelorette*.

Introduction

The dorm room I was assigned to my first year at Scripps was located close to a common room with a TV. Every Monday night, I would hear laughter as groups of students watched something on the TV. As my curiosity grew, I decided to check out what everyone was so interested in and nonchalantly walked by the common room as I grabbed a reading from the nearby printer. I vividly remember seeing a group of about ten students lying on the couches of the Browning common room completely engrossed in the content displayed on the TV. What show were they watching? *The Bachelor*.

Before starting college, I never watched reality dating shows. I was perplexed as to why students would devote two hours to watching a show about random people getting engaged on *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*. As I became more comfortable at Scripps and established my own friend group, one of my friends suggested that we start the new season of *The Bachelor*. I walked over to her suite in New Hall at Scripps, and we all squeezed onto her couch. I immediately realized that the popularity of and fascination with reality dating shows are not about the quality of the shows, but rather about the viewing experience that fosters close relationships among friends, and between college students and the show contestants.

In my senior year, as I began seeking interlocutors for this study, I posted on the “Scripps Current Students” Facebook page asking if any students who frequently watch reality dating shows would be interested in participating. I expected to receive maybe four or five responses, but I woke up the next morning to over 50 responses from Scripps students and alumna. Students even engaged with their friends in the post saying, “oh you would be perfect for this.” These many enthusiastic responses to my post reinforced my hunch that many college students not only watch reality dating shows but relished the opportunity to talk about them with others.

The timing of my research from August 2020 – May 2021 coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic that prevented many college students from residing on campus and participating in in-person classes. Because of the high numbers of cases in Los Angeles County where the Claremont Colleges are located, students have been unable to reside on campus since March 2020. As I spent more time at home than ever before in 2020 due to COVID-19, I, like many others, looked to streaming services for entertaining content. I had heard about *Love Island* in the news and from friends and decided to give it a try. There were six seasons on Hulu with around fifty 45-minute episodes each, so I knew the show would last me a long time. Every night, my sister and I would watch two or three episodes. We immediately became invested in the storylines and splurged for Hulu Premium so we would not be distracted by commercials. During COVID-19, college students, myself included, did not just look to reality dating shows to fill the time that they spent at home. Rather, they viewed and immersed themselves in reality dating shows as a reminder of their residential college experience.

In this thesis, I analyze how twenty-one college students at the Claremont Colleges and across the US view and interact with reality dating shows, especially in the dual contexts of their everyday lives as college students in 2020 and 2021, and the rising digital media landscape. The following questions guide my research and analyses: *What role do reality dating shows play in the genre of reality TV? How do college students conceptualize their own motivation for viewing and relationship with reality dating shows? What needs might college students be fulfilling through their viewership of these shows in 2020 and 2021? How do they connect the realities of the contestants, the media space, and their everyday lives?*

Methods

In order to understand the everyday experiences and personal perspectives of my interlocutors, I conducted individual ethnographic interviews and focus groups via Zoom with twenty-one college students at the Claremont Colleges and other residential colleges, yielding about eighteen hours of data. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the college students I interviewed were comfortable and familiar with conversing with their peers on Zoom since many of their classes have taken place on the platform. The interviews addressed individual experiences with, perception of, and attraction to reality dating shows. We also discussed each interlocutor's connections to the contestants while watching the shows and via social media. In the focus groups, which consisted of two or three participants, I showed short two-to-three-minute segments of reality dating shows, collected participants' raw commentary on the shows, and asked specific questions about their views on the segments. My research specifically focuses on *Love Island*, the UK and US versions, and *Bachelor* franchise shows including *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. These shows were the series that my interlocutors were most consistently familiar with.

To recruit interlocutors, I scheduled my first few interviews with my own peers who I knew watched reality dating shows. As mentioned above, I also posted on the "Scripps Current Students" Facebook to find more participants. After each interview, I would ask my interlocutors for recommendations of other college students who might be interested in participating in my research. This strategy was very successful, as many students had friends at other colleges who also watched reality dating shows. I suspect that students' interest in my work was amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, since many students who were isolated from their friends and taking

classes remotely hungered for ways to connect with other students and reflect on their college experience.

Interlocutors

The interlocutors in this research project are college students who regularly watch and are interested in reality dating shows. I specifically sought out students at residential colleges because the residential environment is conducive to students' having shared experiences beyond the classroom. To confirm that my interlocutors were familiar with the genre, I recruited those who have seen at least three seasons of various reality dating shows.

To ensure the anonymity and protect the privacy of my interlocutors, I employed pseudonyms and removed from the study any identifying information, such as the specific college they attend. I wanted to prioritize the confidentiality of my interlocutors because viewership of reality dating shows can sometime be stigmatized, as I will reflect upon in later sections of my thesis.

Overall, just over 70% of my interlocutors are female and 30% are male. Roughly 77% of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* viewers are female, so my gender breakdown of interlocutors normatively represents the audience of reality dating shows (Sanders, 2020). Of the twenty-one interlocutors, there are fifteen female students and six male students. I believe this sample size of male students is large enough to demonstrate that male college students do have an interest in reality dating shows. I found that males who watch reality dating shows are most likely introduced to the shows by their girlfriends or sisters. In contrast, females often watched reality dating shows from a young age or started watching them with friends in high school or college. Additionally, the content was consumed in gendered settings. Groups of male friends and groups

of female friends would watch the shows separately, but only two of my interlocutors watched the shows with both female and male friends.

To hear from a wide range of college students, I interviewed students at ten different college and universities across the US. Out of my twenty-one interlocutors, 66% attended a Claremont College. I focused primarily on the students at the Claremont Colleges because of the vast interest in my research that I received from students. Fifteen of my interlocutors were seniors, three were juniors, one was a sophomore, one was a first-year, and one was a recent college graduate. While a more diverse sample of interlocutors in terms of age and location may be ideal, I found great consistency in how students interact with reality dating shows across both age and location, suggesting that these factors do not greatly influence these relationships.

Positionality

When conducting research with human subjects, awareness of the researcher's positionality is important to understand the lens through which the interview data is being analyzed. While I had hypothetical ideas based on my own experiences with reality dating shows, to create open conversations for my interlocutors to freely share their opinions, I reserved my own perspectives and tried not to influence my interlocutors' experiences and comments.

As the research primarily relied on individual and focus group interviews, it required a careful ethnographic sensitivity toward the nature of the conversations that I had with my peer college students. Interviewers may inadvertently reinforce their own biases of their research and limit the response of the participant. Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte specify common sources of interviewer biases, including "us[ing] nonverbal cues to indicate the 'right answer' to a question," "redirecting the story or interrupting it," and "stating opinion on an issue" (Schensul,

Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, 144). These biases can easily direct participants to an answer they believe the interviewer wants to hear, rather than vocalizing their own opinion. Ultimately, the interview reflects the interviewer, the skills they possess, and the techniques they use. As I conducted interviews and focus groups, I tried to keep in mind Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte's advice and maintain an open mind about where my research might lead me.

Since I am a current college student and avid viewer of reality dating shows, I easily gained access to the private discussions of reality dating shows among college students. At the start of each interview, I always made sure my interlocutors were aware that I was just as big a fan of reality dating shows as they are. Since I have not seen every single season of *Love Island* or *The Bachelor*, I focused in my writing on the interlocutor's experiences with reality dating show seasons and contestants that I was most familiar with. Fortunately, I have seen most recent seasons of these shows, so I was able to understand what my interlocutors were referring to in most situations, but not all.

The topic of reality dating shows can be highly stigmatizing, as demonstrated in McCoy's article "Watching 'bad' television: Ironic consumption, camp, and guilty pleasures" (2014). My positionality as a fellow viewer of reality dating shows allowed my interlocutors to feel understood and not judged as we went through the interview. While Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte advise anthropologists to refrain from stating an opinion, I often found that sharing an opinion helped my interlocutors relate to me. I could relate to which contestants they like or dislike or talk about our favorite season of *Love Island*. I believe that because I was relatable as a researcher and interviewer, I was able to gather richer data and build stronger rapport with my interlocutors than someone who was not a viewer of reality dating shows.

Guiding Theory: Media, The Audience, & Social Interactions

The analyses of my research and interview data were largely guided by theories of media anthropology, social spaces of reality, and the audience. According to Spitulnik, mass media “are economically and politically driven, linked to developments in science and technology...there are numerous angles for approaching mass media anthropologically: as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, and as historical developments” (1993). Anthropology of media distinctly utilizes ethnographic perspectives to understand the cultural practices of media usage, which consist of the dynamic interactions between the text, the audience, and the broader socioeconomic context. For example, the works of Abu-Lughod and Boellstorff suggest that media forms can influence and resemble individuals’ daily interaction and contribute to identity formation. In *Dramas of Nationhood*, Abu-Lughod studies how Egyptian television soap opera contribute to the formation of a shared, Egyptian cultural identity (2005). In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff describes his research on the new media form of the virtual world Second Life where users participate in many normal aspects of life, such as purchasing a home, buying goods, and building friendships (2015). His work highlights how individuals seek to build cultural practices, even on the internet. Gershon is an anthropologist who researched the reality TV show *Undercover Boss*’ portrayals of corporate hierarchies in the US and the UK during the financial crises (2019). Her work signifies that reality TV can provide a window into economic, social, and cultural structures within a society. In my work, I theorize how my interlocutors’ perceptions of reality dating show contestants were influenced by their cultural identity as a college student and how a shared viewership of reality dating shows facilitates social interactions online and in person.

Theories of social interactions and media usage emphasize media's ability to form and strengthen social bonds. On campus, college students form relational closeness with their classmates, roommates, hallmates, teammates, and many more individuals (Taylor & Bazarova 2018). In my research, a shared viewership of reality dating shows can be a powerful source of relational closeness on college campuses as I discuss in Chapter Two. Media multiplexity theory, which assumes that relationships between individuals become stronger when individuals use more media forms for communication, is used to qualify the power of a shared media usage of reality dating shows among friend groups (Taylor & Bazarova 2018).

Social interactions establish that students are not merely consuming media but are building relationships with the contestants through the process of consuming the show. I conceptualize these interactions through narrative engagement and parasocial interaction in Chapter Three. Narrative engagement allows audience members to apply their life to the characters and situations shown through media, as described by Buselle & Bilandzic (2008). Parasocial interaction takes narrative engagement one step further as audience members utilize this knowledge to build perceived friendships with individuals featured in media (Kühne & Oprea 2020). In their viewership of reality dating shows, college students utilize narrative engagement and parasocial interaction to apply their life experiences to the situations the contestants are in and to expand their social spaces of reality.

The gaze, as described by Lacan and Foucault and analyzed by Krips, serves to mediate the relationship between objects and subjects, and provides insights into the role of an audience member (2010). Andrejevic applies the theories of the gaze to reality TV as the camera acts as a gaze and symbol of the audience, constantly influencing the behaviors of the contestants (2003). In reality dating shows, the gaze influences the actions of the contestants as they navigate their

choice for romantic partners, which highlights how the audience participates in the outcome of the show.

Uses and gratification theory demonstrates how viewers' needs in everyday life are satisfied through media consumption (Katz et. al 1974). In Barton's work on reality dating shows, she employs uses and gratification theory to argue that personal utility is obtained through viewership of reality TV and social utility is obtained through the specific viewership of reality dating shows (2009). In Chapter Two, I employ uses and gratifications theory to identify the needs that reality dating show viewership fulfills in the everyday life of a college student. By combining ethnographic anthropological methods with theories from psychology, sociology, and media studies, I analyze college students' perceptions of and relationship to reality dating shows, in order to position my work as a valuable contribution to media anthropology.

Contextualizing College Students & Reality Dating Shows

The existing bodies of literature on college students as viewers include them as a subgroup of the "young adult" age group, but only a few studies provided a detailed account of college students' viewing habits of and relationships with reality TV (Oprea & Kühne 2016). Similarly, other studies research reality TV, but categorize reality dating shows as one genre within their greater research (McCoy & Scarborough 2014). In contrast, my study focuses specifically on college students' relationship with reality dating shows. This relationship is especially intriguing because of the many parallels between contestants and college students, which I explore in this research.

Teenagers and young adults as of 2021 have a close relationship with media as they grew up during the evolution of modern digital media. On average, "adolescents are estimated to use

media up to 11 hours a day, and emerging adults up to 12 [hours a day]” (Opree & Kühne 2016). I have found that college students frequently use multiple media forms at once. For example, they may be on Twitter or Instagram while watching their favorite shows. This convergence of two medias demonstrates that college students and young adults may be consuming more media within a day than this data may reveal. College students in particular take significant time out of their busy schedules to watch and discuss reality TV and reality dating shows, often in group settings that create a shared viewing experience in person or on social media.

The accessibility of digital media content in contemporary society helps make it a timely and fascinating research subject. Through the rise of streaming platforms, viewers can watch and enjoy TV shows that aired years ago. Reality dating shows are no exception.¹ Over the summer of 2020, I watched Season 4 of *Love Island*, which originally aired in 2018. I became very invested in the relationship between contestants Dani Dyer and Jack Fincham and enjoyed imagining what their life would be like together as they shared their plans of living together, getting married, and having children. Even though I later learned from a quick Google search (spoiler alert), that they had broken up a few months after the season ended, their relationship still seemed very real and current to me as I watched it unfold.

Both *Love Island* and *Bachelor* franchise shows are part of a specific subgenre that I call “contestant-centric reality dating shows.” In this subgenre, contestants are removed from their daily lives in order to participate in a competition to find a romantic partner and stay in the competition until the season finale. Because the shows are designed as a competition, viewers

¹ All *Bachelor* and *Love Island* series are accessible in different formats to American viewers. *Love Island* (UK) is accessible to Americans through the paid streaming service, Hulu, while *Love Island* (US) is shown live, five times a week when a season is airing, on CBS and past seasons are available on the CBS streaming platform. All shows in *The Bachelor* franchise are aired weekly on ABC and posted on the ABC streaming platform. Therefore, an individual’s viewership of each show may be impacted by what streaming services or cable options they have access to.

become invested in the relationships between contestants and make bets on who will win the season. As previously mentioned, I focus my research on these shows, and therefore this subgenre, because these are the reality dating shows most frequently viewed by my interlocutors. While the role of the contestant is highlighted throughout my work, I refer to these shows simply as “reality dating shows” throughout my thesis, since “contestant-centric reality dating shows” is too long of a phrase to use repeatedly.

As previously mentioned, my interviews focused on the experiences of my interlocutors’ watching two reality dating shows – *Love Island* and *The Bachelor*. I provide here some background on the format of the shows so my readers can better understand some of the terms I and my interlocutors use. *Love Island* is a reality dating show that originally aired in the UK in 2015. At the start of each season five female and five male contestants are selected to fly to Mallorca and enter the *Love Island* villa. The contestants “couple up” with another contestant of the opposite sex as they get to know one another, share a bed, and compete in challenges together.² Audiences can vote for their favorite contestants and couples, and ultimately vote to decide which couple wins the season. Because audiences can vote for contestants, they feel involved in the outcome of the show and want to root for their favorites to win. They also enjoy *Love Island* because all contestants have a chance of finding love, in contrast to *The Bachelor* where only one contestant finds love with the lead of the season.

² Every week, new contestants enter the villa as new “re-coupling” ceremony occurs. Depending on the week, the male or female contestants will have the power to choose which member of the opposite sex they want to couple up with. The show lasts for seven to eight weeks as episodes air six nights a week. In the season finale, one couple is crowned the winner and one member of the couple is given a large monetary prize. On *Love Island* (US), the winner is given \$100,000. The one contestant in the couple who is given the monetary prize is invited to either keep the money or split it with their partner (Love Island 2015). As of 2021, all contestants who have won the prize have split the money with their partner as a public testament to their love, even though many of the couples have broken up weeks after the show ends. Now, Australia and the US have produced their own versions of *Love Island* with the same format but filmed in different locations including Fiji and Las Vegas.

While I provide a more thorough history of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* in Chapter One, I will briefly describe the show's format here. Every season, a male contestant, for *The Bachelor*, or a female contestant, for *The Bachelorette*, is selected as the lead of the show. Throughout the season, the lead will go on a series of group and one-on-one dates with the contestants of his or her choice. Every week, the lead gives roses to the contestants they want to continue their relationship with at the "Rose Ceremony." At the end of the season, each lead picks one contestant out of the final two contestants to propose to.³ Viewers are drawn to *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* because they like to follow contestants from past seasons. The leads were typically contestants on previous seasons of the show who were popular among audiences but did not find a romantic partner on their season. If a viewer was really rooting for a contestant in the past season, they will be excited to see that he or she is now the bachelor or bachelorette in the current season. In comparison to *Love Island* where contestants spend every day and hour as couples, contestants only see the lead once or twice a week on *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. Because contestants spend less time with their love interest in *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, audiences feel that the connections on *Love Island* may be more genuine.

Arguments

College students have a multilayered and interactive relationship with reality dating shows. The shows not only engage college students as a viewer with reality dating show contestants but also reflect and foster the dense relations they have with fellow college students on campus and other viewers via social media. While watching TV is typically viewed as an

³ In recent seasons, the leads have not proposed to a contestant, but have rather elected to continue dating them after the conclusion of the show.

isolating experience, reality dating show viewership encourages the formation of social relationships. In Chapter One, I provide a history of the evolution of reality TV and reality dating shows. Through an exploration of reality dating shows, I conceptualize the role of the audience and the contestant using Krips' analysis of Foucault's and Lacan's work on the gaze. I demonstrate how audience members are able to participate in and influence the media form through their viewership and social media. Lastly, I describe a compelling example of how Claremont College students have taken this participatory action to a new level through creating a version of *Love Island*, with contestants from the Claremont Colleges, shared on social media.

In Chapter Two, I apply a spatial analysis to examine how the role of a college student and structure of residential college campuses influences college students' conceptualization of reality dating shows. I utilize uses and gratification theory to frame what motivates audiences to consume media content. By spatial analysis, I refer to the space of a college campus within college students' lives that impacts their perception and viewership of reality dating shows. I share my finding that these spaces can be categorized as forms of social experimentation, escapism, or socialization. These findings are unique to the college student demographic because they help further engage with or escape from their academic and social life on campus.

In Chapter Three, I analyze how college students view their relationship with reality dating show contestants as similar to, and sometimes a supplement for, their friendships on campus. These relationships are formed both as they are viewing the shows and as they engage with contestants, and other viewers on social media. While watching the shows, college students interpret the behaviors and communications between contestants based on their past experiences, as demonstrated through narrative engagement and parasocial interaction. These connections become deeply personal and intimate, especially during COVID-19, as they envision themselves

in the life a contestant. Through analyzing college students' trusted relationship with broader media forms, I postulate that college students openly discuss political and social topics regarding reality dating shows in the public network of social media.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the normal college experience more isolating than ever and made forming and maintaining interactive relationships all the more challenging. Over the course of my research, it became clear that the significance of my interlocutors' relationship with reality dating shows was amplified by COVID-19. In Chapter One, I refer to the *Love Island Claremont* project through which students sought romantic connections and relationships with their fellow peers on social media. In Chapter Three, I discuss how college students viewed reality dating shows to replicate the social connections they have at school and to seek reminders of normalcy. For many college students, reality dating shows became a powerful way to not only connect with peers, but also grieve the loss of and attempt to emulate the traditional residential college experience.

Chapter One: Conceptualizing the Audience and the Contestant of Reality TV

Reality television is a media phenomenon consumed by millions of Americans in the early 21st century. Popular American reality TV shows *Big Brother* and *Love Island* received 4.06 million and 1.55 million viewers respectively for a single episode on September 4, 2020 and likely many more views through streaming services after the episodes aired (Hipes, 2020). Through conversations with friends who watch reality TV, I have found that viewers often have trouble articulating why they watch these shows, despite their immense popularity. The shows' strong appeal is perplexing since they lack many of the elements that make for good television programming, like talented acting, well-told stories, or imaginative plots. Instead, reality TV focuses on the interpersonal drama between normal everyday people who are transformed into dramatic characters by the shows' format.

What is it about reality TV that causes millions of Americans to be glued to their screens each week? In this chapter, I seek to further our understanding of this phenomenon by first tracing the evolution of reality TV and its role in contemporary media. I apply the gaze, an element of surveillance theory, to mediate the relationship between the reality TV audience and contestant and argue that these connections attract audiences to become active audience members. I analyze some of the defining features of this genre in specific that elicit audience engagement including normative contradictions, the questionable "reality" of reality TV, emotional participation, audience personification, and social media engagement. Finally, I identify a particular audience segment of reality dating shows – college students - with an example of how they take active audience engagement to an extreme.

The Emergence of Reality TV in the US

At the turn of the century, production companies and media networks gained interest in creating reality TV shows because of their dual advantage of low-budget production costs and large and accessible audiences. In contrast to many fictional shows, reality TV shows can usually be shot in one location and do not require paying large salaries to celebrity cast members since contestants are not trained actors. Some of the first successful American reality TV shows that helped to popularize the genre include *The Real World*, *Survivor*, and *The Bachelor*. Through researching the history of reality TV, I discovered that these three shows contributed greatly to the evolution of the genre as the major networks utilized their creativity to compete for the next best reality TV show. Extensive media coverage of real-person dramas like the OJ Simpson trial and the Monica Lewinsky scandal in the late 1990s whetted audiences' appetites for viewing the lives of real people as a source of entertainment (King 2005, 15). Audiences were drawn to the production of entertainment by someone who could be their friend, co-worker, classmate, or neighbor, in stark contrast to the professional production and fictional plots of non-reality TV shows.

The format and success of one of the first reality TV shows, *The Real World*, demonstrates that companies did not need massive budgets to produce engaging and popular reality TV shows. In this MTV reality TV show, first airing in 1992, seven strangers in their 20s move from other parts of the country to a house in an American city and form friendships and romantic relationships with one another (*The Real World* 1992). As the strangers live together, the camera catches every glimpse into the drama and interactions that take place in the house. The first season attracted an estimated audience size of 3.1 million, had "a modest cost of \$300,000 per episode, and a core audience of agers 18-25" (Roman 2005, 175). The show format

proved to be beneficial to both audiences and producers as young adult audiences wanted to see the everyday lives of people their own age, and producers could earn a large profit through the creation and airing of the show. *The Real World* soon drew a cult following, and audiences were so intrigued with the lives of the contestants that they wanted to take their relationship with the show one step further by seeking to join its cast. Over 35,000 audience members applied to join the cast each season, despite having only a .02% chance of being selected (Roman 2005, 174). *The Real World's* immense draw demonstrated that young adults were even more interested in the lives of contestants, who were their perceived peers, than in the lives of fictional characters.

The genre expanded as the wide popularity of *Survivor* on CBS among American audiences revealed the potential virality of competition-based reality TV. The reality show *Survivor* first aired in the summer of 2000 and features contestants living on a remote island where they are given limited survival supplies and forced to live off the land (*Survivor* 2000). Contestants are voted off the “island” by other contestants, giving audiences’ the opportunity to make predictions about the winner and analyze alliances between contestants. After roughly 7 weeks of filming and living remotely, the last contestant standing wins a prize of \$1 million. The show format allows the audience to be privy to everyday people in abnormal situations. The show location on a remote, tropical island with crystal blue waters and tall palm trees allows audiences an appealing escape from their everyday life. The large prize money incentivizes audiences to root for their favorite contestant. The first season finale generated 50 million viewers and received ratings comparable to the Super Bowl of that year (Roman 2005, 175). Since 2000, the show has aired 40 seasons. The wide viewership of the show signifies that it was not just reality TV fans who were watching *Survivor*, but even casual TV viewers were tuning in.

Survivor was, and still is, a favorite TV show of many Americans, and proved that reality TV shows can gain viewership similar in size to, or even larger than, fictional television or sitcoms.

In 2002, ABC further pushed the concept of the competition-based reality TV show by creating a reality dating show, *The Bachelor*. Each season, twenty to thirty single female contestants compete for the love of one “bachelor.” Throughout the season, the bachelor indicates which contestants he chooses to stay in the competition by giving them a rose in the show’s quintessential rose ceremonies (*The Bachelor* 2002). The drama of the season culminates with the bachelor selecting one female contestant to propose to. The first season finale, featuring bachelor Alex Michel, received 19 million viewers (Roberts 55). Through its ability to consistently attract large audiences, *The Bachelor* helped to broaden the demographic of reality TV audiences. While *Survivor* focuses on physical strength and endurance, *The Bachelor* appeals to a distinctive, but large audience that seeks entertainment about love and romance. In 2003, ABC created *The Bachelorette* where a former of female contestant of *The Bachelor* becomes the lead and dates new male contestants (*The Bachelorette* 2003). Since their inception, *The Bachelor* has aired 24 seasons, and *The Bachelorette* has aired 16 seasons.

New Relations between the Audience and Contestant

Through the popularization of reality TV and reality dating shows, audiences began to actively participate in the media form. Audiences became fascinated with the contestants, locations, and format of the shows and formed various relationships with the content. In this section, I argue that the various features of the shows incite an active audience presence during and outside viewing time.

Krips', a Cultural Studies Professor at Claremont Graduate University, and Andrejevic's analyses of theorists Lacan and Foucault's frameworks for conceptualizing the gaze provides insights into the powerful social and psychological reality between audiences and contestants. The gaze foregrounds the operations of surveillance, describing an individual's awareness of and sensitivity to other's watching them. Krips shares Foucault's definition of the gaze as twofold, since it is made up of "the act of observation on the one hand, and the internalization on the other" (Krips 2010, 96). Further, he offers Lacan's view that the "source of the gaze is a stain" that lacks a "precise identity" (Krips 2010, 96). Foucault and Lacan's theories suggest that the gaze does not derive from a direct source. Further, the recipient does not have to identify the source of the gaze to internalize the emotions associated with being the recipient of the gaze. In order to be defined as a gaze, the "stain must precipitate unrealistic anxiety" in combination with pleasure (Krips 2010, 98).

In *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, Andrejevic, a Media Studies Professor at Pomona College, applies the role of the gaze to reality TV and audience-contestant relationships. He shares Lacan's vision of the gaze as "an unsymbolized Real" that acts as "the omnipresent gaze of the camera/audience" (Andrejevic 2003, 181). Through the camera on reality TV, Andrejevic describes "an imagined gaze" in which audiences can "see all," while contestants "are left to imagine what [other] contestants are up to" (Andrejevic 2003, 181). To Andrejevic, the camera becomes a symbol of and vehicle for the gaze as it allows audiences to peer into the lives of the contestants. The camera is not merely a filming device to portray scenes one-way but constitute the complexity of the "reality" within reality TV.

Together, Krips' and Andrejevic's interpretation of Lacan's and Foucault's theories propose that the scenes of reality TV as a virtual space in which the presence of an audience gaze

produces sensations of anxiety and excitement. The constant surveillance allows audiences to “participate in a medium that has long relegated audience members to the role of passive spectators” (Andrejevic 2003, 2). Through this active role, audience members act as a generator of the gaze. Even if the contestant does not see a camera, they are aware of the omnipresence of the surveillance and will experience feelings of both anxiety and pleasure because of it. And these senses of anxiety and pleasure are transmitted back to the audience, accentuating the tension and drama of the mediated reality within these shows. A contestant’s awareness of the constant presence of an audience influences how they behave, making audiences an active participant in how the drama unfolds. This participation is intensified due to the emotional and intimate experiences of contestants, which characterize the plotlines of reality dating shows. The camera as a symbol of and vehicle for the gaze furthers my argument that most recent reality dating shows invoke more immediate, extensive, and creative audience engagement with the media form.

Normative Contradictions

In an interesting twist on the audience/contestant relationship, many audience members form a seemingly contradictory relationship with reality TV and its contestants as they may consider the media form to be “trashy” and “bad” television yet continue to be fascinated and entertained by it. In “Watching ‘bad’ television: Ironic consumption, camp, and guilty pleasures,” the authors analyze why viewers watch reality TV and label this consumption pattern as a “normative contradiction” since consumers overtly acknowledge that these shows lack many of the classic elements that make for good television programming, yet still gain pleasure from and are interested in watching the shows (McCoy & Scarborough 2014).

McCoy and Scarborough offer a typology for why viewers are attracted to stereotypically “bad” television including daytime talk shows, reality TV, made-for-tv movies, and soap operas. Their research describes the participants’ styles of viewing as either ironic consumption, guilty pleasure, or camp sensibility. Ironic consumption is defined as viewers who watch “trashy” television shows “to make fun of and feel superior to them and their ‘traditional viewers’” (McCoy & Scarborough 2014). Guilty pleasure viewers continue to watch shows even though they are ashamed of their habits. Camp sensibility is described as viewers who perceive shows to be “so full of exaggeration and extravagance that it cannot be taken seriously” and it is “not about ridicule or even condemnation” (McCoy & Scarborough 2014). At the root of McCoy & Scarborough argument is a strong relationship between audiences and contestants. In fact, it is the relationship with the contestants that defines the audiences’ attraction to the show as they either make fun of, feel guilty about their interest in, or enjoy the extravagance of the contestants’ behavior. These types of viewers have a hyper-awareness of the contestants’ performativity, and their impact as generators of the gaze, because they are indulging in and poking fun at the outrageous contestant behaviors.

The comments of one of my interlocuters in my research reveal a common misperception about reality TV viewing that can be explained by the concept of normative contradiction. Before watching *The Bachelor* in college, David, a student at the Claremont Colleges, assumed that all viewers were truly invested in the show and contestants. After his friend group jointly started watching the show, he understood that “a lot more people watch it ironically to make fun of it, nobody really legitimately watches it in general.” His commentary that “nobody really legitimately watches [reality dating shows]” demonstrates that he places all college students who watch the shows in the category of ironic consumption. College students who ironically consume

reality TV are enticed to view these shows in a consumption pattern indicative of a “normative contradiction.” I will analyze these relationships further in the following chapter.

The Questionable “Reality” of the Reality TV Genre

As reality TV evolves, it pushes the boundaries of fictional TV through increasingly outrageous formats and contestant behaviors. Reality TV is filmed on exotic locations, such as Fiji, as seen on *Survivor*, and Mallorca, as seen on *Love Island*. Contestants with extreme personalities, who have never been on TV before, go on reality TV to trigger drama and conflict between other contestants. Andrejevic proposes that “the fact that the genre itself reinvents conventions of prime-time programming provides a ready-made media hook that encourages coverage of the latest and most outrageous formats” (2003, 4). If you enjoy physical comedy, you could watch *Wipeout* where contestants compete on a massive, complex obstacle course. If you enjoy dramatic romances, you could watch young adults search for a contestant to propose to after knowing one another for only 2 months on *The Bachelor*. Contestants willingly participate in these extraordinary behaviors, creating novel entertainment for viewers. Despite the label of “reality” TV, it seems that viewers are more entertained by outrageous and unrelatable content. Audiences are immersed in an outrageous world but are still grounded to reality by seeing everyday people engage in it.

The structure of competition-based reality TV shows relies on the motivations of everyday people to participate in the entertainment world as a contestant. Contestants are not incited by financial gain since, unlike trained actors, they are not paid salaries. Contestants on *The Bachelor* are not compensated monetarily at all for their participation while *Love Island* contestants are paid a small stipend of only \$300 a week for competing on the show, which is not

even a livable wage. (Willen 2020 & Alblas 2020). Andrejevic argues that reality TV contestants are instead compensated with access to the celebrity realm. He asserts that “the ability of real people – those who are not officially part of the entertainment industry to participate in a realm from which they have been excluded is offered ... as compensation to the public for allowing themselves to be watched” (Andrejevic 2003, 6). To enter the exclusive world of celebrity and entertainment culture, reality TV contestants must openly provide audiences with access to their private lives. Despite this sense of constant surveillance as represented through the gaze, many everyday people will overcome these breaches of privacy to have their “15 minutes of fame.” *Love Island*, a British-based reality dating show, received nearly 100,000 applicants for its 2019 season (Sansome 2019). The sheer number of applicants illustrates that young adults are not only invested in these shows but will willingly sacrifice their privacy to partake in this celebrity world. Through filming in exotic locations and incenting contestants with access to the celebrity realm, reality TV does not truly or accurately represent reality. Reality TV instead creates a reality with some resemblance to everyday life. They feature contestants who live fairly normal lives, thus remaining relatable to their audience, yet contestants are encouraged to behave in entertainingly abnormal ways by the formats and performative nature of the shows.

Emotional Participation

Through reality TV, and more specifically reality dating shows, contestants openly express their emotions, allowing contestants and audiences to emotionally participate in the media form. A common feature of reality TV shows is the monologue confession, where a contestant breaks the fourth wall and confides directly to the audience in a private setting. Typically, a contestant is filmed solo as they respond to questions posed off camera from a

producer yet appear as though they are sharing raw commentary. These monologues are an example of confessional culture “in which the key attraction is the revelation of ‘true’ emotions” (Aslama & Pantti 2006, 168). Through allowing contestants to speak directly to their audience, monologue confessions serve as an opportunity for the audience “to assess the key characteristic of authenticity: the participant’s integrity and credibility when it comes to feelings” (Aslama & Pantti 2006, 168). Audiences can take an active role in evaluating the authenticity of the contestants. In monologue confessions on *The Bachelor*, contestants will typically share their feelings towards “the bachelor” of the season, react to drama between contestants, or share how the experience has impacted them emotionally. If audiences do not feel that the contestant is authentic or genuine, they often turn to social media to mock their monologue confession. For example, Mykenna Dorn, a contestant on Season 24 of *The Bachelor* shares her journey of personal growth in a monologue confession.

After not receiving a rose from Peter, the bachelor of the season, and being eliminated from the show, Mykenna begins to cry and says:

I know that this girl right here is tough and strong, and she’s powerful. And she’s beautiful and she knows what she deserves more than anything. Even though I wanted to end up here in love, I feel like I’m more madly in love with who I am than anything.
(*The Bachelor* 2020)

This intimate and emotional moment can conceivably be perceived as an authentic example of extreme personal growth as Mykenna accepts and loves herself without needing to be loved by someone else. Instead, audience members and even comedians chose to mock her, rejecting the authenticity of her confession. On his late-night talk show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* Kimmel features this moment and says “Ok, well at least she found someone” (2020), as the live audience laughs. The video, titled “The Most Dramatic & Inspiring Goodbye in Bachelor History,” was posted on YouTube and now has 421,000 views. The virality of this clip

demonstrates that viewers did not perceive Mykenna's revelation to be authentic, and rather viewed it as comedic. These monologue confessions, coupled with the use of social media outlets, give audiences an active and often powerful role as viewers of reality TV and creators of the gaze who can analyze and pass judgement on the performance and emotions of contestants. The growth of social media serves to accelerate this phenomenon, providing viewers with many platforms to share their perceptions with others and comment on one another's assessments.

The Audience Personified

Reality TV further encourages audience participation and empowers the audience by providing the viewing public, often referred to in the US as simply "America," the opportunity to influence the outcome of the show. Americans are personified as the key decision makers for the contestants and their ability to stay or be eliminated from each show. *Big Brother* first aired on CBS during the summer of 2000 and was one of the first reality TV shows to give "America" power as key stakeholders in the show. Contestants on *Big Brother* spend their summer in a house within a production studio outfitted with cameras and microphones following and recording them 24/7, and complete challenges to determine who had power in the house each week (*Big Brother* 2000). During each season's finale, viewers can vote for "America's Favorite HouseGuest," who will win \$25,000. Even if the chosen contestant does not win the season, they are motivated through financial gain to be "liked" by "America." In another example, on Season 2 of the *Love Island (USA)*, "America" voted for a male contestant in the villa, Connor Trott, to go on a date with an incoming female contestant, Lauren Coogan. Viewers could download the "Love Island" app to participate in the vote. Viewers voted for Connor to go on a date with Lauren, even though he was "coupled up" with Mackenzie Dipman. After Lauren and Connor

leave for their date, Mackenzie begins to cry and says, “I just feel like America is trying to say that I’m not good enough for Connor” (*Love Island* 2020). She talks about America as if they are a monolith that is personally inflicting harm upon her relationship. She recognizes the power of the audience gaze, and experiences extreme anxiety. Mackenzie internalizes the public vote as the greater opinion of “America,” and allows it to negatively impact her social well-being. Throughout both examples, “America” is given power to influence the decisions and actions of contestants.

Extended Engagement Via Social Media

I was recently watching the new season of *The Bachelorette* and found myself texting many of my friends to see if they were watching it and what they thought about the episode. Not only do I spend time thinking and texting about *The Bachelorette* while watching the show, but I also engage in conversations about the contestants outside of my viewing time, as do many of my peers. What is it about the format and content of reality dating shows that encourages their emergence as a social phenomenon?

As soon as *The Bachelor* launched in 2002, viewers became invested in the romantic lives of the shows’ contestants. Season 1 ended with Alex Michel proposing to Amanda Marsh. Even after the show ended, viewers wanted to know whether Alex and his fiancé Amanda Marsh actually ended up getting married. While the contestants are no longer filmed by camera crews consistently, they still attract public interest and are at times followed by paparazzi. Since Twitter did not exist at the time, rumors spread through magazines and gossip blogs that Alex continued to pursue the runner-up, Trista Rehn, after the show ended (*Reality TV World Staff* 2003). The drama and speculations kept viewers engaged in the contestants’ love lives well

beyond the end of the show. While other reality TV shows' storylines definitively end when the show concludes with winner and losers, the storylines of reality dating shows extend into the real world as the contestants continue or terminate the relationships they formed while on the show. Gossip blogs and magazines easily capitalize upon viewers' desire to determine the current relationship status of these former contestants.

With the advent of social media, viewers can easily engage with and about reality dating show contestants' before, during, and after the show. In 2018 and 2019, *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* were rated as top "Social TV" shows due to the large social media engagement they produce (Nielsen 2018 & 2019). Prior to the airing of each season, networks will usually release the names and photographs of the contestants on the network's website (Krolak 2020). Fans of the show can utilize this information to find the contestants' social media pages and learn about what the contestants look like, in addition to their lives, jobs, and interests before the show even airs. On *Love Island*, the Instagram pages of each contestant are featured in the season premiere, therefore encouraging audiences to engage with the contestants' social media (*Love Island* 2020). Through this social media engagement, fans can build a relationship directly with the contestant and share their opinions on them with friends who watch the shows.

Before, during and after the airing of a reality dating show episode, key figures from the shows, including past contestant or show hosts, will elicit engagement from viewers. Chris Harrison, the host of *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Bachelor in Paradise* tweeted before an episode of *The Bachelorette* aired, "Waking up on #TheBachelortte premiere day like it's Christmas morning! See you tonight #Bachelor nation" (@chrisbharrison, Twitter, October 13, 2020). Through featuring these branded hashtags, Twitter users who search or find the hashtags can locate this content and participate in a conversation about the show. Viewers of the show

often write comedic tweets poking fun at the contestants. After the episode of *The Bachelorette* aired on October 20, 2020, one Twitter user tweeted “Me, recovering from this train wreck of an episode” with a picture of one of the contestants putting on a spa facial mask (@TheBachBabes, Twitter, October 20, 2020). This tweet received 2.6k likes, signifying that other viewers found this content entertaining and comedic. Social media extends engagement with the show well beyond each viewing season and episode, and even provides an opportunity for savvy viewers to attain a version of celebrity with their witty commentary. This sub-section provides a framework for how social media operates within reality dating shows, but I will further discuss how college students in specific use social media to get to know other viewers’ opinions and measure the authenticity of contestants in Chapter Three.

In summary, the relationship between the audience and contestant in reality TV, and reality dating shows in particular, is a defining feature of the genre. Audiences acknowledge that the performative nature of the shows, but also enjoy participating in the outcomes of the shows. The format, programming choices, and other elements of the genre, with the help of social media, make audiences into active participants in the fates of the contestants they view and the content they consume.

College Students’ Replication of Reality Dating Shows

As of 2016, young adults aged 18 to 34 spend “six hours and 40 minutes weekly with TV-connected devices” (Nielsen 2016). In 2013, a Nielsen study found that college students aged 18 to 24 “watch more video on the internet” than other age groups (2013). The study found that college students consume video content on the internet for “an hour-and-a-half each week” (Nielsen 2013). Since this study was conducted almost ten years ago, we can be confident that

this average watch time had increased drastically due to the surge in popularity of video content through a wide range of streaming services and video content apps such as Tik Tok and Instagram Reels. As of 2021, 85% of businesses use video marketing as a tool, compared to 61% of businesses who used video marketing as a tool in 2016 (HubSpot 2021). Video content has infiltrated the media, entertainment, and marketing industries, allowing college students to absorb many hours of video every day.

Among the dizzying array of video content choices, reality dating shows emerge as a popular entertainment choice by college students. In a 2019 study through Comcast's "Xfinity on Campus," *The Bachelor* ranked number 4, *Bachelor in Paradise* ranked as number 12, and *The Bachelorette* ranked as number 17 of the top 20 shows viewed by college students (Campus News 2019). In many residence halls and off campus apartments across America, college students tune in to watch *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Love Island*, and many other reality TV shows every week for a dose of the drama, romance, and competition that these shows are famous for. In fact, US college students are so enchanted with the reality TV genre that some have attempted to replicate reality TV shows on-campus, including *Survivor Maryland* at the University of Maryland where students compete in *Survivor* challenges and post episodes of the challenges on YouTube (Feingold 2019). The show gained a massive following through 25,000 YouTube views and even inspired other college campuses to create their own versions (Feingold 2019).

In an ambitious expression of their collective fascination with the reality dating show *Love Island*, a group of students at the Claremont Colleges (The 5Cs) produced a version of the show over Zoom, titled *Love Island Claremont*, during the early summer of 2020 after students had to leave campus and complete the semester remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On

the actual *Love Island*, 10 to 12 contestants live together in a “villa” in tropical location such as Mallorca or Fiji where they are filmed 24/7 as they “couple up” with a contestant of the opposite gender (*Love Island* 2015). Contestants spend the majority of their time building a relationship with their current “coupling” or discussing other contestants that they want to romantically pursue instead of their current partner. In the Claremont Colleges socially distanced version of *Love Island*, 5C contestants met on Zoom daily to film while chatting with other contestants in hopes of finding a romantic connection. The “episodes” were shared with viewers via Twitter and Instagram.

In an interview with one of the contestants of *Love Island Claremont*, Quinn, I learned about the application process and the format behind the scenes of the project. Quinn found *Love Island Claremont* through a friend who suggested she sign up for the show. She had seen information about the show on Instagram as well and decided to apply through the Google Form application. The application was fairly similar to an application for *Love Island* or *The Bachelor*, asking for “a bio, why you want to be on the show, and also how your friends would describe you.” The application also asked for the applicant’s social media handles and a current photo. Because of the similarities between an actual application to a reality dating show and this application, students could feel like they were immersed and participating in the reality dating show experience.

Contestants met every day for one to two hours on Zoom where they would have one-on-one conversations with contestants of the other gender in breakout rooms. The male and the female contestants each had their own group chat on What’s App where they would discuss their relationships. Contestants also contributed to a “villa” group chat with all of the contestants. Additionally, each contestant had an individual group chat with the producers. Just as producers

influence the outcomes of reality dating shows, the producers in this version of *Love Island* could have the same impact.

Just as with professionally produced reality dating shows, audiences were given the opportunity to actively participate in the show. The Twitter account, “@5Cloveisland” shared updates on the show and allowed the audience to participate in the show through voting. One poll asked its followers to vote for their favorite couple, and received 83 votes (@5Cloveisland Twitter, June 16, 2020). Even if a student was not selected to be a contestant, they could still participate in the outcome of the show via social media.

While the production of the show was cut short due to technical issues, Quinn shares that the show “moved very quickly.” She felt that she did not have enough time to get to know other contestants to truly decide if she could be interested in them romantically. She also shares that it seemed like “everyone was just playing a part” because “when you are in the environment of [a reality dating show], you feel like you have to act dramatic because people are going to watch the show” on social media. Overall, she describes the show as more of a “spectacle” for the audience than a real opportunity to form romantic connections with fellow students.

Interestingly, this echoes the ironic consumption pattern that many of them may display in their role as viewers. Quinn’s comments may parallel how contestants experience reality dating shows. Contestants also are forced to make romantic connections with their peers very quickly that may not always be genuine due to the looming elimination ceremonies. Because of the constant awareness of the audience as the gaze, as represented through the camera, contestants are pressured by producers to create entertaining content.

Quinn believes that if the show were filmed on campus, she could have created stronger relationships with the other contestants. Yet, she does not believe that students would even have

created this project if it was a normal school year when they were able to engage daily with their peers and friends on campus. She believes that *Love Island Claremont* was so popular among students because it provided a connection for students who were suddenly robbed of their normal school environment. Quinn shares that she joined the show because she was “bored,” and socially isolated because of the pandemic. Nevertheless, when faced with a barrier to being able to engage with one another on campus, these Claremont College students chose as their solution a detailed emulation of a reality dating show. For the students who participated, the *Love Island Claremont* not only provided them with a chance to stay connected with their peers remotely, but it also gave them a unique opportunity to experience life as a reality dating show contestant, however ironically they chose to enact the role.

Conclusion

In the late 1990s, the novel genre of reality TV grew out of a dual recognition of the expansive audience appetite for viewing the drama of real people’s lives, and the low production costs of creating programming that catered to that appetite. The genre evolved from the audience watching real people simply interact, to watching them engage in increasingly outrageous competitions and even compete for romantic relationships, to finally actively engaging with the contestants. The relationship between the audience and contestant is the most distinctive feature of the genre, making it inherently active in that the presence of the audience, through the camera as they project their gaze into the scenes of the show, influences the behavior of the contestants. These relationships are strengthened due to features of the show format such as outrageous situations, monologue confessions and voting. I briefly discussed how this close and interactive relationship was amplified and accelerated with the advent of social media but will further

analyze the relationships formed on social media in Chapter Three. Reality dating shows are perhaps the most social format of the genre since the relationships formed on them extend beyond the boundaries of the show, enabling audiences to engage with and about contestants both before and well after the shows conclude.

Reality TV viewing, and specifically reality dating show viewing, has emerged as a wildly popular activity among college students, who regularly gather in residence halls or apartments to watch episodes together, converse over social media and in real time with their peers about the shows, and even try to replicate the shows on Zoom. In the following chapter, I will further explore the relationship that college students have with reality dating shows and seek to understand how their role as a college student influences their viewership of reality dating shows.

Chapter Two: College Students' Motivations for Reality Dating Show Viewership

As someone who has watched reality TV since she was five years old, Delaney considers her relationship with reality TV to be a “personality trait.” She comments that as people get to know her at the Claremont Colleges and beyond, they will realize that she loves reality TV, specifically *Survivor* and *The Bachelor*. Just as we were wrapping up our interview, she shares that reality TV “has in a lot of ways shaped how I see the world.”

The impact of reality TV and reality dating shows on Delaney's life is not unique to her. In his analysis of realism in reality TV, Bondebjerg writes that “the rise of reality TV is ... a reflection of the deep mediation of everyday life in a network society which creates a strong need for audiences to mirror and play with the identities and uncertainties of everyday life, thus intensifying our innate social curiosity” (2002, 162). Thus, reality TV is reflective of everyday life, and the way in which audiences perceive and discuss this content both is influenced by their self-identity and situatedness within their particular context. For college students who attend residential colleges, their perspectives to the “reality,” both of reality dating shows and the world, is shaped by the relatively bounded and interrelated social spaces, as they live and work with their peers and interact with the in the classroom, outdoor spaces, dining halls, corridors, and communal dorms.

In a study on college students' consumption patterns of reality TV, the authors find that perceived escapism and social affiliation attract college students to the media genre (Lundy et al. 2008). Through my interviews, I found that college students express similar attractions to reality dating shows as those described in this article, but further define their relationship with reality dating shows relative to their identity as a college student. One of my interlocutors explains that his attraction to reality dating shows has “everything to do with the fact that [he is] a college

student.” Another interlocutor shares that “the fact that we're relatively young, and the people are like, relatively close in age also, makes it in some ways more relatable.” McCoy and Scarborough’s previous scholarship has defined distinct audience viewing styles of reality TV shows and other reality dating shows, but my research suggests a deeper dynamic between audience, their everyday lives, and the media content (2014). I have found that college students do not simply *view* the content, but the way in which they consume and interact with reality dating shows is reflective of other aspects of their college life.

In this chapter, I build on uses and gratification theory, widely used in evaluating the relationship between audience and media form, to frame how the everyday space of a college campus influences college students’ analysis and perceptions of reality dating shows. The first assumption of the theory states that “the audience is conceived of as active, i.e., an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal-directed” (Katz et al. 1974, 510). Through my research with college students who are avid viewers of reality dating shows, I have learned that college students watch reality dating shows for a variety of reasons, yet each of these three reasons that I discovered seem to be integrally related to their status as a college student and the spatial location of a college campus. First, through escapism, college students seek a respite from their own reality as a college student by immersing themselves in reality dating shows. Second, college students view reality dating shows as a social experiment, actively bringing in the perspective and skills that students gain through their college experience. Lastly, college students utilize reality dating shows as a catalyst for new social life on campus and to build relational closeness with their peers.

Escape from Reality

After wrapping up the interview and asking my interlocutor Henry, a senior at an East Coast liberal arts college, if he had any questions, he responds “nope, I think you covered more topics about *The Bachelor* than I’d ever thought of.” Henry’s comment reveals a common aspect of some college students’ relationship with reality dating shows: many college students who watch these shows do not really think about the content and their viewership that much. When characterizing their relationship with the genre, interlocutors often describe themselves as passively viewing the shows to escape from the reality of the rigorously academic college life.

In sharp contrast to the requirement to intensively pay attention during lectures and class discussions by taking notes or speaking up, watching reality dating shows can be attractive to college students because they view the content as pure entertainment and a welcome respite from academic topics. Lucy, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, does not think that “there’s really anything complex for [her] brain to think about” while watching the shows. Similarly, Theo, a senior at an East Coast college, describes watching reality dating shows as “vegetative” because he can “just sit there.” To Lucy and Theo, consuming this content allows them to relax as they de-stress from the rigors of school. Gabby, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, and Theo also emphasize the lack of learning they experience through watching reality dating shows. Gabby comments that she “is not trying to learn *anything*.” Theo echoes Gabby’s point of the nonacademic nature of the shows as he claims that “[the shows] are not trying to teach you anything.” The usage of the verbs “to teach” and “to learn” demonstrate how Gabby and Theo frame watching reality dating shows as a welcome contrast to attending college classes, where there is an expectation to gain knowledge from the experience. They argue that they do not gain knowledge from watching the shows, which is very appealing to them. Through this separation

of academic and entertainment activities, college students can escape from the academic topics that dominate their daily lives.

By utilizing reality dating shows as background noise to entertain them while completing other assignments, some college students create a shared space for academic work and entertainment. Becky, a senior at a major university, shares: “I’m an architecture student, so a lot of the 3D modeling work is pretty mindless. It takes a lot of time, not a lot of thinking. I love doing work like that because like you can just listen to [reality dating shows] and focus.” Through describing her 3D modeling work as “not [taking] a lot of thinking,” she creates a similarity between the passive nature of watching reality dating shows and that of some aspects of her academic work. Becky makes her academic work more enjoyable by watching reality dating shows as she completes the time-consuming task of 3D modeling. Watching these shows also make the time go by as she is not purely focusing on the 3D modeling but can distract herself by learning about the plots and contestants within each episode.

The escapist tendencies of college students as they watch reality dating shows resembles a traditional relationship between audience and media content. Since the 1950s, families can sit in front of their TV after a long day of work and escape the stress of their daily lives through watching TV. In a study on college students’ consumption of reality TV, one participant states that reality TV “is an escape from the reality of ... a lot of economic problems and political problems” (Lundy et al. 2008, 214). While this participant frames their escapist reality as a distraction from the stresses of economic and political problems, my interlocutors describe their escapist reality as a distraction from the stresses of academic work. This form of escapism through watching reality dating shows is unique to college students as they utilize escapism as a counterbalance to their academic life.

The Social Experiment of Reality Dating Shows

Just as college students participate in class discussions through intellectual frameworks and analysis, they also consume and interact with reality dating shows with a similar approach. Many of my interlocutors enjoy discussing the construction and content of reality dating shows in an observational and analytical manner, and view contestants as participating in a social experiment. In stark contrast to those who view reality dating shows to escape, these college students view reality dating shows to engage their mind.

While he also uses reality dating shows as an escape from academics, Theo discloses that he watches the content “for the psychological factor.” He describes the shows as a “weird experiment where people go through almost a full relationship in the span of a few weeks and can actually experience emotions.” This comment shows that he is attracted to how the environment and venue of reality dating shows can impact the contestants mentally and emotionally. The contestants are placed under extreme pressure to succeed romantically and are forced to solely concentrate on their romantic life. On *The Bachelor* and *Love Island*, contestants are completely cut off from their daily lives since they are unable to talk to family or friends, read a book, listen to music, or watch TV. Through removing them from the normalcies of their daily lives, contestants become engrossed in the bubble of the show where they are encouraged to only discuss matters that relate to the show and would be entertaining to the audience. These isolated environments invoke abnormal contestant behaviors, such as dramatic vocal arguments between contestants or extreme devastation when they are rejected romantically. Because contestants behave more dramatically than most individuals in the real world, Theo and other college students view contestants as a subject of psychological analysis.

The academic majors of college students appear to influence the way they view reality dating shows. Amber, a first-year student and Media Studies major at the Claremont Colleges, comments that she is aware of “what the producers are doing and they're like coaching people to follow the beats of a three-act structure.” While watching the shows, Amber is aware of the classic structure of fictional TV series and can see how reality dating shows attempt to emulate this. In addition, she considers how the conversations between and behaviors of contestants may not always be genuine and could be influenced by the direction that the producers want the episodes to go. By acknowledging the role of the producers, Amber is analyzing how reality dating shows create a warped reality where contestants are not always in control of the way they are portrayed on TV. Delaney is a Sociology major and senior at the Claremont Colleges. Because of her research in human behavior, she reveals that she “just love[s] analyzing people.” When watching reality dating shows, she “find[s] it extremely interesting to see how people behave in situations that are unnatural.” Like Theo, Delaney is aware that the environment contestants are placed in is abnormal and may lead them to behave in ways that they would not in the outside world. Because of their background in Media Studies and Sociology, Amber and Delaney have a hyper-awareness of how the contestants’ behaviors may be altered due to the highly managed and surveilled environment they live in.

The topic of gender also arose frequently in my interviews, which is yet another indication of how the college curriculum can influence colleges students’ perceptions of reality dating shows. The curriculum at many liberal arts colleges, including the Claremont Colleges, encourages students to consider how race and gender influence individual experiences in society. Evan, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, spoke about Camilla Thurlow, a contestant in Season 3 of *Love Island*, who works as an explosive ordnance disposal expert (2017). Camilla’s role as a

humanitarian activist stands in stark contrast to the other contestants who work in less noble roles that preference physical appearances such as a model, physical trainer, or social media influencer. In our interview, Evan refers to a conversation between Camilla and another contestant, Jonny Mitchell, on feminism. Jonny critiques feminism by saying that “feminism believes in almost inequality” (*Love Island 2017*). Camilla responds by saying “Absolutely, not.” Evan praises Camilla and states that “she really stood up for herself because I feel like in other seasons, I have seen contestants say super questionable stuff. Because they’re on the show [and in the public eye], they don’t really respond or defend themselves.” Evan’s commentary reveals the critical lens through which he views *Love Island* and can recognize and analyze how the traditional gender dynamics engrained in society can force contestants to conform to these gender norms, or bravely go against them as Camilla does.

Based on my interlocutors’ experiences, they view reality dating shows as a sort of experimented reality to which they are eager to apply the critical ideas they learned in class discussions and seminars. In contrast to fictional TV shows where cast members are celebrities, contestants on reality dating shows are real people and their actions are reflective of current societal norms and behaviors. In my interviews, my interlocutors recognize patterns, identify inconsistencies and similarities, conjecture about the rationale for production decisions, and called out questionable behaviors. College students are practicing and sharpening their critical thinking skills as they consume the shows.

While college students apply their academic knowledge and skills to reality dating shows, they share that the content is often perceived by their peers as anti-intellectual. The study on college students’ relationship with reality TV by Lundy et al (2008, 220) observed a common social stigma associated with one’s viewership where “participants seemed hesitant, as well as

embarrassed, when they revealed the amount of [reality TV] that they consumed; their reactions of guilt coupled with their responses insinuated that it is bad to enjoy watching RT.” I notice similar patterns among my interlocutors that reveal how the positionality as a smart, educated college student may lead one to question their relationship with reality dating shows. Delaney recounts that if she brings up reality dating shows in a conversation, she understands that “people may make a judgment on [her] intelligence and question whether [she] is using [her] time in an educated way.” She further demonstrates her self-awareness of this stigma by saying that “[she does not] really want to interact with people who would judge [her] for watching [reality dating shows].” Similarly, Becky is hesitant to bring up reality dating shows with other students who do not share her interest in the topic. Because she recognizes the unacademic stigma associated with her interest in the shows, she will “apologize a little bit” and even feel “ashamed” when she brings up reality dating shows in conversation. College students who view and enjoy reality dating shows may experience a stigma for watching reality dating shows, even though they apply what they learn in the classroom to the media content. Thus, those who watch reality dating shows may continue to watch they shows, but only discuss their viewership with select friends who share this interest.

The contestants and their conversations provide my interlocutors with an awareness that the stage of reality dating shows is a distinctively different social space from the social space that college students occupy. Consistent with the ironic consumption prototype identified by McCoy & Scarborough, college students consume reality dating shows “to make fun of and feel superior to them and their ‘traditional’ viewers” (2014). Before watching *The Bachelor* in college, David, a junior at the Claremont Colleges, assumed that all viewers were truly invested in the show and contestants. After his friend group jointly started watching, he understood that “a lot more people

watch [*The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*] ironically to make fun of it, nobody really legitimately watches it in general.” His commentary that “nobody really legitimately watches [reality dating shows]” demonstrates that among his friends, it is common to watch reality dating shows ironically and to find humor in the content. Because of this ironic viewership, my interlocutors can reaffirm their own role in the social space of a college campus.

In a focus group, interlocutors Leah and Jess ironically discuss the commentary of a *Love Island* contestant, Hayley Hughes. On Season 4 of the UK show, contestant Georgia Steel asks a group of her fellow female contestants, “What do you think about Brexit?” Another contestant, Hayley, responds, confused, “What’s that?” Georgia tries to explain the impact of Brexit and responds that “it would mean like welfare and like things we trade with would be cut down” (2018). When I showed this clip in my focus group, I caught Leah and Jess, and myself, smirking. Leah thinks Hayley is “really ditzy” due to her lack of Brexit knowledge. Jess thinks that “it’s a little baffling to be living in England, not know what Brexit is considering that like we all knew about it over here, and it’s like not that relevant to us.” Like David, Leah and Jess view reality dating shows and contestant behaviors ironically. They recognize that these contestants live in a separate social space from college students where members have different values. Thus, college students enjoy ironically analyzing the behaviors that this social space inspires.

Through viewing reality dating shows as a social experiment, my interlocutors demonstrate how their academic experiences and roles as a college student influence the way in which they perceive and analyze this media content. Uses and gratification theory reveals that they practice the analytical skills they learn as college students by applying them in their relationship with the subgenre. Because of the unacademic stigma associated with this genre,

they may feel ashamed to express their interest in reality dating shows. Others recognize this stigma and enjoy analyzing the venue of reality dating shows as uniquely different from the lives they live.

Catalyst for New Social Life

While Mondays are usually quiet on college campuses, the airing of *The Bachelor* on Mondays in January through March generates considerable excitement. On these nights, you will most likely see clusters of students gathered around a laptop or television and talking while the show airs. This time provides an opportunity for students to leave their homework and essays behind and spend time with friends in front of a screen for two hours. The cult following of reality dating shows is heightened on residential college campuses, such as the Claremont Colleges, where students live in communal dorms, eat meals in dining halls, and socialize on-campus. Many students only discovered and started watching reality dating shows when they started college, further highlighting this social phenomenon. Students who attend schools with Greek life also start watching reality dating shows with their fraternity or sorority. My interlocutors' comments illustrate that watching reality dating shows enables students to immerse themselves in and receive gratification from the reality of many common and distinct aspects of college social life including making new friends, building interpersonal relationships with friends, building connections with significant others, and participating in the party culture.

By building relationships with friends on campus through a shared viewership of reality dating shows, college students develop relational closeness with their peers. A study on media use in romantic relationships researches “the effect of using multiple media on relational closeness” (Taylor & Bazarova 2018). Relational closeness is defined as “a subjective

experience of intimacy, emotional affinity, and psychological bonding” (2018). Media multiplexity theory proposes that “tie strength characterizes relational closeness defined by the amount of time, level on intimacy, emotional intensity, and reciprocal services within the relationship” (2018). Fellow college students increase their tie strength as they spend together watching and bond emotionally over the show.

When coming to campus, many first-year students look for opportunities to get to know other students and form strong connections. For many of my interlocutors, watching reality dating shows provides a format to spend time with friends and have something to talk about together in their first year at college. As friendships are formed and strengthened through emotional connections and quality time, watching reality dating shows with others can facilitate the creation and deepening of friendships. David describes that he bonded with his friends as a first-year student over *The Bachelor*. He describes walking around his college campus one night looking for something fun to do with two friends and one friend suggests, “Hey, have you ever seen *The Bachelor*?” His two other friends had seen the show with their sisters, but David had never seen it. After giving *The Bachelor* a try, he realized that watching the show can be a social bonding activity between him and his friends. Through investing in friendships while watching reality dating shows, David and his friends increase their relational closeness.

Even when friendships on college campuses have already been established, watching reality dating shows as a group provides an opportunity to continue to strengthen social connections. Lucy discusses how watching *The Bachelor* is “an activity to do on a weekly basis so it gives us a reason to all come together during the week, and then it gives us something to look forward to throughout the week. It also gives us something to talk about throughout the week.” They also may text about the show during the week. Interpersonal relationships are

strengthened by increasing the number of media in which individuals communicate with one another, as media multiplexity theory “proposes a positive association between tie strength and the number of media used for communication” (Taylor & Bazarova 2018). By texting about reality dating shows, students are increasing their tie strength with their friends. The content of *The Bachelor* provides the friend group with a substantive point of discussion, and a reason to gather on a recurring basis. The consistency of the show, airing every Monday night for two and a half months, also provides structure to a friendship where group members can rely on a certain time of the week to socialize with friends.

The social bond created through a shared viewership of reality dating shows separates this genre from fictional TV shows and other reality TV shows. When asked if she consumed other TV shows in a social environment, Jessica, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, quickly affirmed that she only consumed reality dating shows, specifically *The Bachelor*, with friends. She comments that “I could never watch *The Crown* with friends because we would be talking too much and would miss the plotlines.” Because reality dating shows are not scripted, it seems like college students can engage in a conversation without paying attention to every word of dialogue in the show. In contrast, a show like *The Crown*, which involves multiple, complex plot lines in an episode, requires close attention and is therefore not conducive for consumption in a social environment. In her study on subgenres of reality TV, Barton similarly finds that viewership of reality dating shows results in higher “gratifications obtained in terms of social utility” (Barton 2009). Even within the landscape of reality TV, reality dating shows more strongly facilitate social interactions.

Watching reality dating shows can also be an inclusive social experience where students can expand their friend group. David shares that other students would walk past him and his

friends watching *The Bachelor* and ask to join. He elaborates that “we're very much that way of just like the more the merrier, there would be some people who would like become regulars at our viewing nights, even though we didn't really know them.” Viewership of reality dating shows becomes a way for students to meet other students who they have never interacted with before. Even if students have never spoken to each other, they have a shared interest in reality dating shows allowing them to initiate further conversations and interactions.

Through watching reality dating shows, college students can also create and strengthen connections with their significant others. Evan, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, explains that he and his girlfriend started watching *The Bachelor* together when they first started dating. Even though he had never been exposed to the show or genre before, he reveals that he first found it “mildly entertaining.” The act of watching *The Bachelor* together every week provided them with a reason to spend time together and improve their relational closeness. One of Evan's friends had a similar experience with his significant other who introduced him to *Love Island* and this friend then introduced his whole friend group to the show. *Love Island* became so popular that “everyone on that floor [of their dorm] was watching it.” By being introduced to reality dating shows through their significant others, students can bond with their significant other, form their own interest in the media form, and share it with their friends on campus.

College students merge watching reality dating shows with other normal aspects of college life, including drinking and partying. Adam, a recent graduate of the Claremont Colleges, shares that he would watch *The Bachelor* regularly with his suitemates. Every Thursday night, he describes sitting down with his suitemates in the common room of their suite before going out to a party. Even though the show aired on Monday nights, the group waited to watch it together until Thursday when they had fewer academic commitments. They would also often go out to

parties after finishing the episode. In this example, their role as a college student who has pressing assignments and tests influences when they consume reality dating shows. The group was always eager to start the episode since they would “wait for no one.” To further engage with the content of the show, the group created a drinking game based on predictions of which contestants would succeed in the season and which would be eliminated. If someone’s predictions were inaccurate, they had to chug their drink. The group would also create season-specific drinking games. For example, Colton was the lead in Season 23 of *The Bachelor* and his virginity was frequently discussed on the show among the female contestants. If Colton’s virginity was brought up, each member of the group would take two sips. Not only are college students able to socialize through watching reality dating shows, but they also see viewing the shows as an opportunity to engage in drinking activities, which are highly common on college campuses as 55% of students consume alcohol (National Institutes of Health, 2018).

A similar viewing party for *Love Island* among Evan’s friend group arose where everyone would bring pizza and beers. Evan compares the environment to that of watching a “football game,” where groups of male students will gather on a Sunday afternoon to watch football. While members of a group watching a reality dating show may favor different contestants, a group watching a football game may also support different teams. This comparison demonstrates how differences in opinion can be expressed in college social situations, and how friendly rivalries can be used to as a form of inclusion and socialization.

Overall, college students are able to participate in many aspects unique to the college social experience through consuming reality dating shows. The shared experience of viewing reality dating shows facilitates the formation of relational closeness between friends and significant others. Many of these social groups that watch reality dating shows consist of one

gender. For Lucy, she could bond with her female friends while watching *The Bachelor* while Adam, Evan, and their respective friends bonded with their male friends over drinks and reality dating shows. David's viewing group consisted of male and female students, and often invited new students to join them every week. Regardless of gender, this subgenre of reality dating is used as a catalyst for forming and strengthening social ties, an important and significant aspect of the residential college experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyze how the spatial location of a college campus influences college students' viewership of reality dating shows. Using uses and gratification theory, I demonstrated how interlocutors used this media form to escape academic commitments, engage with contestant behaviors as a social experiment, and socialize with existing and new peers. College students spend a significant amount of their time with highly rigorous academic material, and they use reality dating shows as a way to both further engage in and escape from the curriculum. The social structure of residential college campuses also makes college students more likely to create a shared, social viewing experience of reality dating shows where they can build interpersonal relationships.

Detailed stories that I explored in this chapter do not necessarily fall into one of these instances. Rather, these instances closely comprise and are reflective of various aspects of students' lives. For example, Theo describes that he looks to reality dating shows to escape from the stresses of his everyday lives, but also actively engages with the contestants because he views the show format as a social experiment. Even though these escapist and engaging behaviors are almost contradictory to one another, he exhibits both while watching a single episode. While he

is attracted to reality dating shows because he is able “to just sit there,” he also thinks deeply about the psychological elements that the environment of reality TV creates. Some motivations for viewing reality dating shows, such as to socialize with friends and to analyze, can work together to create a shared viewing experience. For David, watching reality dating shows is an opportunity to not only socialize with friends, but also to ironically talk about and analyze the contestants.

Taken together, these relationships replicate the multifaceted nature of the college experience. Within one day, college students spend time with friends in the dining hall, relax through watching reality TV, and contribute to intellectual conversations in class. The experiences of my interlocutors highlight that simply watching 45-minutes of *Love Island* or *The Bachelor* can expose college students to all of these distinct and cherished aspects of college life. My research highlights that college students’ relationship and fascination with these contestants seem to mirror the very same characteristics that define their college experience. In my next chapter, I expand upon these parallels and discuss how college students engage with reality dating show contestants, and other viewers, through their viewership and via social media.

Chapter Three: College Students' Proxy Social Circle of Reality Dating Show Contestants

“After learning that Connor was a financial analyst, we immediately stalked his LinkedIn page” and “requested to add him as a connection.” Becky is in a business fraternity at a major university in California and the group frequently gathers to watch *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. Connor Saeli was a contestant on Season 15 of *The Bachelorette* and works as a “financial analyst” at the investment banking company, Goldman Sachs. As college students who aspire to enter the business world upon graduation, Becky and her friends in her business fraternity were interested to learn more about Connor and his career.

A variety of social media platforms allow viewers to interact with reality dating shows. One platform used for this purpose by college students is the business and employment-related social media platform, LinkedIn. Becky and her friends were interested in Connor because they could relate to him as they shared his career aspirations. After our interview, I looked on Connor’s LinkedIn page and found that five of my LinkedIn connections, who are currently college students, are also connected with Connor. Perhaps because reality dating show contestants are accessible and seen as “normal people,” college students are very comfortable engaging with them in the public networks of social media where they can discover more about the contestant’s life and personality.

In Barton’s research on gratification obtained through viewership of competition-based reality shows, she finds that “correlations exist between the specific content of reality-based programs and the gratifications obtained by viewers” (2009). Within the category of reality dating shows, she discovers that viewership of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* result in higher “gratifications obtained in terms of social utility” (Barton 2009). While reality dating shows facilitate social interactions among viewers both in-person and online, they also incite

social connections between audiences and contestants. Some examples of these relationships include viewing a contestant as a friend, empathizing with the experiences of a contestant, or finding amusement in the complexities of contestant interactions.

In this chapter, I explore the personal and public networks in which college students create proxy social connections with contestants. Firstly, I contextualize this relationship by sharing some parallels between the lives of students and contestants. Then, I explore how college students get to know the contestants through watching the episodes and following them on social media, as they piece together a puzzle of who each contestant truly is. As they watch reality dating shows, I argue that contestants become a member of a college student's personal network. These relationships mirror how they understand their peers on campus and sometimes act as supplemental social interactions during COVID-19. In their public network, I argue that college students look to Twitter and other forms of social media to further get to know contestants and the opinions of other viewers. These interactions are profound as they can incite political change within the media and entertainment industry, as evidenced by Chris Harrison stepping down as host for *The Bachelor* franchise in February 2021. I argue that in the personal network of viewing reality dating shows, college students apply their own life experiences to understand the lives of contestants while in the public network of social media, they participate in a community to support and assess reality dating show contestants, and even inspire political change. Lastly, I contextualize the college students' relationship have with media by highlighting the emotional connections that they build with peers through a variety of media forms.

Parallels Between the College Student & the Contestant

Through my interviews, I noticed that the environment of a college campus and a reality dating show are not as different as one might expect. Firstly, college students are typically of similar ages to the contestants. On shows like *The Bachelor* and *Love Island*, the contestants range from roughly 20 to 30 years old, with many in their early 20s. Lucy comments that she is even more interested in the contestants because they are similar in age and “are doing something completely different than what I’m doing or will be doing in a few years.” She enjoys seeing other young adults navigating life who do not spend every day in the classroom as she does. Furthermore, college students and reality dating show contestants live in communal environments. College students live in dorms and apartments with peers, while contestants on *Love Island* live in a villa with ten other single young adults, and contestants on *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* live in a mansion with roughly 30 other contestants of their same gender. These environments facilitate social interactions, as I discussed the social nature of reality dating show viewership in my previous chapter. During my research, I observed that both groups conduct their own social life within their living space, yet they both experience a realm of surveillance and lack of privacy. College students are surveilled by school administrators and professors, while reality dating shows film contestants 24/7. Both contestants and college students live in a microcosm with other individuals at similar life stages and share motivations for being in the same physical location. While many exceptions may exist to these parallels, they demonstrate how the college experience influences how college students relate to and perceive the content of reality dating shows.

In addition to the similarities in lifestyle, college students find reality dating show contestants to be very approachable. According to Delaney, reality dating show contestants are

“in between celebrities and real people.” Contestants occupy this middle ground because they are exposed to some elements of the celebrity world through their participation on a show yet have normal jobs and lives before and after leaving the show. Therefore, reality dating show contestants act a symbol of fame. Contestants become microcelebrities as they are able to “gain the audiences of traditional celebrities” as they interact with fans and craft a persona (Marwick 2013, 115). Many of my interlocutors want to understand this experience and enjoy seeing someone who is not that different from them encounter being in the spotlight. Viewers become fascinated by contestants who are relatable because they “are just a few steps above a real, normal person,” according to Delaney. To viewers, there is a simultaneous sense of familiarity and excitement as they are able to watch people just like them with normal jobs, such as a pharmacist or paralegal, be exposed to the celebrity world.

Building Personal Networks with Reality Dating Show Contestants

Through watching reality dating shows, college students not only engage with their social circles on campus, but they also create a proxy social circle of the shows’ contestants. As students consume this content, contestants become part of the student’s personal network. These close relationships with contestants formed through viewership are fostered as contestants share their raw feelings and emotions via conversations and monologue confessions that I discussed in Chapter One.

Reading through my interviews, I noticed that many interlocutors inserted themselves into the scene of the reality dating show when consuming the content with friends. Because these contestants occupy this relatable identity as being an “almost” celebrity, viewers feel more inclined to step into their shoes. Gabby describes how when watching *The Bachelor*, she and her

friends will sit on the couch to “comment on the [contestants’] decisions” and “imagine [themselves] in the show and what [they] would do” if they were contestants.” Within this scenario, Gabby and her friends are simultaneously socializing with one another but also individually contemplating the role and experiences of the contestant based on their own personal experiences. This pattern of behavior can be understood through narrative engagement, which is “the key driver in evoking other emotional responses, including identification and enjoyment” (Kühne & Oprea 2020, 114). Experiences of narrative engagement can “represent settings, characters, and situations, and are created by combining information from the text with knowledge the reader or viewer already possesses about life in general as well as about the specific topic and genre of the narrative” (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009). To take part in narrative engagement, “viewers must be capable of linking settings, characters, and situations to their knowledge about the real world” (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009). When analyzing any form of media, viewers will recall their past experiences to relate to and understand on-screen interactions. In order to employ narrative engagement, the viewer does not have to like the contestant as a person or want to be their friend. Frequently, my interlocutors did not like a contestant, but still aimed to analyze how they may act if they were playing the role of a contestant.

College students build their personal network of reality dating contestants as they contextualize the role of a contestant and consider their own potential involvement with the shows. Towards the end of each interview, I asked each interlocutor, “Would you ever go on a reality dating show?” Many of my interlocutors admitted that they have thought about applying for *The Bachelor*. I received a variety of answers from “Absolutely, yes” to “No, that would be my worst nightmare.” I found that most of my interlocutors would be interested in going on a

reality dating show, but not to find a partner. Rather, my interlocutors wanted to go on *Love Island* or *The Bachelor* “for fun” or “to start drama.” Some interlocutors would love to be a contestant to travel to exotic filming locations, such as Mallorca and Fiji. Out of all of my interlocutors, only one would go on a reality dating show to find a partner. Many revealed that despite their interest in being a contestant, they also fear the public criticism. Kate describes herself as someone who “does not like drama and conflict and tends to take criticism personally.” Natalia shares that many contestants just “turn into a meme.” They become the butt of a joke due to the interactions they had or comments they made on the show. She also fears once she is navigating her career after college, “no one would take [her] seriously” after being a reality dating show star.

As I described earlier in this chapter, college students can be critical of contestants in conversations with their friends. This criticism is exacerbated on social media platforms where millions of viewers share their opinions. My interlocutors put themselves in the shoes of a contestant, using narrative engagement. Natalia and Kate apply the knowledge of their everyday life by acknowledging that if they went on a reality dating show, they would be subjected to the same criticism that contestants are subjected to today. Most of them do not want to be publicly criticized and therefore decide that they would rather watch other contestants on reality dating shows than enter the experience first-hand. Residential college campuses have a similar culture to reality dating shows because of the small communities where all students know one another. Using their experiences of the social environment on their college campuses, my interlocutors may refrain from actively seeking a role as contestant on a reality dating show to avoid criticism.

My interlocutors often connect the conflicts between contestants to the dynamics happening in their everyday lives at college. In interviews, I asked interlocutors what types of

contestants they like to discuss with their friends. Gabby shares that “the villains” are usually the center of their conversations. The villains may stir up drama in the house by interfering in the other contestants’ relationships. Yet college students who enjoy this drama through reality dating shows do not necessarily enjoy drama in their daily life. I define drama as the tension and emotion between contestants displayed in an intensified and somewhat exaggerated way, which helps create a captivating narrative for producers. While Gabby admits that having a mutual dislike for someone can be “unifying for friends,” she also admits that “it can feel wrong to be talking with people about someone else behind their back.” Through talking about contestants, she does not feel bad because “contestants willingly put their life in public for people to watch.” Interestingly, Gabby enjoys discussing drama between contestants because it will prevent her from becoming involved in drama among her friends. If she discusses issues or fights between friends at school, she may be accused of taking sides or risk ruining friendships. Gabby actively employs narrative engagement by linking her knowledge of drama in her own life to drama in reality dating shows. She can create and experience the “mutual dislike” of contestants with her friends, without the risks that come with creating conflict within her own friendships.

Reality dating shows took on a heightened importance to many college students during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. Many traditional aspects of college life that students desire completely disappeared in the US in mid-March of 2020 as COVID-19 cases increased exponentially. Instead of living in dorms with friends and participating in in-person classes, college students’ lives were abruptly uprooted as they were sent to their respective homes to complete their classes on-line. They could no longer enjoy the sacred social aspects of college life such as going to the dining hall with friends for dinner or watching an episode of *Love Island* before bed. Since many college students moved back into their family homes, they experienced

less social interaction and therefore sought some sense of normalcy and connection with their peers.

Reality dating shows allowed them to view individuals, similar in age, engage in behaviors that closely paralleled aspects of college life. Both reality dating shows and college life reflect a social culture where contestants and students are surrounded by individuals similar in age. One type of interaction between audiences and contestants is parasocial interaction where “each viewer should have at least one character they could consider as their friend and build a so-called parasocial relationship with” (Kühne & Oprea 2020). Parasocial interactions are particularly strong within the reality TV genre because of the intimacy formed between contestants and audiences (Kühne & Oprea 2020).

For college students during COVID-19, building parasocial relationships with contestants, who were representative of their normal social lives, became especially attractive as they were isolated from their typical social spaces at college. To Kate, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, watching *Love Island* while at home allowed her to form a parasocial interaction with one of her favorite couples on the show – Nathan Massey and Cara De La Hoyde. Kate considers herself “a huge hopeless romantic” and loves to “root for contestants and their relationships.” Before watching Season 2 of *Love Island*, she looked online to see that contestants Nathan and Cara won. As of 2021, they are married and have their first child together. Because she knew the couple had a future together after the show, she was “excited about [their relationship]” as she watched their season and saw the couple grow closer. During isolating times of the pandemic, Kate sought normalcy through her viewership of reality dating shows and affection for happy endings. Her parasocial interactions with Nathan and Cara also motivated her to continue

watching the season because as a hopeless romantic, she was wanted to see how their relationship developed from strangers to significant others.

The social nature of reality dating shows enticed college students to form parasocial interactions with contestants during COVID-19 that resembled college life. Cara, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, shares that she “lives vicariously through [the contestants] because in quarantine, I’m personally not interacting with a lot of people.” Because she is craving the normal social interactions of a college campus, Cara turns to reality dating shows to vicariously live through the social life of the contestants. Gemma, a senior at the Claremont Colleges, bluntly states “[she] honestly [has] nothing going on, so it’s fun to keep up with their drama since [she has] none of her own.” Even though Gemma is not on campus to experience drama between friend groups, she is able to watch contestants create drama between one another. Cara’s and Gemma’s experiences with reality dating shows during COVID-19 demonstrate how college students can build relationships with contestants that resemble the relationships they have with their friends at college – friends that they can spend time with and also share insights about the complexities and drama of campus life.

Through narrative engagement and parasocial interaction, college students engage with contestants and with one another about the experiences of the contestants. In this way, viewing of reality dating shows plays a significant role in the social lives of many college students, enriching, and even at times replacing, their peer interactions. As I discussed in Chapter One, audiences are aware of how performative contestants can be within this genre, yet this performativity does not stop them from forming relationships with contestants. Given the similarities in the lives of college students and reality dating show contestants described at the beginning of this chapter, reality dating show contestants essentially become an expansion of

many college students' peer group and social life and grew to be increasingly important during COVID-19 when that social life is no longer accessible.

Social Media: The Public Network of Reality Dating Show Contestants

Relationships formed with contestants depart from personal networks and become part of public networks as college students discuss and learn more about the contestants on social media. For college students, social media is a place for them to hear about other viewers conversations about the shows. My interlocutors utilized social media for a variety of reasons regarding reality dating shows including to get to know contestants, stay in touch with contestants and their relationships after the show ends, and to discover spoilers and plot points for each season.

Generally, contestants who go on reality dating shows have a pre-established social media presence. As I discussed in Chapter One, the shows often display the contestants' social media handles during the first episode of every season. The involvement of social media in reality dating show viewing is an attractive feature for college students. Delaney describes that she is "more likely to watch [reality dating shows] now that social media has become a part of the viewing experience." Through social media, viewers can engage with the show and its contestants during and after the show airs. This social media following of reality dating shows and its contestants creates an imagined community of viewers that can endure long after the show airs.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson describes an imagined community as a socially constructed community that is both "inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives in the image of their communion" (Anderson

1983, 6). In Koh's analysis of *Imagined Communities* and social media, she argues that "social media also create[s] asynchronous communities around issues and interests" (2016). These imagined communities form a sense of "immediate connectedness to groups of people all over the world" (Koh 2016). Similarly, social media incites "immediate connectedness" for viewers of reality dating shows. Through engaging with other viewers and absorbing content regarding reality dating shows, college students participate in this profound imagined community created and maintained through social media. In this section, I discuss how social media creates a public, dispersed network of individuals, college students included, who watch reality dating shows and seek to interact with contestants.

During the Show

As an episode of a reality dating show airs, viewers flock to social media sites to read and discuss reactions to the episode. Twitter is a popular platform for these quick communications as users will add the hashtags "#TheBachelor" or "#LoveIsland" to help other users find, consume, and respond to their content. In my interview with Lucy, I learned that she looks to her Twitter trending page to see what topics regarding *The Bachelor* are popular among viewers. As a viewer on the West Coast, she signs up for Twitter alerts to see what the episode is about as it airs on the East Coast. Similarly, Through Twitter, Lucy, and other reality dating show viewers, gain a preview into each episode, read about other viewers' reactions, and begin to form their own opinions. Lucy looks to other viewers to provide insights on the episode before she is able to watch it.

Beyond just finding out plot points of the season and getting to know contestants, social media can also be a place to vocalize issues regarding contestants. Gemma shares that arguments

often break out between viewers on Twitter who are defending their favorite contestants. For example, if a rumor is released that a contestant cheated on their significant other, “viewers will defend their favorite contestant within the couple on Twitter.” Gemma perfectly summarizes many of my interlocutors’ feelings about the role of social media in the world of reality dating shows by saying that “social media is a way for viewers to find out what contestants are like and see if the contestants’ beliefs align with their own personal beliefs.” College students utilize narrative engagement through social media by applying their opinions of the world to that of the contestants. If a contestant’s beliefs align with a viewers’ personal beliefs, the viewer will be more likely to continue to follow and support that contestant. In other cases, the contestant’s beliefs do not align with a viewer so the viewer will actively and publicly vocalize their disagreement with the contestant. Just as college students engage with their academic curriculum through watching reality dating shows, as discussed in the previous chapter, Gemma is able to understand her own identity through interacting with reality dating show contestants who share her beliefs. Gemma’s commentary also highlights that college students do not necessarily have to like the contestant to interact with them on social media. They rather showcase an innate curiosity towards contestants and their life.

In recent years, politics has become a perennial topic of discussion on social media and has infiltrated reality dating show viewers’ public conversations. My interlocutors are no exception to this phenomenon, as Morgan is not a very active Twitter user, “except during the election cycle.” A 2011 article finds that British reality TV, a typically apolitical space, inspires political conversations among viewers (Graham 2011, 19). Political conversations regarding reality dating shows continue to arise each time a new season airs. In February 2021, images were released on Reddit of Rachael Kirkconnell, a contestant on Season 25 of *The Bachelor*,

attending an antebellum plantation-themed fraternity party in 2018 (Strause 2021). Viewers were outraged to see that Rachel was participating in an event they saw as racist. In an *ExtraTV* interview about these images hosted by a previous and first black bachelorette, Rachel Lindsay, *The Bachelor* host Chris Harrison, commented “Well, Rachel [Lindsay], is it a good look in 2018, or is it not a good look in 2021? Because there’s a big difference” (Strause 2021). Chris dismisses Rachael Kirkconnell’s behavior by simply claiming that these racist actions were socially acceptable, and not seen as racist, only three years ago.

After the interview, Rachel Lindsay announced that “she no longer wants to be associated with the series” (France & Melas 2021). Following, Chris Harrison released a public apology and announced that he will be “stepping away” from *The Bachelor* franchise (France & Melas 2021). A single Reddit post caused immense controversy in the world of *The Bachelor*. Social media not only provided an outlet to expose the racist action of a contestant, but also highlighted further internalized racism on behalf of the host.

Throughout the airing of the show, the public network of social media allows college students to immediately absorb and produce information about the contestants. Without social media, the photos of Rachael Kirkconnell would have never been released and Chris Harrison would still be the host of *The Bachelor*. This controversy and discussion on social media also spurred conversation amongst mainstream media outlets such as *NPR* and *The Atlantic*. In the “After the Final Rose” special of this season of *The Bachelor*, the show expected viewers to already know that this controversy had occurred (2021). While the previous episode of *The Bachelor* showed a happy scene as Matt and Rachael started their relationship, the tone of “After the Final Rose” episode was extremely serious as they addressed Rachael’s racist actions. This episode only drew 5.75 million viewers while the show received 26 million viewers per episode

at its peak popularity (Li 2021). Social media enabled audiences to become aware of how the contestants behave outside of the production of *The Bachelor* and decide whether they wanted to continue watching and supporting the show. This statistic demonstrated that *The Bachelor* could be at risk of losing its fanbase.

Through this community formed through social media, college students show support for contestants they like by watching their YouTube videos or reacting positively to their posts. The community can also shed light on the contestants' behaviors that are not aired on TV. For reality dating show viewers, social media has the power to engage audiences with the storylines, create connections between audiences, and bring attention to problematic behaviors. For college students like Gemma, they are able feel connected to contestants who support their same beliefs and also stand up for issues that are not being represented on camera. They are also able to connect with other viewers as they can share spoilers about contestants and the plotlines. The imagined community of social media is not only a part of the viewing experience of reality dating shows, but also enables viewers to become more informed audience members and have an awareness of the content they consume.

After the Show

In Chapter One, I discussed how the emergence of social media allows for viewers to stay in touch with contestants after the show airs. In this section, I am to aim analyze the audience experience as they get to know contestants after the show through social media. Reality dating shows can extend contestants' time in the limelight because relationships between contestants continue beyond the show. Social media is an outlet for contestants to share their relationships or confirm breakups between themselves and their significant other from the show. After the season

airs, contestants become micro-celebrities as they capitalize on their popularity with reality dating show audiences and build a social media following (Marwick 2013). Kate describes that she enjoys not only “seeing [the contestants’] lives after the show,” but also to “see how their relationships continue, and always checking to make sure they’re still together.” Through YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok, viewers can keep up with their favorite contestants’ relationships. After the season airs, contestants seek continued fame through social media. Kate loves to subscribe to various contestants’ YouTube channels. After she followed Nathan and Cara’s love story on *Love Island*, she now watches their YouTube videos to get a glimpse into their life as a married couple with children.

Amber is intrigued by the contestants’ social media pages because she wants to see how “they interact with each other in the context of real life.” While on the show, contestants live in a bubble extricated from the outside world. They are unable to have contact with anyone outside of the show nor consume TV, movies, or books. Therefore, many couples must adjust to life in “the real world” once the show has ended. To Amber, this step is a test to see how long a relationship will last, “without going on all of these fancy vacations” to exotic locations such as Bora Bora, Mexico, The Greek Islands, and Portugal. In her analysis of microcelebrities, Marwick find that authenticity on social media “is judged over time, in that people’s authenticity is determined by comparing their current actions against their past for consistency” (2013, 120). Social media becomes a measure of authenticity as college students gauge how couples interact with one another outside of the show. In addition, college students can more closely relate to relationships after filming ends because they are not constantly engaging in extravagant vacations and dates like the contestants are during the show. For Amber and other college students, social media provides a window into the long-term fates of the contestants that they met during the show.

Social media acts a tool for college students to extend their engagement with reality dating shows. They are able to get to know contestants during and after the show, be involved in their relationships, and test the authenticity of contestants. Marwick's work reveals that microcelebrities, including reality dating show contestants, also understand their audiences' motivations for engaging with their content on social media and seek to capitalize on this fame. In light of the recent racial controversy on *The Bachelor*, college students should be increasingly aware of any controversial positions held by the contestants they support on social media because their support for the contestant could be perceived as support for a controversial stance.

Digital Media & the 21st Century College Student

Colleges students' relationship with the personal and public networks of reality dating contestants can be further understood through the lens of their relationship with digital media. In most cases, this relationship predates their relationship with reality dating shows. Growing up in the rise of the digital age, college students of the 21st century utilize many forms of digital media and communication every day and have done so for many years. They are extremely comfortable sharing their lives on social media, navigating web services, and more recently, conducting much of their learning digitally on Zoom. For college students, engaging in social media on their cell phones and laptops as part of their reality dating show experience feels like a natural extension of their engagement with social media for other purposes.

In a study on social adjustment to college, researchers found that students who used Facebook and Instagram to interact with on-campus friends were more likely to adjust better socially (Yang & Yen, 2020). Through following their peers' social media accounts and starting conversations online, they transport and reinforce their in-person communications online.

Just as college students establish and strengthen relationships and friendships through watching reality dating shows together, they also can do so through using multiple media forms. A study on college students' media usage in their romantic relationship finds that the more medium forms a couple using to interact, the greater their relational closeness will be (Taylor & Bazarova 2018). Relational closeness, as I discussed in my previous chapter, is defined as “a subjective experience of intimacy, emotional affinity, and psychological bonding” (Taylor & Bazarova 2018). This study demonstrates how media can help partners form stronger romantic relationships. Similarly, college students gain relational closeness with their peers when watching and engaging about reality dating shows, as I discussed in my previous chapter.

College students seamlessly navigate between the personal networks of their relationships with friends and the contestants, and the public network of social media. They are comfortable concurrently existing and openly communicate their thoughts and opinions in both networks. As a college student in the US in 2021, I live in a world where all of my classes take place on Zoom. This is the norm for many individuals as companies and schools have moved to remote work and classes to decrease the spread of COVID-19. A strange phenomenon occurs through this move to the digital realm as we expose our personal networks to our public networks. College students take classes in their kitchen as their family dog barks in the background. Employees are forced to interrupt their conference calls to help their children with their remote classes. Never has there been a time when our personal and public networks have been so intertwined. Possibly the rest of the world will begin to communicate similarly within personal and public networks, just as college students have been practicing their whole lives.

Conclusion

In many ways, reality dating show viewership and discussions extends various aspects of a college student's social life. She sees herself in the lives of the contestants, engages with and about them over social media, shares her interest in reality dating show viewing as a way to form and build friendships, and seamlessly navigates between their personal and public networks in her engagement with the medium. As demonstrated by Kata, Cara, and Gemma's stories, college students' love affair with reality dating shows parallels their love affair with the college experience, and in the time of COVID-19, becomes a partial replacement for it.

In addition, reality dating shows strike numerous types of conversations between college students and other viewers outside of this demographic; conversations that have more complexity than one may suspect. Talking about reality dating shows allows college students to relate to and construct opinions about the contestants, and to utilize their own life experiences as a college student to understand and interpret the actions of the contestants. They apply their understandings of the social scenes on campus to the realm of reality dating shows. College students engage in political discussions about reality dating show contestants and these conversations can even inspire change within the media & entertainment industry. They participate in an imagined community consisting of millions of reality dating show viewers where they can connect with others outside of the college bubble, and support and comment on contestants.

Through understanding college students' relationship with the broader digital media, it is easy to see how reality dating show viewership and discussions fit so seamlessly into their lives. College students have spent their lives creating and strengthening friendships online and are comfortable establishing relationship closeness on social media. Consequently, they can imagine

themselves in the role of a reality dating show contestant, who they seek to understand authentically through the show and social media. College students of the 21st century live in a world dominated by digital media and have become accustomed to living and sharing in both the personal network of their friends and families, and sometimes contestants, and the public networks of social media. Therefore, college students of 2020 and 2021 have become extremely creative and adaptable to new situations and environments. Not only can college students create close friendships through social media, but they can also imagine their life as and become friends with a contestant on *Love Island* or *The Bachelor* from the comfort of their college dorm (or their imagined college dorm).

Conclusion

My analyses have revealed a multiplex relationship between college students and reality dating shows as students engage in the content of the shows, conceptualize the reality of reality dating shows, and form interpersonal relationships with contestants, their fellow college students, and other viewers. Through tracing the history of reality TV and the emergence of the reality dating show subgenre in Chapter One, I argue that the structure of these shows encourages audience participation in a way that is not possible through non-reality TV shows. Through monologue confessions, contestants make themselves extremely vulnerable and relatable to audiences. The personification of “America” as an audience allows viewers to participate in the outcome of the show. This participatory relationship is further evidence by the *Love Island Claremont* show where students envisioned themselves as *Love Island* contestants and explored friendships and relationships with one another online.

In Chapter Two, I analyzed the impact of the residential college experience which facilitates academic engagement outside of the classroom and social interactions with peers. Additionally, because students spend so much time on campus and in the classroom, some turn to escapism through reality dating shows to escape from academic and social pressures. Thus, reality dating viewership can actually help college students increase their attachment to their peers and campus life.

Lastly, I explored the personal and public networks in which college students form relationships with contestants in Chapter Three. In their personal networks, students watch reality dating shows alone or with friends, and perceive contestants similar to how they would other students on campus. Throughout the time of COVID-19, students looked to reality dating shows as a remedy for their social isolation. The public network of social media allows college

students to expand who they discuss reality dating shows with and to even interact with the contestants themselves. On social media, they look for other viewers' opinions, engage in political discussions, and determine the authenticity of contestant they know on screen.

Through my research, I recognized that the relationship college students have with reality dating shows is not unlike, and in many ways parallels and influences, the relationship they have with college life. Just as college students seek to participate in reality dating shows, they are encouraged to participate in extracurricular clubs and jobs on campus. In the classroom, student utilize analytical skills to formulate and defend their academic arguments, which influences how they analyze reality dating shows. They apply the lessons they learned from friendships on campus to understand the behaviors of the contestants. Lastly, college students seek social interaction with peers as they spend time the dining hall, dorm, or even watching reality dating shows.

My analyses of college students and reality dating shows as subjects of research have led me to discover how reality dating shows, and many other media forms, create connections between the media and the audience. To showcase that media viewership is use-oriented, I applied uses and gratifications theory which showcases how and why individuals are attracted to media to satisfy specific needs (Katz et al. 1974). I found that reality dating shows are attractive because they incite social relations between college students, viewers, and contestants. Through the gaze, narrative engagement, and parasocial interaction, the audience influences and experiences the life of a contestant, and vice versa. The gaze, as represented by a camera, symbolizes audience viewership and influences contestant behavior. (Andrejevic 2003). Narrative engagement allows audiences to apply their self-identity to the behaviors of the contestants (Kühne & Oprea 2020). Parasocial interaction helps build relationships between

contestants and audiences as audience members can view contestants as their friends (Kühne & Oprea 2020). Reality dating shows formulate mutual and influential relationships between contestant and audiences. The contestants' vulnerability and participation enable the audience to themselves become vulnerable and participate in the content. Interestingly, college students do not always have to like a contestant to participate in these audience and contestant relationships. Some of my interlocutors spent the most time talking about the contestants that they liked the least. Even though college students may not be friends with these contestants in the real world, they actively analyze their perspectives in comparison to that of the contestant.

By situating my research within American residential college campuses, I am gaining knowledge solely through the perspective of college students who live on campus. By living on-campus, students are constantly reminded of their status as a college student and are surrounded by peers in the same stage of life. Because of this constant reminder, college students' perspectives are most likely significantly influenced by their college experiences. In my research, I found that college students discuss reality dating shows relative to their role as a college student, whether that be about their major, friends, passions, or dorm. COVID-19 played a large role in my conversations with my interlocutors. College students may have had a stronger affinity with reality dating shows throughout 2020 and 2021 because they sought reminders of normalcy and wanted to imagine their college experience in the lives of the contestants. For a broader scope of research, it would be important to identify how young adults out of college or adults with children interact with reality dating shows during COVID-19. Ethnographic attentions to different social groups and their interactions with media would help us understand the social spaces they belong to and the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I close with some further reflections and limitations of my research. I anticipate that the relationship college students have with reality dating shows will be an enduring one, and that it will evolve as the shows continue to adapt to the current sociopolitical culture and climate of the US. In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff writes that “to be virtually human might itself constitute an ethnographic project, in the sense that it involves a dialectic of participation and observation, a self-reflexive crafting of one’s point of view” (2015, 178). His commentary reveals that digital interactions are not that different from in-person interactions. They are both community-oriented, yet simultaneously impacted by each member’s self-identity. Similarly, college students’ interactions with reality dating shows in-person and online are impacted by their personal identity. Through bringing a global community of individuals with vastly different experiences together and enabling that community to become even larger through the power of social media, the subgenre has the potential to incite profound social change. The recent emergence of issues of racial insensitivity in reality dating shows, highlighted by the behaviors of Rachael Kirkconnell of Season 25 of *The Bachelor* that ultimately led to the demise of her relationship with the lead Matt James’, signify the power of social media to spread political messages. As college campuses and social media platforms act as mediums for political activism, reality dating shows and the contestants that participate on them will very likely become more politicized. The unexpected intersection of politics and reality dating shows which I only briefly covered in my research is a topic worthy of further exploration.

My final reflection is deeply personal, yet I suspect it is shared by many of my interlocutors. After graduation, students may develop a nostalgic relationship with the subgenre of reality dating shows because it reminds them of their college experience and the time that they spent with friends watching the shows. This nostalgia may be especially poignant for those of us

who used engagement with the subgenre as a way to stay connected with friends, and with college life, during the geographic and physical isolation that we endured throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. I can see myself years from now watching a yet to be filmed episode of *The Bachelor* that takes me right back to that TV lounge in my first-year dorm at Scripps.

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2005. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Alblas, Ezelle. 2020. "We Take a Look at the Love Island Prize and If the Contestants Get Paid..." *The Sun*. February 22, 2020. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/11020100/love-island-winners-prize-islanders-paid/>.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015024120274>.
- Andrejevic, Mark. 2003. *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=17e17043-b924-4317-9b5f-3e7aa68b15da%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&vid=0&format=EB>.
- Aslama, Minna, and Mervi Pantti. 2006. "Talking Alone: Reality TV, Emotions and Authenticity." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 (2): 167–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549406063162>.
- Barton, Kristin M. 2009. "Reality Television Programming and Diverging Gratifications: The Influence of Content on Gratifications Obtained." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53 (3): 460–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150903102659>.
- "Big Brother (USA)." 2000. CBS.
- Boellstroff, Tom. 2015. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bondebjerg, Ib. 2002. "The Mediation of Everyday Life: Genre, Discourse and Spectacle in Reality TV." *Realism and 'Reality' in Film and Media: Northern Lights. Film and Media Yearbook* 159–192.
- Busselle, Rick, and Helena Bilandzic. 2009. "Measuring Narrative Engagement." *Media Psychology* 12 (4): 321–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213260903287259>.
- Campus News. 2019. "The Top 20 TV Shows College Students Watch!" November 3, 2019. <https://cccnews.info/2019/11/03/exclusive-the-top-20-tv-shows-college-students-watch/>.
- Feingold, Lindsey. 2019. "It's Survivor: College Edition, As Students Create Their Own Reality Shows." NPR.Org. February 17, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/17/694358519/its-survivor-college-edition-as-students-create-their-own-reality-shows>.
- France, Lisa Respers, and Chloe Melas. 2021. "Chris Harrison Controversy Puts 'Bachelor' Race Issues Back in the Spotlight." CNN. February 15, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/15/entertainment/the-bachelor-history-race/index.html>.
- Gershon, Ilana. 2019. "Undercover Boss's Travels: Comparing the US and UK Reality Shows." *Visual Anthropology Review* 35 (2): 176–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12190>.
- Graham, Todd, and Auli Hajru. 2011. "Reality TV as a Trigger of Everyday Political Talk in the Net-Based Public Spaces." *European Journal of Communication* 26 (1): 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323110394858>.
- Harrison, Chris (@chrisbharrison). 2020. "Waking up on #TheBachelortte premiere day like it's Christmas morning! See you tonight #Bachelor nation." Twitter, October 13, 2020, 9:56 a.m. <https://twitter.com/chrisbharrison/status/1316015056732131330>
- Hayes, Adam. 2021. "What Video Marketers Should Know in 2021, According to Wyzowl Research." HubSpot. February 16, 2021. <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/state-of-video-marketing-new-data>.

- Hipes, Patrick. 2020. "‘Big Brother’ Tops Thursday Ratings; ‘To Tell The Truth’ Season Finale Dips." *Deadline*. September 4, 2020. <https://deadline.com/2020/09/big-brother-tv-ratings-thursday-to-tell-the-truth-finale-1234571002/>.
- Jimmy Kimmel Live. 2020. "The Most Dramatic & Inspiring Goodbye in Bachelor History", YouTube Video, 2:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5IM92rQ3xI>.
- Katz, Elihu, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch. 1974. "Uses and Gratifications Research." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37 (4): 509–23.
- King, Geoff. 2005. *The Spectacle of the Real : From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond*. Portland: Intellect Books. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=27fe37de-b129-44de-a606-0a2b460af5f8%40sdc-v-sessmgr02&vid=0&format=EB>.
- Koh, Adeline. 2016. "Imagined Communities, Social Media, and the Faculty." *American Association of University Professors*, (May – June 2016). <https://www.aaup.org/article/imagined-communities-social-media-and-faculty#.YGTI9GRKjOo>.
- Krips, Henry. 2010. "The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek." *Culture Unbound* 2 (1): 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.102691>.
- Krolak, Milke. 2020. "The Bachelorette 2020 Cast: Meet Clare Crawley’s Bachelors." ABC. September 29, 2020. <https://abc.com/shows/the-bachelorette/news/updates/the-bachelorette-2020-season-16-clare-crawley-men-announced>.
- Kühne, Rinaldo, and Suzanna J. Oprea. 2020. "From Admiration to Devotion? The Longitudinal Relation between Adolescents’ Involvement with and Viewing Frequency of Reality TV." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 64 (2): 111–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2020.1728688>.
- Li, Shirley. 2021. "‘I Didn’t Realize How Much of a Machine It Is.’" *The Atlantic*. March 28, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/03/bachelor-season-25/618439/>.
- "Love Island (UK Season 1). 2015. ITV.
- (UK Season 3). 2017. ITV.
- (UK Season 4). 2018. ITV.
- "Love Island (USA Season 2)." 2020. CBS. <https://www.cbs.com/shows/love-island/video/ThgC97Qgk73eyhcBneIcILkZSkxUBQA4/love-island-episode-8/>.
- LoveIslandClaremont (@5Clloveisland). 2020. "who is your favorite couple? [poll]." Twitter, June 17, 2020, 12:20 a.m. <https://twitter.com/5Clloveisland/status/1273108345868750848>
- Lundy, Lisa K., Amanda M. Ruth, and Travis D. Park. 2008. "Simply Irresistible: Reality TV Consumption Patterns." *Communication Quarterly* 56 (2): 208–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370802026828>.
- Marwick, Alice. 2013. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- McCoy, Charles Allan, and Roscoe C. Scarborough. 2014. "Watching ‘Bad’ Television: Ironic Consumption, Camp, and Guilty Pleasures." *Poetics* 47 (December): 41–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2014.10.003>.
- National Institutes of Health. 2018. "College Drinking." National Institutes of Health. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/college-drinking>.

- Nielsen. 2013. "Does College Play a Role in Media Consumption?" Nielsen. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2013/does-college-play-a-role-in-media-consumption>.
- . 2016. "The Digital Age: Young Adults Gravitate Toward Digital Devices." Nielsen. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2016/the-digital-age-young-adults-gravitate-toward-digital-devices>.
- . 2018. "Tops of 2018: Social TV." Nielsen. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2018/tops-of-2018-social-tv>.
- . 2019. "Tops of 2019: Social TV." Nielsen. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2019/tops-of-2019-social-tv>.
- Oprea, S. J., & Kühne, R. 2016. Generation Me in the Spotlight: Linking Reality TV to Materialism, Entitlement, and Narcissism. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19 (6), 800–819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1199706>
- Reality TV World Staff. 2003. "Trista Rehn: Alex Michel and I Continued Our Relationship after He Picked Amanda Marsh on 'The Bachelor' Finale." Reality TV World. January 10, 2003. <https://www.realitytvworld.com/news/bachelor-alex-michael-and-bachelorette-trista-rehn-continued-relationship-after-michael-selected-amanda-marsh-860.php>.
- Roberts, Jessica. 2011. "Keeping It Real: A Historical Look at Reality TV." *Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports*. 3438. <https://doi.org/10.33915/etd.3438>.
- Roman, James W. 2005. *From Daytime to Primetime: The History of American Television Programs*. Westport: Greenwood. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015059262785>.
- Sanders, Linley. 2020. "What Type of Person Is Part of Bachelor Nation?" YouGov. November 16, 2020. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/media/articles-reports/2020/11/16/bachelor-nation-profile-poll>.
- Sansome, Jessica. 2019. "Why Only Six of 98,000 People Who Applied for Love Island Appeared on the Show." Manchester Evening News. July 31, 2019. <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/tv/only-six-98000-people-who-16674980>.
- Schensul, S., Schensul, J. & LeCompte, M. 1999. *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires*. Lanham: Altamira.
- Spitulnik, Debra. 1993. "Anthropology and Mass Media." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1): 293 – 315.
- Strause, Jackie. 2021. "'The Bachelor' Frontrunner Controversy: Chris Harrison Apologizes." The Hollywood Reporter. February 10, 2021. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/chris-harrison-wades-into-the-bachelor-frontrunner-controversy-apologizes-over-interview>
- "Survivor (USA Season 1)." 2000. CBS.
- Taylor, Samuel Hardman, and Natalya N. Bazarova. 2018. "Revisiting Media Multiplexity: A Longitudinal Analysis of Media Use in Romantic Relationships." *Journal of Communication* 68 (6): 1104–26. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy055>.
- "The Bachelor (USA Season 1)". 2002. ABC.
- (USA Season 24)." 2020. ABC.
- (USA Season 25)." 2021. ABC.

“The Bachelorette (USA Season 1)”. 2003. ABC.

TheBachBabes (@TheBachBabes). 2020. “Me, recovering from this train wreck of an episode.” Twitter, October 20, 2020, 10:02 p.m. <https://twitter.com/TheBachBabes/status/1318734377686282241>

“The Real World (Season 1).” 1992. MTV.

Willen, Claudia. 2020. ““The Bachelor’: Everything ABC Doesn’t Want You to Know - Insider.” February 26, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/bachelor-bachelorette-secrets-facts-2017-3#contestants-get-paid-nothing-to-appear-on-the-bachelor-and-the-bachelorette-3>.

Yang, Chia-chen, and Yen Lee. 2020. “Interactants and Activities on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter: Associations between Social Media Use and Social Adjustment to College.” *Applied Developmental Science* 24 (1): 62–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1440233>