

# It's Jersday!: A Psychological Exploration of Stereotyping and Audience Appeal in *Jersey Shore*

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## Abstract

*Jersey Shore* is a reality television show that depicts risky behaviours such as verbal and physical conflict, binge drinking, and promiscuity. Due to the show's popularity and seemingly crude content, it is worthwhile to understand the psychological appeal towards this type of television. This paper explores the controversial portrayal of Italian-Americans and how *Jersey Shore* provides insight into the Italian-American identity. It also discusses explanations for *Jersey Shore*'s appeal; specifically, the paper examines the development of the audience's parasocial relationships with cast members, accessibility to status and fame, obtaining meaning and knowledge through viewing cast members' day-to-day behaviour, as well as individual differences in viewership.

The viewership of reality television shows that depict risky behaviours, such as verbal and physical conflict, binge drinking, and promiscuity, has been steadily increasing. A particularly noteworthy example of this type of reality television is *Jersey Shore*, a hit television series on MTV, which features eight Italian Americans who are followed as they engage in risky behaviours. A unique feature of *Jersey Shore*, compared to other reality game shows such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, is its lack of competition for an end prize. Nor does *Jersey Shore* simply follow the cast members around in their own daily living, as in lifestyle shows such as *The Real Housewives* or *16 and Pregnant*. *Jersey Shore* depicts the cast living in an unfamiliar city as they socialize with each other and people they meet along the way. Since its premiere in 2009, the show has faced much controversy regarding its content, stereotypical portrayal of Italians, and increasing popularity. Over the past decade, reality television has become one of the highest rated genres on television (Edwards, 2013). Thus, it is important to understand the appeal towards reality TV, and the programs' potential effects on viewers. Some research suggests that a person's choice of television show relates to

his or her identity (Cavallero, 2004), while other studies suggest that what people choose to watch can influence how they behave (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004).

This paper will explore the portrayal of Italian-Americans in television and how this portrayal relates to the Italian-American identity. Furthermore, the paper will develop explanations for why *Jersey Shore* is appealing by specifically investigating the audience's experiences developing parasocial relationships with the cast, access to status and fame, obtainment of meaning and knowledge, and individual differences in viewership.

## The Popularity

*Jersey Shore* follows Italian-Americans cast members, self-proclaimed Guidos/Guidettes, as they spend their time at the beach by day and at parties by night. The show hit record viewership on MTV since its premiere and remained highly popular throughout all six seasons (Medley, 2009). The soaring popularity of *Jersey Shore* has sparked much conversation so-

cially with fans, going as far as labelling the days that the show airs as 'Jersdays'. The show has also aroused academic interest. For example, in October 2011, the University of Chicago hosted a *Jersey Shore* Academic Conference that discussed many topics related to the reality television show, including the Guido identity, the show's morality and ethics, gender portrayal, and issues related to labour and economics (Huffington Post, 2011). This conference, along with the show's television ratings, highlights the level of interest that *Jersey Shore* has sparked, though not all the attention has been positive. One of the principal controversies surrounding *Jersey Shore* is the show's supposed reckless portrayal of Italian-American stereotypes.

### The Portrayal of the Italian-American Stereotype

Verbal and physical conflict, binge drinking, and promiscuity have been characterized by *Jersey Shore* as supposedly revealing the lifestyle of young Italian-Americans. The show also seemingly perpetuates the young Italian-American dialect and clothing style. For example, the characters have artificial tans, spend a lot of time styling their hair, wear tight clothing, and speak with an Italian accent. Each character identifies as a Guido/Guidette, an ethnic slur used to identify young Italian-Americans. Through advertising and promotions for the television show, MTV exaggerates, and it could be suggested that the network mocks, the Guido/Guidette lifestyle, raising public concern surrounding the negative portrayal of Italian-Americans.

As Harris (2009) indicates, negative media portrayal of society's minority groups has implications for the way the dominant group in society develops schemas regarding that group. For example, when Caucasian children have prolonged exposure to television roles regularly played by an African American and Latino cast (i.e., minority outgroup), the Caucasian children increase in their acceptance of this minority group and exhibit less racist beliefs towards them (Gorn, Goldberg, & Kanungo, 1976). This may explain why some

Italian-American ethnic groups are indignant about *Jersey Shore's* portrayal of their Italian-American ethnicity, which has the potential of reinforcing negative stereotypes perpetuating their minority status rather than increasing positive acceptance.

Clark (1969) suggests that the portrayal of minority groups in television represents the dominant group's attitude towards that minority group in society. He proposes a stage theory for media portrayal of minority groups on television: initially, the minority group is absent from television shows; then the minority group is ridiculed; subsequently, the minority group members appear to regulate social order, for example, as police officers or detectives; finally, the minority group garners respect and is portrayed in all types of roles, positive and negative. *Jersey Shore* exemplifies the second stage (i.e., ridicule) of media portrayal by entertaining the public at the expense of Italian-Americans, highlighting associated negative stereotypes (Franklin, 2010).

Some research illustrates an alternative picture, suggesting that Italians have actually moved into a position of power within media portrayal. According to Cavallero (2004), works such as *The Sopranos*, *Scarface*, *Friends*, or *Seinfeld*, portray Italians in more authoritative positions, reflecting a stage three media representation. If *Jersey Shore* represents a recession within media portrayal of the Italian-American stereotype, then why are the *Jersey Shore* cast members so enthusiastic and proud to be termed a Guido or Guidette? For instance, Pauly D., a popular *Jersey Shore* cast member, consistently declares his identification with the Guido lifestyle and is proud to be associated with it. His incessant support for the Guido identity suggests that being a Guido/Guidette allows cast members to form and uphold an identity.

### The Guido/Guidette Identity

For minority groups, making one's ethnicity salient emphasizes ethnic traits that distinguish that member of the minority from the dominant group (Harris,

2009). Cavallero (2004) suggests that the portrayal of Italian-Americans in television and film attempts to celebrate Italian-American ethnic roots. *Jersey Shore*'s self-proclaimed Guidos/Guidettes' willingness to comply with, and perhaps even exaggerate, the stereotype seems to suggest that the cast use it as a way of defining themselves as Italian-American. Some have likened this identification to minority groups self-identifying with derogatory names, such as gay people identifying with the word 'queer' (Medley, 2009). Other research suggests that in addition to cast members securing an identity, reality television participants interpret their being on reality television as a personal growing experience (Andrejevic, 2004) or a tool used for "finding themselves" (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). The cast members may use their time on *Jersey Shore* as a growth experience, where they can engage in the controversial, and stereotypical, behaviours with which they identify. Up to this point, this paper has explained the cast members' involvement in the show and their endorsement of Italian-American stereotypes. However, it has not explained the audience appeal and general popularity of *Jersey Shore*.

### The Audience Appeal

Various explanations have been offered to describe the astounding audience appeal that reality television receives. These explanations include the development of parasocial relationships between the audience and the show's stars, the attainment of status and fame, obtaining meaning and knowledge, and a uses and gratifications approach. Each can successfully be applied to the popularity of *Jersey Shore*.

#### *Parasocial relationships*

It is proposed that viewers consume reality television for a number of different reasons. Andrejevic (2004) proposes that viewers are able to identify with the cast of reality shows, especially through the use of social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook.

Viewers can communicate with other viewers, and sometimes even the cast members themselves, to comment on the happenings of the show. This intimate connection enhances the potential for developing a parasocial relationship, that is, the viewer behaving as though he or she is in a reciprocal social relationship with the cast member (Giles, 2002). Giles (2002) explains that this type of parasocial relationship can be based on companionship (i.e., to remedy social isolation) or personal identification (i.e., similarity or wishful) with the television character.

The development of a parasocial relationship with a cast member of *Jersey Shore* could explain the apparently committed viewership. These dedicated fans feel as though they have a relationship with one or more cast members and thus feel the need to tune in each week in order to follow the storyline and to keep up-to-date on their 'friends.' In Fraser and Brown's (2002) qualitative study of Elvis Presley fans, the authors revealed three findings: fans' heavy identification with a celebrity turns into a psychological relationship, fans regard the celebrity as a role model, and fans adopt the celebrity's values and behaviour. Considering the content of *Jersey Shore*, heavy identification and the formation of parasocial relationships with cast members could be problematic. This relationship has the potential to influence fans to adopt the characters' endorsement of the prevalent risky behaviours that are evident in *Jersey Shore*, such as drinking, promiscuity, and aggression. Nevertheless, this relationship could go in the opposite direction, as Biressi and Nunn (2005) point out, as one could feel disconnected or frustrated for not understanding the cast member's motivations underlying their behaviours. Regardless of any subsequent influence, identification with a television character and the development of a parasocial relationship leads to higher viewership of reality television shows.

#### *The 'ordinary' celebrity*

A prevalent feature of reality television shows, like *Jersey Shore*, is the pervasive surveillance of day-

to-day life. Andrejevic (2004) claims that the appeal of this constant surveillance is associated with wealth and fame. *Jersey Shore* boasts characters that are seemingly ordinary people who are fortunate enough to have an audience. Reiss and Wiltz (2001; 2004) suggest that people watch reality television because the cast members, who are ordinary people, become important enough that viewers themselves begin to fantasize about the possibility of becoming a celebrity. Haspel (2011) suggests that the elements of becoming famous have shifted from the honour of skill and accomplishment, such as the ability to act or sing, to the exploitation of what can be considered immoral behaviour. These immoral behaviours, such as binge drinking and engaging in risky behaviours, garner attention and fame. *Jersey Shore* promotes the notion that immoral behaviours are easier to engage in than accomplishing a skill. This notion only increases the viewers' accessibility of, and desire for, fame.

A further examination of the desire to be famous reveals the need for status; that is, status-oriented people are more likely to watch reality television, reporting more pleasure and enjoyment in the activity than those with less status-orientation (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Researchers suggest that those motivated by status have an above-average need to feel self-important, which is satisfied through attention (Reiss & Wiltz, 2001, 2004). On *Jersey Shore*, cast members are constantly monitored by cameras, which can be regarded as the ultimate form of attention. Moreover, it seems that *Jersey Shore* viewers, who are motivated more by status, could be fascinated by the attention that the 'ordinary' cast members receive constantly. They could fantasize that one day, they, too, will be lucky enough to appear on television. Nevertheless, not all viewers seem to be motivated by status and attention.

#### *Authenticity and knowledge*

Biressi and Nunn (2005) agree that privileged access to cast members' daily lives, afforded by reality television, is a key aspect of its appeal. However, they

claim that, rather than viewers experiencing vicarious status and fame, the access provides viewers with a sense of meaning, as they are viewing other people experiencing life events in a domain where there is high competition for attention and fear of loss of authenticity (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). Andrejevic (2004) suggests that constant surveillance reveals authentic individuality because cast members are expected to express genuine reactions to events. *Jersey Shore's* portrayal of Italian-American cast members potentially offers viewers an authentic portrayal of daily life in America, providing a sense of purpose to viewers through the cast's everyday antics.

Additionally, some research suggests that reality television provides knowledge not only about meaning and authenticity, but also about human nature in general (Andrejevic, 2004). MTV describes *Jersey Shore* as the outcome of combining eight unique personalities, all of which have one thing in common: the Guido/Guidette identity. This human experiment perspective engages viewers who are curious about and interested in witnessing human behaviour (Andrejevic, 2004).

#### *Uses and gratifications approach: traits versus motivations*

In earlier research, a popular explanation for high reality television viewership was a trait called voyeurism. Calvert (2000) defines voyeurism as a commonly occurring fascination with access to private details of people's lives. More recently, voyeurism has been associated with four reality program features; the use of fly-on-the-wall perspective, scenes taking place in private settings, scenes containing gossip, and scenes containing some nudity (Baruh, 2009). *Jersey Shore* contains each of these features, and although there is no explicit nudity, sexual content is made apparent. This suggests that some viewers who watch *Jersey Shore* may have a voyeuristic tendency. However, controversy remains over defining voyeurism, as well as individual traits and their correlation to reality television viewing (Banerjee, Greene, Krcmar, & Bagdasarov, 2009; Nabi, Biely, Mor-

gan & Stitt, 2003; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004).

A final approach to understanding reality television appeal involves a 'uses and gratifications approach'. Nabi, Biely, Morgan & Stitt (2003) explain that the 'uses and gratification' theory is grounded on the following assumptions: a) individuals are aware of their needs; b) individuals evaluate various channels and content; c) individuals assess functional alternatives; and d) individuals select the medium or interpersonal channels that will provide the gratifications they seek. This perspective implies that certain individual traits will affect the medium and content consumed. In relation to *Jersey Shore*, it seems that the uses and gratifications perspective offers potential individual differences in motivational profiles that influence the viewers who tune in weekly.

Studies using the Reiss Profile assessment suggest that it is not specific traits that predict viewership, but statistically significant motivational profiles (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). The Reiss Profile is a standardized instrument used to assess participants' viewership and enjoyment of reality television shows (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). As discussed previously, the need for status is a fundamental motive for those who wish to achieve fame. Another interesting insight from this study is that people who tend to avoid conflict, anger, and competition in their daily lives tend to avoid reality television shows (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). This aversion to the shows may be due to the prevalence of conflict, both intrapersonal as well as interpersonal, in reality television. Moreover, more sociable people tend to watch more reality television (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Social people use reality television as a topic for discussion. However, this finding conflicts with the parasocial explanation for viewership, which suggests that those who are more socially isolated tend to form more parasocial relationships. Thus, it can be speculated that sociable people who watch reality television, would be less likely to form parasocial relationships for companionship reasons, and more so for identification purposes.

## Conclusion

*Jersey Shore* has recently completed its sixth season, while giving rise to two spinoff shows. The popularity of this reality television series is concerning, considering the highly prevalent crude content consisting of drinking, sexual activity, and aggression. The discussed explanations regarding the popularity of *Jersey Shore* include the formation of parasocial relationships, the potential of status and fame, the acquisition of meaning and knowledge, and differences in individual motivations. This paper's exploration is relevant, since research on *Jersey Shore* and its consequences is fairly limited despite its profound influence on culture. Understanding the controversy and audience appeal that surrounds *Jersey Shore* is crucial when considering its application to other reality television shows, as well as, its potential to create popular successors of this show. Furthermore, research is needed to address other types of reality television shows (e.g., reality dating television and reality lifestyle television) and the psychological reasoning behind their appeal.

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