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Sluts, Brats, and Sextuplets: The Dangers of Reality Television for Children and Teen Participants

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Sluts, Brats, and Sextuplets: The Dangers of Reality Television for Children and Teen Participants

Reality Television and Popular Culture

In our mediated world, media representations are an essential part of our relationship with society. Popular culture, especially in the United States, is shaped and constantly redefined by a plethora of images, sounds, words, and narratives densely packed with meaning. Our sense of self is intimately intertwined with our surrounding media culture, influencing our identities, relationships, and perceptions (Holland, 2004).

The new millennium has heightened the pervasiveness and expansive breadth of media. Traditional forms of media such as television have been fundamentally changed over recent decades due to technologies such as the Internet, DVRs, and cable and satellite channels. Although television audiences are more fragmented and the programming has become increasingly niche, television has become no less influential. Are its viewers any more critical? Television is now less narrowly defined than ever before and has been increasingly absorbed into diverse forms and horizontal integrations. It has been incorporated into ever more interactive and accessible media forms, enabling its survival in the digital age.

Blurring the line between polished Hollywood media and everyday life, reality television is a manifestation of television's evolution in the new millennium. As a genre it has become an increasingly accepted and durable entertainment format, watched by millions globally in a variety of media forms (Penzhorn & Pitout, 2006). Reality programming is characterized by its effort to reproduce everyday life and create a semblance of the real that is unachievable in scripted television. Producers and directors record events in the lives of "real" people rather than actors, and package them in familiar narrative forms reminiscent of television dramas and sit-

coms. The final product is marketed as an entertaining “slice of life,” appealing because of its “elevated ordinariness” (Penzhorn & Pitout, 2006). It reflects the participatory aspect of our postmodern culture and the rejection of a media elite’s creation of a fictional television world with little relationship to its viewers (Penzhorn & Pitout, 2006). (Editor’s note: See Isher-Paul Sahni on television authenticity in the preceding issue of this journal, Spring 2013.) The genre’s “realness,” however, is an illusion. Issues of power structures and hegemonic discourse are still present, but are cloaked behind an illusion of objective documentary. Reality television markets itself as truthful and free of manufacturing and media elitism, an artifact addressed to the common person portraying the lives of ordinary people. It purposefully *seems* natural, real, and spontaneous. However, reality television is fabricated and packaged as much as any scripted program; its truthfulness is an artifice created to sell its product. Reality television, like any media commodity, is designed for a specific audience with a specific goal motivated by commercial factors.

Reality television shows that revolve around the lives of children and teenagers have become popular to audiences of all ages, which is evident in their success across diverse channels and various demographics. Whether the children are secondary characters or central to the show, part of the appeal of the programming is its access into the lives of minors (Neifeld, 2010). New questions arise as to the allure of these programs and their ethical implications. The shows *Laguna Beach* (2004-06, MTV), *Jon & Kate Plus 8* (2007-2011, TLC), *16 and Pregnant* (2009- , MTV), and *Toddlers & Tiaras* (2008- , TLC) are shows that prominently feature children and adolescents ranging from newborns to teenagers, and exhibit some problematic representational practices of their subjects. In these reality shows, the handling and portrayal of their child stars are ethically dubious in their presented characters, which are heavily constructed through editing and narrative techniques to enhance drama. In addition, the tropes and images created through these programs interact with questionable hegemonic discourses about children, gender, and family.

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**Hegemonic Imagery of Children and Teens in Reality
Television**

In her book *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*, Patricia Holland (2004) analyzes the inescapability of routine imagery and its effective creation of continuities in societal perceptions of children. She argues that the power of visual repetition works through connotation rather than rationality, touching our subconscious with discursive meaning formations that are difficult to detect. Holland conceptualizes “public imagery” (p. 3) as akin to a database that is accessible at any time and from any place: certain images are present across media forms and create a simplistic “pictorial vocabulary” (p. 4). According to Holland, these repetitive concepts and stereotypes are ever-present in an individual’s mind, and are referred to in any process of meaning formation. Within these archival sets of images, expectations for what children and families are and what they should be are cemented. In a society of inescapable media bombardment, there are potent socializing effects and loaded messages contained in every image and word. Holland argues that public imagery constructs conceptual maps that delineate healthy human relationships and identities, especially true in the context of familial roles and formations. Supporting her argument with a collection of mediated images of children and family, Holland demonstrates that children are frequently pictured within a family unit that is immediately recognizable through its archetypal characters: mother, father, and brother, sister. In her body of collected images, untraditional families and gender roles are largely invisible, and thus, Holland argues, presented as deviant and undesirable.¹

Additionally, Holland brings into view the questionable voyeurism implicit in mediated images of children. Reality television plays on voyeuristic desires by ignoring the people behind the camera, creating the illusion of observing an unknowing subject. The lives of its participants are captured, packaged, and broadcast without their collaboration, creating an unequal power balance between the television show’s producers and its stars. Holland contends that when the subject is a child, the imbalance is even greater due to the child’s inherent status as subservient to adults. Further, she argues that the adult gaze is never innocent when it is aimed at

a girl child. Images of females are routinely laden with sexual innuendos, and the repetition of suggestive messages has trained the viewer to interpret images of females at all ages erotically. Through collected images of girls in media, Holland demonstrates that a girl child displaying herself is loaded with sexual connotations regardless of the child's knowledge or intentions, and often the creator of an image structures it sexually out of habit rather than malevolence. An image of a girl can be encoded with sexuality through the simple coy tilt of a head or open-mouthed pout, Holland argues (p. 191), requiring no great effort or planning on the part of either videographer/photographer or child.

Drawing from Holland's concepts of public imagery, reality television can be seen as a media form that extracts visuals and narratives from archives of established meanings to discursively construct and reinforce hegemonic norms of gender, childhood, and family. The frequent recurrence of televisual representations of families and children have created an archive of familiar archetypal characters (the doting mother, the rebellious teenager, the rambunctious child) and narratives (teen romance, the American dream, family struggles). Drawing from this archive creates familiarity in reality television programs that functions to incorporate its programming into the daily routines of its audience (Penzhorn & Pitout, 2006). These routine images and themes may not be created with sinister intentions, but regardless of intent, their repetition amalgamates and has material hegemonic effects on society. Television is an especially potent media form because it combines habitual images with conventional storylines, familiarizing itself through its use of established narratives and meanings. The stories and images of reality television are naturalized even more, because they are presented, and thus legitimated, as a neutral presentation of the "truth."

Representation of Race and Ethnicity

Television discourses present the normal American as white, upper-middle class, attractive, and heterosexual, marginalizing other demographics as peripheral to the in-crowd (Berg, 2002; Durham, 1999; Gitlin, 1979; Morley, 2000). *Laguna Beach* is no exception, featuring beautiful,

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wealthy, white teenage girl stars whose lives are represented as revolving around boyfriends. The show portrays itself as realistic and posits its girl stars as plucked impartially from the real world, strengthening the myth that the norms within media discourses may be extended to expectations of “normal” in broader society. Despite the diversity of races and ethnicities in the United States, the cast of *Laguna Beach* is entirely white, as is their total fabricated social universe. There are no members of any race other than Caucasian to be found anywhere: in school, at the mall, on the beach, or on the street. *Laguna Beach* exists in a fantastical world that has been completely whitewashed.

In *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, lead character Jon (the father of eight children) is part Asian, a fact that is briefly discussed on the show. Although his interracial relationship with his Caucasian wife, Kate, contradicts the norm, interracial dynamics are largely ignored on the show. Jon is the only Asian member of a suburban community otherwise composed entirely of Caucasians, a realm that the family rarely exits. Besides Jon, the only instance in which a non-white person is featured on the show is in season one when Kate interviews a female maid who doesn't speak English. The maid in every way is constructed as foreign to the white, suburban world of *Jon & Kate Plus 8*: she speaks a foreign language, her physical appearance marks her as a different race from the family, and her clothing distinguishes her as an individual only entering this sphere temporarily. She is a foreigner, portrayed as someone not yet assimilated to the suburban norms of United States culture, and thus is discursively constructed as peripheral and abnormal.

The other shows repeat the pattern of excluding non-white races and ethnicities and ignoring racial and ethnic social dynamics. Of the six teenage girls featured on season one of *16 and Pregnant*, five are Euro-American despite the fact that the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the United States are amongst Hispanics and African Americans (Family First Aid); the only non-white character featured on *16 and Pregnant* is biracial (Euro-American and African-American). Similarly, while *Toddlers & Tiaras* does occasionally feature African-American and Hispanic families, the majority of families featured on the show are Euro-American (19 of

the 27 families from season one are Euro-American, and a twentieth family has a Euro-American mother). This exclusion is unrepresentative of the diversity of families in the United States, contributing to the hegemonic conceptualization of United States citizens as white and, by default, minorities as other (MacGregor, 289).

Normative Heterosexuality

Although audience members have agency and actively decode mediated messages, societal influences and ingrained meaning formations often serve to ensure a decoding of the dominant reading (Hall, 2006). Studies of adolescent girls suggest that popular culture is greatly influential in adolescent meaning creation and conversation (Durham, 1999). According to an ethnographic study conducted by Meenakshi Gigi Durham (1999) of eighth grade girls, despite the occurrence of individual acts of resistance in the girls, their peer groups and social pressures overwhelmed most opposition and reinforced hegemonic norms of heterosexuality and femininity. In her study, Durham found that heterosexuality frames identity construction in adolescents through media discourses that define an individual's desirability in society (1999).

The preference of heterosexual romance is evident in the reality television series *Laguna Beach* (Auerbach & Gately, 2004), which revolves around girls wanting boyfriends and boys chasing girls. In the first season of the show, the central story arc involves a love triangle between lead characters Lauren, Kristin, and Stephen. The plot advancement is driven almost exclusively by heterosexual melodrama, with a gaping lack of discussion or acknowledgement of other sexualities.

Hegemonic privileging of heterosexuality is also present in the characters' discussion of marriage on *Laguna Beach*. The young female stars frequently discuss marriage and mothering as desirable goals, and often treat these topics as measurements of success. Female leads Lauren and Kristin are both told by their friends that they would have "pretty babies" with the male lead Stephen, although this is never a topic of conversation for Stephen and his friends. This gendered division reinforces heteronormative designations of appropriate gender roles and ambitions.

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Heterosexuality is portrayed as the norm in the series *Toddlers & Tiaras* (Lexton & Rogan, 2009), *16 and Pregnant* (Freeman & Savage, 2009), and *Jon & Kate Plus 8* (Hayes, 2007) as well, which tend to feature traditional nuclear-style families. However, an instance of subversion pushing against the heteronormative mold does occur in *Toddlers & Tiaras* in an episode that features lesbian mothers. This inclusion, unlike *Laguna Beach* and the other programs, acknowledges the existence of non-heterosexual relationships and families. Mothers Nicole and Elisha, however, are not portrayed as normal or desirable parents, and deviate from the media norm in more ways than their homosexuality. They are economically disadvantaged, have strong southern accents, are racial minorities, and are portrayed as uncouth and often socially awkward. Overall, the mothers do not fit the normative ideal of parents in the United States presented by *Toddlers & Tiaras* in the majority of its episodes. Their comparison to the other parents in this and other episodes—where they are positioned in a binary of heterosexual-homosexual, normal-abnormal—serves to reinforce hegemonic constructions of what a typical American family should be (upper-middle class, white, and heterosexual).

Heteronormative Beauty

Mass media discourses structure heterosexuality in conjunction with Eurocentric ideals of feminine beauty (Durham, 1999). Images of femininity are confining and largely unattainable by most women, but many girls lack the ability to resist the pressures to aspire to these ideals (Durham, 1999).

Toddlers & Tiaras features girl children going to great lengths to bring themselves closer to adult female beauty ideals. Seven-year-old Holly is shown shaving her legs, tanning, having a manicure, and dying her hair. Five-year-old Bella's mother tells the audience that her daughter is overweight and considers putting her on a diet (though Bella does not appear to have a high Body Mass Index). The girls themselves are shown glowing and happy when their appearance is altered, truly believing that they have become more beautiful and thus more valuable. Destiny, age five, says in an interview, "I think I look different at the pageants because

I look prettier than I do right now.” The show maintains the illusion of its realism and objectivity through a documentary-style aesthetic that hides the producers and directors behind the camera, and thus portrays these physical modifications without skepticism or commentary. These girls sincerely believe they gain value when they beautify themselves, implying dissatisfaction with their self-image.

Laguna Beach creates a fabricated reality exclusively inhabited by attractive, young, and white women and men. Youth is the norm here, where the only adults featured are the parents of the teenage protagonists. The young female stars are framed as sexually attractive through camera techniques that suggest sexuality and beauty. Lead characters Kristin and Lauren are frequently shown in small bikinis, the camera mimicking a sexualized gaze of a viewer. In the first episode, for instance, Kristin is shown lying on a float in her pool, and the camera cuts to her slowly and seductively climbing out of the water to answer a phone call. Here, it is noteworthy that the camera work was staged to create this scene, as is evident by the speed of the edits and angles of the camera coverage. The sequence is reminiscent of fashion photography, using familiar angles and gestures to suggest that Kristin is a beautiful and desirable woman.

Throughout *Laguna Beach*, the female characters on the show, including Lauren and Kristin’s friends, continually discuss the romantic lead Stephen’s attractiveness (frequently by referring to him as “hot”). Stephen is positioned as the most attractive male on the show, and the exclusive competition for Stephen’s attention between Kristin and Lauren implicitly places them as the most attractive females of the cast. All three individuals fit nicely into Eurocentric beauty standards: they are young, tan, and impeccably fit; furthermore, they have traditionally European facial features. Models of beauty outside of the European norm are entirely absent from the series, thus constructing the young white leads as the ideal prototype of beauty to which all should aspire.

Presentation of Gender Roles

Societal construction of gender roles for males and females begins very early in life. Television socialization has been shown to breed intoler-

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ance in adolescents towards deviations from gender norms in their peers, while heavy television consumption is linked with stereotypical ideas about sex and gender (Scanlon, 1994). Public imagery begins separating the genders at infancy. The abundance of these images combined with their imposition at birth naturalizes gender types, so that traditional gender roles become fundamental in an individual's identity (Holland, 2004). The danger of gendered identities lies not in the recognition of biological differences, but rather in socialized gender roles that cling to traditional, patriarchal ideologies (Kahan & Norris, 1994).

Girls are marked as different through the feminine—they are pictured as softer, curved, with more decoration, frills, and lace. Patricia Holland (2004) argues that these signifiers have sexual and submissive connotations when compared with the straight lines and action of little boys. Frequently posed in passive, slightly erotic positions, images of girls are weighted with power relationships and expectations of traditional social roles. Holland argues that the division between girls and boys is especially evident in the imaging of appropriate forms of play. Citing patterns in media imagery of children, Holland points to the tendency of girls' play to be seductive, where boys' play is productive. Girls are frequently seen playing dress-up, displaying themselves for an imagined viewer, while boys are shown as actively making or doing. Holland argues that standards of play, maintained through mediated images, thus socializes children into shaping themselves into traditional gender roles and submitting to male and female power relations.

The separation of boy and girl play is fortified by images of real children at play in reality programming. The subject matter of *Toddlers & Tiaras* focuses on girls participating in beauty pageants, its central narrative centering on girls dressing up and displaying themselves for adult judges. To these girls, pageantry and dress-up is a serious business from which they can gain money and prestige.

An interesting motif in *Toddlers & Tiaras* is the comparison of pageants to sports made by the fathers, implying that dress-up is sport for girls while athletic sports are a male pursuit. Likewise, boys seldom participate in the pageants. Episode six features a boy named Payton who is

retiring because he is “getting too old for pageants,” according to his parents. Instead, he plans on participating in the more normatively constructed male activity of four-wheeling with his older brothers. Repeating these hegemonic discourses on gendered play frequently throughout the series, *Toddlers & Tiaras* promotes gender divisions by implying that athletics are for boys and pageants are for girls. Through its uncritical use of hegemonic gender norms, the show implicitly reinforces societal standards that girls should play passive, exhibitionist roles and boys should play active, strong roles.

Sexuality and Children in Reality Television

Regardless of socioeconomic class or ethnicity, adolescent girls are more susceptible than adolescent boys to eating disorders, negative body image, and depression (Durham, 1999). This susceptibility often corresponds with a loss self-esteem and ambition, which has been correlated to the imposition of societal norms of femininity and gender roles (Durham, 1999). According to a study by the American Psychological Association, the abundance of sexualized media images of girls and young women is connected with some of the problematic issues of female adolescence. The APA argues that the sexualization of young girls may cause detrimental effects in cognitive, physical, mental, and sexual development (2007).

The show *Toddlers & Tiaras* centers on little girls who toy with womanhood and sexuality as a competition. Although in the first episode of season one the pageant director asserts the fact that the judges do not want girls in the swimsuit competition to be sexy, the producers point to this hypocrisy with a montage of young girls parading themselves in bathing suits accompanied by stereotypically sexy saxophone music. This montage illustrates the paradoxical demands of innocent dress-up, but its use of comical music and irony makes light of the activity rather than questioning the sexualization of girl children.

Throughout season one, the little girls on *Toddler & Tiaras* display and objectify themselves in performances that are represented as cute. A two-year-old named Ava is told to mime taking off her clothes and

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to “shaky shaky” by her father while on stage. In episode eight, a five-year-old named Faith literally strips on stage, removing her wrap to reveal a bikini underneath. Seven-year-old Meadow’s routine in episode seven involves her shaking her hips and making an open-mouthed pouting face, a common expression in childhood imagery that is also highly suggestive and sexually invitational (Gottfried, 1994). *Toddlers & Tiaras* packages this behavior as cornball and playful, but it is nonetheless sexual and reflective of public imagery of eroticized children.

Teenage girls are commonly used as sex objects in mediated images, and this is no less true for reality television. In MTV’s *Laguna Beach*, the teenage stars are frequently presented in their bathing suits displaying themselves as desirable and sexy. This is established in the very first episode, which opens with teen star Kristin floating in the pool. Beginning at her feet, the camera pans across her figure revealing her young, toned, bikini-clad body. This is accompanied by a voiceover from one of the other stars, Lauren, saying, “She thinks she’s hot. Well, maybe she is.” Later in the series, an episode is named “Fast Cars and Fast Women,” a descriptive title that imparts the teenage girls with a sexual maturity beyond their actual age. Further, it sexualizes and objectifies the teenage girls by placing them alongside cars as inanimate and fetishized commodities.

The sexual activity woven into the major narratives on *Laguna Beach* not only condones promiscuity, but also often encourages it without any discussion of responsible and safe sexual behavior. The only virgin on the show is a senior named Morgan, who is portrayed as extremely religious and abnormal in her abstinence. Most of the characters are at the very least implied to be engaging in casual sex, and very few have monogamous sexual relationships. The negative consequences of sexual activity are never discussed and casual sex is presented as fun, which can be a dangerous implication to send to the teenage viewers of the show. Research demonstrates that adolescents obtain their information and perceptions about sex largely from the media, which ranks just behind parents and peers (Durham, 1999). According to the American Psychological Association, there is a correlation between teenagers watching television with high levels of sexual content and sexual activity at an increasingly

earlier age (2007).

In the program *16 and Pregnant*, celebrity therapist Dr. Drew hosts the final reunion episode. In this episode he claims that the show is fighting against teen pregnancy, and hopes to bring awareness to young girls about the pitfalls of unprotected sex. But these noble intentions are undermined when teen parents Amber and Gary answer Dr. Drew's question as to why they didn't wear a condom. Amber replies that Gary had less sensation, and Gary retorts, "Everybody knows it's better without a condom." Gary then tries to elaborate his point and explain his choice to engage in unsafe sex by saying, "Well, there's lots of different factors. For pleasure, it's better without a condom. For protection it's better with a condom." Amber dismisses his comment by telling the audience not to listen to Gary, and changes the subject by saying, "I don't want them to think that we're trying to glamorize teen pregnancy, because it's not glamorous." Dr. Drew allows the subject to change and the discourse to stay on a very simplistic message: teen pregnancy is bad, contraceptives are good. Rather than engage in an in-depth and open discussion of the reasons why teenagers may knowingly make unsafe sexual decisions, Dr. Drew merely repeats the same sterilized and politically correct message about sexual behavior and contraception.

Further, while the show *16 and Pregnant* addresses the difficulties of teen pregnancy and motherhood, these instances are packaged within a narrative formula that undercuts the series' claimed intentions. Each episode follows melodrama generic conventions: as the story progresses, the conflict mounts for the young women, but in the end there is always a resolution. The girls struggle with their relationships, financial situations, and health issues, but the episode concludes with a positive note that wraps up the drama and provides a satisfying conclusion for its viewers. For example, in the first episode of season one, protagonist Maci faces the challenges that come with having an unsupportive spouse and lacking co-parenting aid. But in the end, the episode concludes with a monologue in which Maci speaks of her hopes that things will get better with her spouse in the future, juxtaposed with images of the three of them playing together outside of their apartment. In the finale episode, we learn that Maci and her

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fiancé, Ryan, have resolved their issues and plan to get married. Ryan is apologetic, assuring the audience that he has become a participatory father and compassionate spouse. The finale presents a parade of cute, cuddly babies and their happy parents, suggesting (though perhaps unwittingly) that teen parenthood might not be so bad. Following crowd-pleasing narrative tropes of happy resolutions, *16 and Pregnant* concludes on a syrupy optimistic note. The show might effectively deter teens from unprotected sex if it revealed that only a third of teen mothers graduate high school, a mere 1.5-percent earn a college degree by the age of thirty, and almost 80 percent end up on welfare (Family First Aid). These unpleasant effects of teen pregnancy are ignored in favor of more dramatically appealing storylines centered on the girls' family and romantic lives.

The Childishness of Children

Media discourses often use children to represent an idea of childhood as separate, or other, from adulthood. The differences articulated by media representations of children construct a binary between adult and child, which serves to define adulthood by childhood (Holland, 2004). "Adult" is the dominant term, delineating "child" as what adulthood is not, and thus subordinating societal conceptions of childhood (Holland, 2004). Children are defined as dependent, powerless, and ignorant, which constructs adults as independent, powerful, and knowing (Holland, 2004).

This is reinforced in the media with images of pathetic children (Holland, 2004). *Jon & Kate Plus 8* frequently spotlights the children crying in close-ups with their faces covered in tears and mucus. Frequently they are calling out for their mother or father, showing their complete dependence on parental comfort. Although the reliance of children on their parents may be a natural part of development, unlike most children the child stars of *Jon & Kate Plus 8* have these vulnerable moments broadcast to thousands of viewers. The emphasis on the children's lack of autonomy strengthens one of the show's major themes of parental love and duty, but while doing so the show portrays its young subjects in a light that could be seen as negative.

Media representations of children as brats reaffirm the definition

of children as submissive and powerless (Holland, 2004). In season one of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, episode five focuses in particular on a four-year-old girl named Kayleigha. She is portrayed as a brat, frequently telling her parents to “shut up” and her mother to “move it!” Interviews from her parents are used to support her portrayal; her mother describes her as spoiled and her father at one point states, “the kid’s just terrible.” Kayleigha’s storyline largely revolves around her bratty actions, presenting it as an entertaining anecdote of child behavior that viewers can pleurably watch and laugh at from a distance.

Children’s Lack of Authorship and Consent

Child stars across media forms and genres are generally less empowered than adults in constructing and controlling their public image (Holland, 2004). Children in reality television are even less capable in defining their mediated representation than child actors in scripted programming due to their lack of preparation and technical ability in self-presentation (Neifeld, 2010). Part of the appeal of reality television is its unscripted and unpracticed documentation of the lives of regular people. This demands that its child participants, unlike professional child actors, do not develop their public persona. Because these child subjects are required to act naturally and improvise, there is little to no separation between the actual person and the role (Neifeld, 2010).

A child subject of a reality series has no control over his or her portrayal. Once a parent signs the consent forms, the footage obtained becomes the property of the show and is used to best suit the needs of the producers. The child star’s onscreen character is often subject to postproduction manipulation for the sake of entertainment, and misleading editing techniques can heighten the drama or humor of a show at the expense of the child (Neifeld, 2010). This can be particularly damaging because the child in reality television is portraying him- or herself rather than a fictional character (Neifeld, 449). The general public takes the mediated representation to be accurate and synonymous with the child’s actual self, creating a situation in which a reality star has little control over the communication of him- or herself to society. The child is not allowed self-defi-

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dition, and is thus, in a Kantian sense, denied his or her humanity.

This is particularly ethically problematic with children, as many of them lack the maturity, social wherewithal, and media literacy to fully realize the ramifications of their on-camera actions. It is often questionable as to whether the children were consulted in their desire to be on television prior to the start of the show. In *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, the sextuplet stars became the subjects of a reality show while they were still infants and unable to speak. *Toddlers & Tiaras* often features very young subjects, most likely not fully aware of the implications of their televised personas.

Although *Laguna Beach* and *16 and Pregnant* use teenagers who were consulted as to their participation, ethical questions of self-representation are nonetheless relevant. Shows featuring teenagers are usually structured around life dramas, and are edited to increase conflict and tension. This can be very damaging to a person's public image if that person is portrayed in an unflattering representation. Kristin Cavallari of *Laguna Beach*, for example, fell victim to the consequences of her immature behavior in front of the camera, which was compiled and edited along with conversations between other characters about her conduct to portray her as a promiscuous wild child. When the teenagers of *Laguna Beach* go to Cabo for spring break, Kristin is shown drinking and dancing on a stripper pole while her sometime boyfriend, Stephen, watches and yells "slut!" In other episodes, Stephen describes Kristin as a fun hook-up but not girlfriend material, while her rival, Lauren, frequently talks about her "slutty" behavior with her friends. Given the popularity of *Laguna Beach*, Kristin's very public portrayal as a slut and party girl may lead to future trouble controlling the damage to her image and being taken seriously in potential careers and relationships.

Often the parents are complicit in the denigrating portrayal of their children, which is the case with Jon and Kate Gosselin in *Jon & Kate Plus 8*. In interviews they frequently laugh at or condemn their children's behavior with the unseen audience, accompanied with a descriptive montage. In an interview in season three, episode 19, Kate describes her four-year-old daughter Alexis as loud, wild, and dramatic. This is heard as a voiceover, accompanied by a series of clips of Alexis running, shouting,

and crying, completely out of context. Alexis has no say in her depiction, and is thus powerless in constructing a definition of her herself to the world.

Research suggests that overexposure and pressure to be on television can have serious and long-lasting effects on a child's emotional and physical health (Neifeld, 2010). In *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, the airing of the series coincided with the eventual divorce of its parent stars Jon and Kate Gosselin and a paparazzi assault surrounding the family's marital troubles. Although in interviews from the series Kate Gosselin adamantly denies that the media storm surrounding her public divorce negatively affected her children, she acknowledges that her family leads a different life as a result. Towards the end of the fifth season, Kate, speaking about her children, says to the camera, "at this point they've realized they don't have a usual life, but they react to it in a usual way." She describes that she and her family deal with fame by trying to ignore the attention, not allowing her children to say the word "paparazzi" or telling anyone where they are planning on going, and asking their peers not to talk about the show. The long-term impacts of this unusual media-saturated situation on the Gosselin children may be difficult to assess, but it is hard to imagine that they will be absent.

Celebrity—public life—is not the only arena in which reality television participants' lives are altered; the addition of cameras can dramatically alter their daily activities. The bonus features of *Laguna Beach* reveal that the television crew members were not mere observers, but rather set a shooting agenda for the day and required that each character dedicate a significant amount of time to this task. Furthermore, casting tapes reveal that the love triangle drama central to the show's plot had already occurred, and lead character Stephen had already chosen Kristin over Lauren. Not only did the show's producers orchestrate the shoots, but also the lives of the teenagers were drastically manipulated in order to fabricate a compelling and dramatic narrative.

On *16 and Pregnant*, privacy invasions abound in the lives of the teenage mothers-to-be, as the camera seems to follow the teenage girls everywhere: into the girls' bathroom, the doctor's office, even the delivery

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room (the girls are all filmed giving birth, complete with the baby falling into the doctor's hands). In a particularly intrusive episode, the viewer is witness to a very personal moment in a character's pregnancy. The cameraperson follows the episode's star, Farrah, and her mother into the girls' bathroom, and the camera stays on their feet in the stalls as Farrah discovers blood in her underwear. The conversation between the mother and daughter that follows discusses the amount, the color, and the consistency of the blood, with the conclusion that she should go to the doctor. Once at the doctor's office, the show documents Farrah receiving a pelvic exam with a close-up on her face and a look of discomfort.

Dangers of Reality Television Stardom

Fame is understandably alluring for the young participants of reality programs, but it comes complete with several drawbacks. Most television celebrity actors are able to separate their person and their persona into distinct entities, the former being an expression of self and the second a marketable commodity (Duits & Van Romondt Vis, 2007). Reality stardom, however, is a very different situation. The person and the persona are indistinguishable for the reality star, so that a person's life becomes a product sold by the media (Curnutt, 2009). Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Laguna Beach Finale Special*, which features Kristin in a guest appearance. In a segment of the show, her "biggest fan" answers trivia about *Laguna Beach*, one of the questions being: "name a guy Kristin hooked up with besides Stephen and Sam." The fan answers correctly, and wins a prize. Here, Kristin's sexual activity and persona as a wild child are commoditized by MTV in the neat package of a game show, and Kristin is powerless to control her public representation. In a revealing quote years later, Kristin expresses second thoughts about her involvement with the show:

I almost felt like it was unfair for [MTV] to come into our lives at such a young age and sort of mess with things. I don't regret it, but I was 17—of course I wanted to be on TV. I felt like they should have been a little bit more careful with us. (Quoted in Neifeld, 2010, p. 452)
In "More than a Minor Inconvenience" (2010), Katherine Neifeld

calls for increased legal protections in reality television for child stars in an effort to combat some of the challenges faced by minors in the reality genre. Although there are already rules protecting child actors from abuse and parental neglect in the United States, depending on the state these do not yet apply to children in reality television (Neifeld, 2010). Neifeld argues that reality child stars require the same protections and more because of the increased risks associated with portraying themselves rather than fictional characters.

But legal protections can only go so far, and reality television production lacks ethical guidelines for dealing with child participants. Additionally, audiences acting as irresponsible and voracious media consumers are culpable in the production of ethically ambiguous reality television programming featuring children. While the producers of shows such as *Laguna Beach*, *16 and Pregnant*, *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, and *Toddlers & Tiaras* are producing largely uncritical and exploitative media products, audiences are providing a profitable market for the problematic use of child stars in reality television. Reality television shows have produced discourses that reinforce problematic norms and simultaneously misuse the child participants. Although the use of all of the child and teenage stars in these shows is ethically questionable, *Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *Laguna Beach* are particularly illustrative of the deleterious effects that reality television stardom can have on children and teenagers. The Gosselin children and Kristin Cavallari are illuminative examples of reality television child stars forced to live in an environment of intense public scrutiny and criticism. Although the participants of *16 and Pregnant* and *Toddlers & Tiaras* may have less negative attention focused on their public image, they nonetheless must cope with the ramifications of a lack of control over self-representation and exposure at a young age. In addition to the misuse of child stars, these programs uncritically produce discourses that effectively contribute to harmful social norms. Each of these reality television shows create meanings and messages that maintain hegemonic standards of family, gender, and children and reinforce a status quo that favors white, male, heterosexual adults. With the rise in the popularity of reality programs and their increasing presence as an established television genre, the

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ethical complexities of the use of child stars should be considered in both the production and consumption of reality television.

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Note

¹ Patricia Holland's analysis is based on her collection of British and North American images of children, which she claims to have been collecting for over twenty years prior to *Picturing Childhood's* publication in 2004 (p. ix). Since 2004, however, there have been images and narratives added to North American and British public imagery that are more inclusive of alternative family models. A noteworthy example is the series *Modern Family* (2009-, ABC), which features families and characters that challenge Eurocentric and heteronormative television tropes.

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