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Dating Reality Television: History and Participant Exploitation

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Contents

Abstract	...6
Introduction	...7
Historical Overview	...10
Exploitation and the Reality Dating Subgenre	...23
Conclusion	...31
Works Cited	...32

Abstract

The thesis focuses on the historical evolution of the dating game show subgenre within the realm of American reality television. We will outline seminal programs, including *The Bachelor* (ABC 2002 - present), *The Bachelorette* (ABC 2003 – present), and *Temptation Island* (FOX 2001–2003 USA Network 2019-present), and will illuminate the subgenre’s evolution and its establishment as a fixture in the American television landscape, exploring how reality television has influenced societal perspectives on gender roles, love, and marriage.

In addition, we delve into the issue of participant exploitation within the subgenre. Supported by theoretical insights from scholars like Wendy Wyatt, Laura Grindstaff, and Mark Andrejevic, we will seek to elucidate the mechanisms and motivation underlying this exploitation, exploring the paradox of individuals willingly participating in these programs despite being cognizant of the manipulative methods employed by producers.

Keywords: reality television, dating reality television, exploitation

Introduction

The birth of reality television in the American television landscape, marks a significant milestone in the annals of television studies, inaugurating a paradigm shift in the conceptualization and consumption of televised content. Rooted in the latter decades of the 20th century, the rise of reality television occurred at the intersection of past documentary formats and the already established template of game shows as the genre “covers a broad range of topics ranging from competitions, interpersonal observations, and dating” (Rasmussen 239). However, it was in the late 1990s and early 2000s that this emerging genre grew into a widely influential cultural phenomenon. Pioneering productions such as the “global broadcasting phenomenon” (Dovey 160) *Big Brother* (CBS 2000-present) and its precursor *The Real World* (MTV 1992-2017) which involved “a number of young people sharing a house filled with video cameras and camera crews” (Creeber 2013 qtd Creeber 168) catalyzed the inception of numerous new programs, giving a rise to an array of distinct subgenres tailored to the reality television landscape.

The reality television genre has evolved in various ways, transforming “from radio game show and amateur talent competition to hidden camera stunt show to dating show to documentary-style series” (Trapani and Winn 190). Alisson Slade argues that “In the modern era of reality television, programming has run the gamut from crime, celebrity, dating, and relationship shows to extreme physical makeovers of persons and homes” (7). In affirming this proposition, Julie Haynes supplements the argument by emphasizing the abundance of coexisting and occasionally overlapping subgenres in contemporary times, stating, “Series cluster around themes of competition (both game show-like and talent-based), makeovers, dating, docusoaps court or legal television, and behind-the-scenes views of occupations or lifestyles” (Haynes 246).

Within the realm of reality television, the dating game subgenre constitutes a compelling facet of the genre’s evolutionary trajectory, offering a nuanced lens through which to examine societal norms, interpersonal dynamics, and the commodification of romance. Emerging as a distinct category within reality programming, dating shows navigate the intricate terrain of human relationships in a way that stages a performative courtship ritual for viewers since they “portray non-actors in dating situations with the camera acting as an observer of real-time events” (Ferris et al 490). At the same time, the viewers are “faced with the commonplace criticism as passive voyeurs” (Rose and Wood 284) by “watching the edited dating situations unfold as if filmed live (Ferris et al 490)

The subgenre’s inception is marked by ABC’s *The Dating Game* (ABC 1965-1986), which creatively blended elements of traditional matchmaking with an innovative game-show format. It served as a foundational precursor to subsequent dating shows while it significantly influenced the dynamics of romantic decision-making and interpersonal connections. At the same time, by employing a voyeuristic lens, the program played a role in shaping societal perspectives on non-traditional dating practices on television. Although the program met great success and can be characterized as a pivotal moment for television, the proliferation and increased production frequency of such programs did not materialize until the late 1990s – early 2000s.

The emergence of the early 2000s dating reality programs marked a departure from the constrained format of the earlier show, embracing a more immersive and unscripted exploration of interpersonal dynamics. Programs such as *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?* (Fox 2000), *Temptation Island* (Fox 2001-2003) and the program that has been described as “one of the most prominent and continuous successes in television” (McClanahan 261), *The Bachelor* (ABC 2002 -present), not only reflect changing audience expectations but also mirrored broader societal shifts in attitudes towards dating, emphasizing a heightened authenticity and at times, a more nuanced portrayal of the complexities inherent in modern relationships.

The discourse of gender emerged prominently in this discussion, particularly evident in programs such as *The Bachelorette* (ABC 2003-present) and *Average Joe* (NBC 2003-2005). These shows departed from the conventional paradigm of positioning women not in competition with each other but rather in a scenario where they faced the pivotal role of the decision-maker. This restructuring became notable as men were now compelled to compete for the attention and affection of the central female figure, marking a notable shift in the gender dynamics within the context of dating reality programming.

Over the years, dating reality television, which once was “condemned as a low taste genre of television” (Skeggs 626), has grown into a widespread cultural phenomenon, known for its ability to mediate and shape societal views on love, intimacy, gender roles and mate selection. This thesis endeavors to conduct a comprehensive and systematic examination of the dating reality television subgenre, spanning from its inception in 1965 to the present day.

The selection of this research topic is underpinned by the discernible absence of a comprehensive historical overview of the subgenre within the existing academic discourse. Despite the burgeoning body of analytical work dedicated to reality TV, the historical trajectory of the dating reality subgenre has been relatively understudied, particularly when juxtaposed against the comprehensive historical overviews offered by scholars like Annette Hill, Misha Kavka, and Richard Huff. Although these scholars have touched upon the dating reality subgenre in specific chapters of their works, a holistic historical examination remains conspicuously absent.

Moreover, prevailing studies exhibit a noticeable inclination towards well-established, enduring programs such as *The Bachelor* and its spin-offs, often neglecting the emergent landscape of new dating reality programs, particularly those accessible on subscription platforms. While influential scholars, including Hill, Kavka, and Huff have extensively contributed to the historical understanding of reality television as a whole, there is a notable dearth of scholarly attention dedicated to newer dating reality programs.

Despite the emergence of academic articles examining recent shows such as *Too Hot to Handle* (Netflix 2020-present), *The Circle* (Netflix 2020-present) and *Love is Blind* (Netflix 2020-present), the predominant focus tends to center on the technological aspects these shows use to enhance their plotlines, neglecting a nuanced exploration of the transformative significance that they have within the dating reality television landscape. Consequently, this research endeavors to address this academic gap by

providing a comprehensive historical overview of the dating reality television subgenre, encompassing both established programs and the evolving landscape of newer ventures, including those on subscription platforms.

This thesis will hopefully furnish a comprehensive historical panorama of the dating reality television subgenre and underscore its significance in shaping the perspectives of critics, audiences, and an evolving societal milieu concerning the ethical treatment of participants. The starting point of this academic investigation involves a thorough historical overview of the dating reality subgenre, encompassing a diverse array of programs, including but not limited to those mentioned above. Building upon the scholarly contributions of Huff and Kavka as primary source material and supplementing these insights with secondary sources, this discourse undertakes a comprehensive exploration. We focus on how the subgenre consolidated its standing within the television landscape, highlighting the instrumental role played by specific programs in garnering and establishing recognition. By scrutinizing the enduring success of programs such as *The Bachelor* and its spin-offs, juxtaposed with the less fortuitous trajectories of others that garnered attention but failed to establish a lasting foothold, the aim is to discern the operational formulas that contributed to success and understand the factors that influenced their efficacy.

We will also explore the rise of new dating programs on subscription-based platforms. This investigation aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape within the genre, shedding light on the distinctive characteristics and dynamics introduced by programs in this emerging digital realm. The resultant surge in demand, frequent production cycles, and heightened participant interest collectively contribute to reshaping the dynamics of this subgenre. Concurrently, these platforms, unlike their regulated television counterparts of the past, operate without stringent oversight, enabling the inclusion of provocative content without apprehension of regulatory scrutiny.

After the history chapter, we delve into one of the issues frequently associated within the subgenre and reality television in general, namely the exploitation of participants by production. Informed by a theoretical framework underpinning exploitation in the realm of reality television and assisted mainly by the scholarly works of Wendy Wyatt, as well as Bastian Banecker, Heidi Pezhorn, Magriert Pitout, Catherine Lumby, and Deni Elliott, we examine exploitation as an aspect of reality television.

Wendy Wyatt conducts a philosophical examination of contestant exploitation by applying Ruth Sample's theory of exploitation. This exploration illuminates the different ways in which exploitation manifests in the realm of reality television. In this context, Wyatt not only scrutinizes the phenomenon but also poses incisive questions directed at production teams. The theoretical discussion will offer a comprehensive understanding of the ethical dimensions inherent in the production dynamics of reality television.

We then concentrate on the most highlighted and publicly discussed instances of exploitation within the dating reality subgenre. The contention that reality television often elicits such concerns has been recurrently articulated by academics, critics and viewers alike. Wyatt for instance, posits that critics have gone so far as to propose

renaming the genre as “humiliation TV” (Wyatt 160). Further substantiation emerges from the observations of Karyn Riddle and JJ De Simone, who emphasize that audience perceptions often liken reality television to a “train wreck” (Riddle and De Simone 237).

The cited testimonies enable program contestants to express their negative experiences, criticize the production and network, and more importantly, reveal anonymized statements from crew members, thus supporting the participant’s accusations. This investigation also unveils additional insights into the conditions under which these shows are filmed. The examined cases in question pertain to instances from the television program *Bachelor in Paradise* (ABC 2014-present), as well as two litigations involving the Netflix series *Love is Blind* (Netflix 2020-present). These cases encapsulate a range of issues, including instances of sexual abuse, allegations of negligence, instances of sleep deprivation attributed to excessively demanding schedules, and failure to provide necessities such as food and water, among other concerns.

An important question naturally emerges from the previous discussion. Considering the acknowledged conditions shaping reality television production practices, an inquiry arises regarding the motivations that prompt individuals to actively seek participation in these programs. To explore this further, we are delving into the concept of the creation of the “ordinary celebrity” (Grindstaff 324), as articulated by Laura Grindstaff. The focus is on understanding how participants rapidly attain celebrity status after their involvement in reality television programs. The primary theoretical framework guiding this investigation draws from the perspective articulated by Sue Collins. She conducts in-depth research to explore the mechanisms underlying the distribution of fame, exploring the cultivation of enduring audiences for consumption and elucidating the interdependent relationship between celebrity value and cultural production.

In addition to Collin’s influential work, other perspectives contributing to the enrichment of the thematic fabric of this thesis include those of Laura Grindstaff, Mark Andrejevic, and Sharon Marcus. While the first two discuss the numerous participants “waiting for their 15 minutes” (Andrejevic 11), Marcus emphasizes the importance of not dismissing the possibility that reality television participants may transition into the more traditional media landscape, embarking on a trajectory towards genuine celebrity status.

The thesis ends with the conclusion drawn from our analysis and the works cited sections.

Historical Overview

According to Richard Huff’s assertion, “television has been playing matchmaker for years” (107). One of the earliest formats of the dating reality show developed by US television was *The Dating Game* (ABC 1965-1986). The show that can be considered “the touchstone for all of today’s reality dating shows” (Huff 107), made its debut on December 20, 1965, marking the inaugural offering in a series of shows conceptualized and

produced by Chuck Barris, spanning from the 1960s to the 1980s. It aired “in both prime time (1966–70) and daytime (1965–73) and was followed by syndicated versions (1973–74, 1977–80, and 1996–2000)” (Tropiano 62). Stephen Tropiano adds that “The show also ran in syndication in 1986 under the title *The New Dating Game*, which was changed for the remainder of its run (1987–89) to *The All-New Dating Game*” (62).

The Dating Game acted “as a precursor to *The Bachelor* as well as a host of other dating shows” (Rossen) and represented a significant departure from the prevailing game show paradigm as it was “sexually suggestive for its time” (Feuer 46). Game shows during that era were predominantly characterized by competitions that often offered a tangible reward. Popular programs, such as *Jeopardy!* (NBC 1964-present) and *The Price is Right* (CBS 1956-1986) were notable examples, of distributing cash prizes, cars, and home appliances to their participants. Pioneering an unprecedented approach, Barris introduced an innovative game show that placed a distinctive emphasis on a prize of greater significance than material possessions such as cars and cash – the prospect of finding true love.

In its customary format, the program consisted of a female participant, known as the bachelorette. The bachelorette would pose predetermined, “often goofy” questions (Huff 107), to each of the three bachelors, “whose faces were concealed” (Tropiano 62). After the questioning phase was over, she would proceed to the selection among one of the male contestants for a date that was organized and sponsored by the show, since “the studio was the place in which couples met and the single date was the extent of their programmed commitment to one another” (Kavka 120). She made her decision exclusively by evaluating how the bachelors answered her questions. Certain questions regarding their personal lives, including their profession, age, and financial status, were strictly off-limits.

Occasionally, the show included a role reversal, where a male contestant took on the position of the questioner, posing inquiries to three female contestants. In other instances, celebrities took center stage, quizzing three potential dates, either due to their interest, on behalf of a colleague, or even concerning the romantic prospects of a family member. Considering all its various configurations, “this format proved so popular that *The Dating Game* remained off and on for over three decades” (Kavka 120). Despite the show’s widespread success and pioneering nature during its era, no endeavors were made to produce another dating show for many years following. As Huff notes, “It wasn’t until 35 years later that the television mating game got a significant push and became a lucrative, reality show staple” (Huff 107).

NBC introduced *Blind Date* (NBC 1999-2006) in 1999, a program that followed two strangers going on a manufactured, televised blind date. The show was “a hybrid between traditional dating game show, reality television footage, and super text-enhanced *Pop-Up Video*” (DeRose et al. 171) as cameras meticulously tracked their every action, while a combination of subtitles and animations provided commentary on their thoughts and behaviors. As Huff observes, the focal point of the program frequently resided not in the date per se, but rather in “what was said in cartoon bubbles appearing on screen that supposedly expressed the inner thoughts of the daters” (Huff 108). “The running

commentary and recurring cartoon characters of the super text not only provide a comic diversion for the audience but also add another layer of meaning to the story of an unfolding “real-life” date” (DeRose et al. 171). The show’s brief 30-minute episode duration, excluding commercial breaks, left insufficient time for the viewers to establish a strong emotional connection with the program’s participants. Coupled with the funny remarks and quotes from the producers, that in some cases, ended up being more interesting than the actual dates, it can be said that although *Blind Date* is considered to be “the first dating reality show [it] is more of a comedy that just happens to be built around a date” (Huff 108).

Misha Kavka notes that “Once absorbed into reality TV, the dating show was reconfigured as both contrivance and reality, both a competitive game *and* real life” (120). The objective shifted from merely securing a date to seeking a long-term commitment, specifically marriage as the “challenge becomes the basis for a lifetime opportunity” (Kavka 120). The pioneering program to raise the stakes and embrace this novel objective and format was *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?* (Fox 2000). The show was “mixing beauty pageant and game show in a matrimonial contest” (Kavka 120). Its creator Mike Darnell admitted that his idea was to “blend the ABC *Millionaire* show with the Miss America pageant and *The Dating Game*” (James).

Fifty women, one from each US state, competed with each other to win the ultimate prize, marrying an unseen man who was billed as a multimillionaire. The marriage was set to transpire at the end of the two-hour live broadcast episode. The host of the program, Jay Thomas, promptly communicated this detail to the audience at the beginning of the episode and assured them that “what would unfold on air was no joke” (Huff 109). The competition encompassed a question and answer stage and when the fifty contestants were narrowed down to just ten, they “paraded on stage in swimsuits, like Miss America” (Huff 109). When just five remained, all dressed in wedding dresses, the questions pertained to their future goals, family planning, and their commitment to fidelity. At the episode’s conclusion, as pledged, the show’s winner, Darva Conger, entered into matrimony with the multimillionaire groom Rick Rockwell.

In Kavka’s words, “The program was met by immediate backlash” (120). Critic Mark Dawidziak commented on the network’s decision to air a program that is “Blending the dubious charms of the beauty pageant, the quiz show and an 18th-century Tortuga slave auction, [since] the show was designed around a concept that’s as degrading as it is cynical” (Huff 109). In addition to this negative criticism, the show also encountered a scandal when it came to light that Rick Rockwell, had a prior partner who provided evidence of his abusive behavior, leading to the issuance of a restraining order against him. This revelation prompted Rockwell’s new bride, Darva Conger to initiate proceedings for the annulment of their marriage. She publicly stated that “she was kept in the dark about hubby Rick Rockwell’s personality and past” (Connor). She also accused the producers of the show “of misrepresenting Rockwell before they married her off to him on the prime-time rating blockbuster” (Connor).

The strong negative response from the public prompted the network to cancel the program. Nevertheless, its termination did not signal the cessation of the network’s

production of reality-based romance programs of a similar nature, some of which “many critics viewed as a salacious and harmful intrusion into people’s lives” (Alexander qtd in Kavka 121). Huff claims that “2001 might be a watershed year for dating shows” (111).

Just a year later, the same network premiered *Temptation Island* (Fox 2001-2003), “a series that was a mix of *Survivor* and a dating show” (Huff 111). “The program format revolves around a relationship test” (Carpentier 135) as several couples consent to cohabitate with singles of the opposite sex, with the purpose of evaluating the resilience of their romantic partnerships. The show featured several committed couples who agreed to live separately on an island with a group of attractive singles of the opposite sex. While separated, the couples are tempted and tested by engaging in dates and activities with the singles. At the culmination of the six-week run, they were expected to decide whether to solemnize their commitment or not to their partner. The couples consisted of ordinary people, while “Among the singles set up for the men were a former Playboy model, a Miss Georgia, and a former Los Angeles Lakers dancer” (Huff 111).

The Chairman of Fox Entertainment at the time, Sandy Grushow, made a solemn pledge in response to the controversy that enveloped the network subsequent to the *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire* outrage earlier that year. He vowed that Fox would refrain from commissioning any future programs that might be construed as exploitative (Carter). Despite these statements, Fox failed to appease the concerns raised by many. Even before *Temptation Island’s* official launch, people were dissatisfied with its promotion, which seemed to imply that it would be “a freewheeling sex romp” (Huff 111). In response, Gail Berman, who held the position of President of Fox Entertainment remarked that the promotional material might have presented the show, in a manner that did not accurately reflect its nature, by adding “I strongly doubt people, when they see the actual show, will find it either sleazy or salacious” (Carter).

All these promotional endeavors were in vain, as the show failed to substantiate its claim of being an exploration of “the dynamics of serious relationships” (Huff 111). Instead, it was “widely criticized for profaning the institution of marriage and turning audiences into voyeurs of bodies as well as emotions” (Kavka 121). Simultaneously, *Temptation Island* faced scrutiny and censure for perpetuating stereotypes, particularly the portrayal of men as primarily motivated by sexual desires and the “sexual double standard, which suggests that men are independent sexually and unable to say no to sex, and women are judged on their sexual attractiveness as well as their ability to have a successful relationship” (Vanderbosch and Eggermont 566). After three seasons and facing cancellation due to low ratings, the show experienced a revival in 2019 under the USA Network. Hosted by Mark L. Walberg, who also hosted the original, the reboot ran for an additional three seasons (Persaud).

A few months later, UPN launched *Chains of Love* (UPN 2001) a show that was originally bought but rejected before production by NBC (Peyser). The show aired for only six episodes and was described by critics as “a satire of human beings” (Ascher-Walsh). The premise centers on an individual, either a man or a woman being tethered to four individuals of the opposite sex for a duration of four days and nights. The “picker” decides which opposite-sex partner was getting kicked off each day, “based on how much

their time was worth with them” (Huff 112). A similar program was introduced by the WB at the same time. *ElimiDate Deluxe* (WB 2001-2006) focused on one male contestant going on a date with four women. In Huff’s words, “The man kicked the females off, while also telling them why they were losers” (113).

In keeping with its customary practice of aligning with the evolving demands engendered by reality television, Fox unveiled another program in September of 2001. *Love Cruise* (Fox 2001), which reached its conclusion after just seven episodes, presented an assembly of eight men and eight women, all of whom were single, competing for a monetary reward amounting to \$ 250,000 while aboard a cruise ship. The program combined a fusion of various elements, such as “the winner-take-all gamesmanship of *Survivor* [and] the agonized mating dances of *Blind Date* by pitting seafaring singles against each other in the pursuit of true love — and a massive wad of cash” (Flaherty). Adhering to the maritime motif, another dating game show was introduced during the same year, titled *Shipmates* (Broadcast Syndication 2001-2003) followed its participants aboard a Carnival Cruise ship, where camera crews continuously documented their experiences as they engaged in blind dates with fellow contestants. The show was a “sort of a sea-set version of *Blind Date* (Huff 113) but it didn’t meet any particular success.

The brief duration of these television programs, their eventual cancellation, consistent public scrutiny, and critical disapproval collectively culminated in categorizing the subgenre of dating reality shows as offensive. This classification has repercussions not only for the participants but also for the viewers at home. “Since the early days of reality programming, critics have consistently attacked the genre for being voyeuristic, cheap, sensational television” (Bell 7). Huff adds, “Critics of unscripted television used these programs as examples of what was wrong with the format and how in general, they were bad programs” (113). In addition, these programs “reframe[s] emotional volatility as entertainment” (Fakuade) as they present an irresistible spectacle of chaos that captivates the viewers which remains consistent in every episode.

The dating reality show subgenre was experiencing a period of significant turbulence. But as Kavka points out “the lesson to be learned from FOX’s foray into the reality romance sub-genre turned out to be about the approach rather than the content” (121). This is attributed to the fact that the concerns regarding ratings and audience reception were not primarily centered on the voyeuristic aspect of television encroaching upon marital life. Instead, it was to a certain extent, mostly related to the lack of alignment between the morals of the programs and the “heteronormative ideologies of marriage” (Kavka 121).

In the midst of this turbulent phase, producer Mike Fleiss, renowned for the creation of the controversial *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire*, was “The person who best learned the lesson of alignment” (Kavka 121). Thus, when he proposed his new concept to ABC, he was acutely aware that the primary objective, beyond the cash prize, was not to tease and play but to find a suitable partner in order to culminate in marriage. This novel notion of a televised courtship took the form of *The Bachelor* (ABC 2002-present), which made its debut in March 2002 and has since demonstrated sustained success, currently spanning its 27th season.

In Kavka's words, "*The Bachelor* attempt[ed] to replace the Fox freak show element with Hollywood elegance" (98). In its fundamental format, the show revolves around The Bachelor, a single attractive man who is searching for a potential life partner from a group of twenty-five eligible single women. Throughout the season, the bachelor engages in a series of dates and interactions. As the pool of contestants diminishes, the stages of dating progress towards greater intimacy. From "group dates, [to] one-on-one dates [and] hometown visits [to] overnight dates" (Kavka 121), each stage ends with a rose ceremony at the end of every week. "At least one participant is eliminated during the "rose ceremony," during which the bachelor presents a rose to each of the women he wants to keep for the next week" (Dubrofsky 40). "The ceremony, as much a part of *The Bachelor* as the tribal council is to *Survivor*" (Huff 114) This event is a meticulously planned and skillfully executed ritual. It involves the bachelor, all the female contestants, and copious amounts of alcohol. Most of the conflicts inherent to the show, primarily stem from the elimination-style format. During the final rose ceremony, one of the two finalists gets rejected and the other "receives a ring as the seal of an engagement" (Kavka 121) and "not a marriage, like the Rockwell mess" (Huff 114).

The audience was instantly captivated, "with 18.2 million people tuning in for the final episode of the first season [...] on April 25, 2002" (McClanahan 262). Collins remarks that "The first season of *The Bachelor* put ABC back on the ratings map, knocking NBC's *The West Wing* out of first place in the key 18-/49 demographic" (Collins 2002 qtd in Dubrofsky 41). As a result, "The network immediately ordered more versions of *The Bachelor*, and Fleiss "once looked down upon the television world, was a star again" (Huff 115). Fleiss attributed the show's success to its relatability. In his words "Everybody connects, [since] they've pursued or been pursued at some point" (Huff 115). At the same time, as Kavka claims, the show "overturned the perception that reality romance shows were voyeuristic publicity stunts by fully espousing the ideology of marriage and the heteronormative trajectory it represents" (121).

The favorable reception by both the audience and critics prompted the development of a spin-off series, which premiered a mere year thereafter. Subsequently, *The Bachelorette* (ABC 2003-present) was introduced, adhering to the identical format as *The Bachelor*. This spin-off made its debut in January 2003, focusing on a single bachelorette, typically a former contestant from a recent Bachelor season. Her goal was to find a potential life partner by dating twenty-five male suitors. At first, there was a certain degree of skepticism stemming from the awareness of the double standard that frequently exists when evaluating individuals who engage in extensive dating, especially women. The network was afraid that "having a woman be the hunter could leave some with the impression that the woman was easy" (Huff 115). Trista Nicole Rehn, the inaugural star of the spin-off's first season, asserted that the show's intended message for its female viewers was actually empowering. She claimed that it was about "Do[ing] what you want and don't worry what people think of you" (Huff 115).

The decision to employ a former contestant from the original series as the first bachelorette proved to be a resounding success, subsequently leading Fleiss to primarily select past participants and popular fan favorites for the spin-off series. This

collaborative synergy between the two programs generated a substantial surge in applications from women aspiring to attain the same level of fan following that Rehn and subsequent Bachelorettes like Jen Schefft had garnered. This phenomenon additionally contributed to a surge in viewership, with “An average of more than 20 million viewers tun[ing] into the two-hour episode, according to Nielsen Media Research estimates” (Braxton). This was fueled by the heightened curiosity of an audience eager to see their beloved contestants who had previously fallen short of victory in the earlier editions. Kavka points out that “*The Bachelor* franchise attempts to secure its longevity by turning the participants themselves into the commodities of future *Bachelor/ette* series” (125).

According to Leigh Edwards, “Reality TV’s emphasis [...] on engaging the emotion of viewers is part of a larger media trend in which media producers try to get audiences emotionally invested in their stories” (48). This focus on forging emotions, combined with the methods employed by the genre to forge emotional connections with the audience by “creating new versions of celebrity and stardom, adapting older models of stardom” (Edwards 48) is a main factor of the rapid success of *The Bachelor* franchise. With the emphasis placed on the profound emotional impact of reality romance programs, Bill Albertini notes that the subgenre “offers [the audience] other things we want, from a false sense of order within the complications of dating rituals to a chance to identify, in a complicated and ambivalent manner, with the emotions and outcomes of the shows’ plots” (Albertini 2003 qtd in McClanahan 263).

Huff claims that “*The Bachelor* has served as the model and inspiration for a legion of dating shows, some similar, others not as much, but all hoping the budding relation between two strangers is enough to get viewers drawn in” (116). These programs took “a more ironic, even playful stance on the heteronormative ideology of romance” (Kavka 123). One of the most popular of *The Bachelor*-inspired shows was *Joe Millionaire* (Fox 2003). The program made its debut in January 2003, and similar to its predecessor, it revolved around a cohort of women vying for the affection of a single bachelor. The contestants were under the impression that the bachelor was a millionaire but in reality, “he was a working-class construction worker from Florida” (Meyers 85) who “was coached by a real-life butler on how to act like he had millions” (Huff 116). The purpose of casting a working-class bachelor was to “test women’s attraction to money and men’s ability to differentiate between gold diggers and ‘real’ love” (Kavka 124). This twist “created the conditions for an implicitly conservative moral message about money and romance” (Kavka 124) but also gave the program an ironic tone since it “produced a double mode of address – a limited story for the female participants and a fuller one for the viewers” (Kavka 124). The show met with great success, “with a reported forty million viewers tuning in to Fox for the final episode on February 17, 2003” (Levin 2003 qtd in Meyers 85).

NBC ventured into the realm of dating reality television by introducing several programs. *Average Joe* (NBC 2003-2005) which premiered in November of 2003, also “played on expectations of the romance genre” (Kavka 124). The show featured a former beauty queen in the role of the bachelorette, with sixteen ordinary-looking men competing for her attention. These men were “nice guys with great hearts but admittedly

average looks – some even describing themselves as nerds and geeks” (NBC). In doing so, the producers attempted to convey the “moral message that beauty is more than skin deep” (Kavka 124). However, “once she was settled in with the average guys, a gaggle of hunks were brought in to stir the pot” (Huff 117), out of which she ultimately selected her final partner. Kavka observes that this evaluation of romantic connections functioned as a dual-faceted reminder. On an initial level, “it highlighted the fact that heteronormative ideology regulates not only the sexual but also the social suitability of desire” (Kavka 124). At the same time, she points out that by “casting male suitors of non-ideal proportions (e.g. short, stick-thin, buck-toothed or obese) [the show] draws attention to the fact that the bodies of participants are part of the *props* of the televised romantic fantasy” (Kavka 124).

The success of these dating reality programs, coupled with their elevated viewership ratings and substantial audience demand, precipitated a proliferation of new productions across various television networks. Even TLC, which billed itself as a learning channel, ventured into the realm of matchmaking by introducing the short-lived dating reality program, *A Dating Story* (TLC 2003). CBS’s *Cupid* (CBS 2003), was an amalgam of *The Bachelor* and *American Idol* (FOX 2002-2016 ABC 2018-present). The program launched in July 2003 and received “good reviews, including a four-star notice in the *New York Daily News*” (Huff 117).

It starred Cupid Girl, Lisa Shannon, who was traveling across the country alongside her two girlfriends, Kimberly and Laura, auditioning potential love interests in order to find the one. Viewers participated in the role of Cupid by “casting their votes to protect Lisa from the men they perceive are wrong for her, in the hopes of steering her towards her ideal mate” (CBS). Whoever was voted out, had to leave the show. Finding the one wasn’t the only objective, as Huff remarks that “Shannon also had at stake \$1 million if she married the guy viewers picked in the end and stayed married for a year” (117). Although Hank won not only the Heart of America but also “the heart of Lisa, the couple did not win a million dollars because they did not get married on the “Cupid” finale Tuesday night” (Crean). When posed with the question of taking Lisa as his wife, Hank conveyed his attention, expressing a desire for her to experience a proper wedding replete “with bridesmaids, showers and focused anticipation” (Crean). Lisa concurred with his statements, “explaining that she and Hank have something special, and they don’t want to share any more of it with the public” (Crean).

More and more reality programs that placed the act of marriage as the ultimate winning prize emerged with producers “still finding innovative new ways to package their romance reality programming” (Essany 12). *Meet My Folks* (NBC 2002-2003) and its spin-off *Who Wants to Marry My Dad* (NBC 2003-2004), both revolved around the idea of tying the knot. Around the same time, Fox launched *Married by America* (FOX 2003), which introduced “five singles [who] were matched to strangers and immediately engaged. At the end of the five-week run of the show, the contestants decide whether to marry or not” (Huff 117).

While these shows predominantly centered around the conventional notion of heterosexual romance, certain programs also explored queer relationships. *Boy Meets*

Boy (Bravo 2003) had a similar format to *The Bachelor* but with a twist, since “only some of the suitors were actually gay so that the bachelor had to use his skills to figure out whom to desire” (Kavka 125). Similarly, Fox’s *Playing it Straight* (Fox 2004), featured a heterosexual bachelorette faced with the challenge of discerning the sexual orientation of her male suitors, distinguishing between those who were heterosexual and those who were gay. Upon her arrival at the Nevada Ranch where the show takes place, “She is introduced to fourteen hunky, eligible men—only to learn that her chances of finding that special someone has been reduced because while some of her suitors are hetero-sexual, the others are only pretending” (Tropiano 61). In addition to the potential of finding a genuine romantic connection, there was also the allure of a substantial monetary reward amounting to one million dollars. “If she chooses a straight guy, the couple splits one million dollars. But if her final choice turns out to be gay, he gets all the money and she goes home alone and empty-handed” (Tropiano 61). The show did not do that well in rating and was “canceled by Fox after three episodes” (Tropiano 61).

Jonathan Roberti remarks that “there has been a notable increase in the number of television dating shows broadcasted during the early 2000s” (118) as the programs have “increased exponentially from 2 to over 28 during the period of 2000 to 2002” (Roberti 117). The dating reality programs that emerged in the wake of *The Bachelor*’s success, with many of them adopting its format, harnessed their appeal to audiences, capitalized on their impressive viewership ratings, and catered to the market’s demand. As a result, this resurgence breathed new life into the genre, resulting in the incorporation of at least one such program into the schedules of the majority of networks. The genre “perpetuates the unrealistic notions that we need love and we need it now” (Glebatis 286) therefore “More *Must Marry TV* series premiere during each television season” (McClanahan 271). The term ‘must-marry TV’ was introduced “by television critic Jill Vejoska” (Tropiano 62) and described a “television trend that attempts to pair a woman and a man in a long-lasting romantic relationship through a game—show format” (McClanahan 261).

The year 2004 stands as a critical juncture in the trajectory of the subgenre’s future. “The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ha[d] been extremely active in the field of indecency since early 2004” (Holohan 341). At the same time, the period was characterized by what Hunter Hargraves refers to as an “explosion of primetime reality programming” (1). However, these programs are not confined solely to prime-time slots. “Current dating shows have a greater emphasis on sexual content and risk-taking behaviors than prior dating shows (Pursell 2002 qtd in Roberti 118).

In response to the adoption of progressively more sexually suggestive content, these programs tend to be slotted for later hours in the broadcast schedule. Concurrently, networks are engaged in a proactive stance against the implementation of stricter censorship regulations, aiming to circumvent potential fines imposed by the FCC. The regulator has defined “indecencies” instances that include “language that describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities, and organs, at times of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience” (Barron 569).

Following the enforcement of FCC's indecency regulations, "Fox Broadcasting Co. was hit Tuesday with what was described at the time as "the largest indecency fine for a television show" (Lazaroff and Cook). The imposition of a nearly 1.2 million dollars penalty, highlights the federal government's commitment to establishing standards for appropriate language and conduct in broadcasting. This punitive measure was a consequence of an episode from *Married by America* that featured strippers at a bachelorette party. The case opened in 2003 and closed in 2012, with the U.S. Department of Justice dismissing the lawsuit against Fox Broadcasting and four Fox-owned TV stations. Although the government did not reveal why it is dropping the suit, "the dismissal is believed to stem from a July Supreme Court decision that said the FCC did not give Fox stations "fair notice" before it took action for allowing expletives to air" (Block).

For those who were disinclined to modify or curtail the provocative nature of their content, the dating reality genre sought refuge in cable television, which remained outside the regulatory purview of the FCC. As Caitlin Allen points out, "Cable television with its ability to allow for more explicate language, adult situations, and excessive violence has led to a cultural change in society" (Allen). This elucidates the reason behind the proliferation of numerous new reality dating programs on cable television.

One of the major cable networks that generated many such programs was MTV. Several of the most prominent instances include: *Date My Mom* (MTV 2004-2006), *Next* (MTV 2005-2008), *Parental Control* (MTV 2006-2010), *My Own* (MTV 2006), *The X Effect* (MTV 2006-2008) and *Exposed* (MTV 2007-2008). Additional cable networks also contributed to this trend with their own productions including *Strange Love* (VH1 2005), *Rock of Love with Bret Michaels* (VH1 2007- 2009), *The Millionaire Match Maker* (Bravo 2008 - 2015), and *Date My Ex: Jo & Slade* (Bravo 2008) which served as the first spin-off in *The Real Housewives* (Bravo 2006-present) franchise.

Around the same period, VH1 launched its own version of *The Bachelor*. *Flavor of Love* (VH1 2006-2008) started Flavor Flav, known as a member of the rap group Public Enemy, on his quest to find love. A group of twenty single women "selected for their expressed love for Flav, move into a "phat crib" in Los Angeles and vie for his affection" (Apple TV). What was different from *The Bachelor* was the "contestant pool that was almost exclusively comprised of women of color" (Meyers 44). The show "quickly cultivated a cult following" with the final episode "becom[ing] the highest rated program in the history of the cable television station VH1 of all time" (Palmer-Mehta and Haliliuc 86). Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Alina Haliliuc also remark that "it was ranked as the number one program out of all basic cable programming in the 18-49 demographic and the number one program out of all basic cable programming [...] garnering nearly six million viewers" (86).

The success of *Flavor of Love* catalyzed the emergence of a fresh format: dating shows involving celebrity participants. Other programs that included the prospect of dating a celebrity served as the ultimate reward were *Ivana Young Man* (Oxygen 2006) starring Ivana Trump, *A Shot in Love with Tila Tequila* (MTV 2008), and *For the Love of Ray J* (VH1 2009-2010).

A notable mention is VH1's *Flavor of Love* spin-off series, *I Love New York* (VH1 2007-2008). The program starred Tiffany Pollard, the runner-up in both the first and second seasons of *Flavor of Love* with "The storyline following several male cast members as they competed for Tiffany's love" (Gammage 74). Her distinctive persona during her tenure on the show elevated her to celebrity status. Marquita Marie Gammage claims that "As a reward for her antics, she was granted a second season of *I Love New York* and spin-off shows *New York Goes to Hollywood* and *New York Goes to Work*" (74).

The transformation of an ordinary person into a celebrity by virtue of their involvement in these reality programs, a subject to be further explored in the subsequent chapters, led to a substantial influx of applicants aspiring to follow in the footsteps of Tiffany Pollard whose "outrageous performance earned her own show" (Gammage 74). Edwards notes that "Many reality shows offer the sense that it could be the viewer themselves on screen since these reality stars are famous for simply appearing as themselves on camera" (48). Consequently, the heightened demand prompted an upsurge in production. During the 2010s there was a prolific proliferation of dating reality programs, spanning both network and cable television.

Edwards remarks that "The dating show subgenre continues to spawn a vast number of formats and high audience ratings" (92). Shows that have solidified their position in the annals of the reality television landscape continued to thrive, exemplified by *The Bachelor*, and *The Bachelorette*. The reason may be that "romanticize young people trying to find a mate, marry, have children, and embody the traditional family ideals of their parent's generation [but] also implicitly register the shifting of those norms" (Edwards 92). *The Bachelor* franchise has extended further with six additional iterations, including *Bachelor Pad* (ABC 2010 – 2012), *Bachelor in Paradise* (ABC 2014-present), *Bachelor in Paradise: After Paradise* (ABC 2015-2016), *The Bachelor Winter Games* (ABC 2018), *The Bachelor Presents: Listen to Your Heart* (ABC 2020) and the most recent addition, *The Golden Bachelor* (ABC 2023-present), which notably features a cast of senior citizens.

While the core pursuit of love remained consistent, the format underwent iterations, introducing novel twists and variations. Notable instances encompass programs such as *Catfish* (MTV 2012-present), the MTV program that "explores dating via the Internet and the lingering question of whether the person on the other side of the screen is actually who they say they are" (Rasmussen 241), *Marrying Millions* (Lifetime 2019-2021), and *Labor of Love* (Fox 2020) that garnered success and favorable audience reception. Another worth mentioning example is *Love Island USA* (CBS 2019-2021, Peacock 2021-present).

The show, which is based on the British hit *Love Island UK* (ITV 2015-present), made its first appearance on CBS where it stayed for three seasons before moving to the streaming service Peacock. "Contestants are tasked with "coupling up," meaning they must find a partner and avoid being "single" and consequently being removed from the show" (L'Hoiry 4). The situation is less favorable for participants who remain single, as they "are removed on a weekly basis following a so-called "re-coupling" ceremony during which contestants decide who they wish to "couple up" with" (L'Hoiry 4). Following the

typical format of a dating reality show that wants the participants to get to know each other, the contestants go on dates that are organized by the production, “take part in challenges and broadly interact in the villa under the constant gaze of a production crew filming their activities” (L’Hoiry 4). The considerable audience response to *Love Island* is a result of the show’s requirement for active audience engagement as they “are invited to take part in voting on a number of topics, some critical to the show’s narrative and others rather more mundane” (L’Hoiry 4). This pattern persists throughout the entire season and plays a crucial role in determining the eventual winner since viewers are “tasked with voting for the winning couple from those to have made it to the final episode” (L’Hoiry 4).

During this concurrent period, mindful of the success and cost-effectiveness of these programs, numerous subscription-based streaming platforms commenced producing and broadcasting their own dating reality shows. Netflix, a prominent player in the dating reality sphere “in an era of expanding [its] global influence” (Yang 393), has swiftly developed and aired a range of shows in just a few years. Some notable titles include *Dating Around* (Netflix 2019-2020), *The Ultimatum: Marry or Move On* (Netflix 2022-), and its 2023 spin-off *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* (Netflix 2023), which featured couples of women and non-binary people. *Too Hot to Handle* (Netflix 2020-present) came out during the time of the global pandemic and met with great success as it “hit the top charts in the United States (#2), the United Kingdom (#1), and Canada (#2) upon its release on April 17, 2020” (O’Brien 2020 qtd in Yang 392).

The show was described by Rebecca Nicholson as “the natural culmination of years of reality TV shows” (Nicholson). Its core concept involves ten participants who are initially instructed by a virtual assistant named Lana upon their arrival on the Turks and Caicos Islands. The participants are explicitly cautioned that engaging with any form of physical contact, including self-pleasuring, will lead to a decrease in the initial monetary prize, which commences at \$100,000. The prize undergoes a reduction each time a rule is breached. The show’s triumph translated into a surge in “social media followers” for its participants, fostering the growth of their fanbases (Jones). Coupled with its impressive viewership figures, Netflix decided to greenlight a second season.

Another notable Netflix program is *Love is Blind* (Netflix 2020-present), listed as a “social experiment, where single men and women look for love and get engaged, all before meeting in person” (Netflix). By emphasizing personality over physical appearance, the show evoked nostalgia for the early days of reality television, reminiscent of programs like *Mr. Personality* (Fox 2003). As Kalhan Rosenblatt observes, *Love is Blind* “has brought a 21st-century twist to a reality dating format that has been around since the beginning of television” (Rosenblatt). The show’s first season took the internet by storm, prompting Netflix to commission two additional seasons (Thorne).

Deriving from the same premise of a social experiment, *The Circle* (Netflix 2020-present) is the US adaptation of the British reality dating game that premiered with the same name in 2018 on Channel 4. The show explores themes of authenticity, social dynamics, and the impact of online communication on human relationships and was described as “a hellish combination of *Real World*, *Big Brother*, and *Black Mirror*”

(Wright). The plot follows eight contestants, also known as “players”, who live in separate apartments and only communicate with each other through a specially designed social media platform called “The Circle”, a voice-activated social media platform that is located on every screen of their personally assigned apartments. The twist is that players have the option to play as themselves or create a completely fictional persona. Throughout the competition, they engage in strategic interaction, form alliances, and rate each other. The ultimate goal is to become the most popular player. Their popularity is determined by how well they are liked and rated by their fellow contestants. Players must navigate the complexities of online communications and strategize to avoid being blocked by “The Circle”, with the winner receiving a cash prize at the end of the season.

Other streaming services also effectively accommodated dating reality programs. HBO Max’s most prominent example, *FBOY Island* (HBO max 2021 – 2023, CW 2023-present), has been characterized as “reality dating television at its finest” (Bousfiha). The show, characterized by its unique twist, is frequently compared to a variant of *Love Island* (Fuentes). The show features three women and twenty-four men, with half of the men being described as nice guys looking for genuine relationships and the other half as self-proclaimed Fboys, aiming for the cash prize. The female contestants and the audience are kept in the dark about which category each man falls into with the former trying to find the truth through dates and challenges. Allegra Frank highlights the irony in the show’s use of the abbreviation Fboy instead of the explicit term Fuck Boy, not only in the title but also throughout the program. This choice stands in contrast to dating games like *The Bachelor*, typically aired on broadcast networks, as *FBOY Island* places a strong emphasis on sexual themes and interactions. Consequently, the show is replete with sexual tension and particularly suggestive content (Frank).

Several other noteworthy examples of contemporary reality programs outside network television encompass *The One That Got Away* (Amazon Prime Video 2022), *Are You the One* (MTV 2014-2019, Paramount+ 2023-present), and *Love in the Jungle* (Discovery+ 2022-present). In 2022, Hulu brought back *Joe Millionaire: For Richer or Poorer* (Hulu 2022), reviving the famous 2003 show with a twist. It features two single men, one of whom is a millionaire, while the other one is not. The show revolves around twenty female contestants who will date both men without any knowledge of their bank accounts. As they form connections and get to know the men better, the women are confronted with the dilemma of choosing between love and money.

In conclusion, this chapter explored the intriguing history and evolution of the dating reality game subgenre. It traces its roots from groundbreaking shows like *The Dating Game* to its present-day manifestations, exemplified by diverse formats such as *The Bachelor* and *Love Is Blind*. Beyond mere entertainment, the subgenre has not only captivated the interests of audiences and scholars alike but has also played a significant role in shaping and reflecting societal perceptions of love and relationships. The exploration within the subgenre encompassed pivotal moments, the emergence of various formats, and the dynamic shifts that underscore how these programs have seamlessly integrated into the broader tapestry of reality television. This nuanced analysis, underscores the subgenre’s integral position in the larger cultural landscape,

highlighting its enduring impact on popular culture and the collective understanding of romantic narratives.

The next chapter will focus on the exploitation aspect of reality television and the dating subgenre in particular by presenting a discussion of the theoretical framework analyzing specific public instances from the recent history of the subgenre.

Exploitation and the Reality Dating Subgenre

The discourse on exploitation has been frequently linked to the domain of reality television. As Bastian Vanacker states, “Reality TV is big business. Many people make a living from it, and it provides a source of revenue for networks and producers” (112). Taking into consideration the financial implications that this product brings alongside the fact that “all reality shows compete for viewers” (Vanacker 114), we can assume that the genre has consistently navigated a delicate balance concerning ethical considerations. “In its quest for audiences, one show may require its participants to eat cockroaches, another may expect them to expose private and embarrassing moments, and a third may encourage them to lie” (Vanacker 114). Programs like *Survivor* (CBS 2000-present) and *Fear Factor* (NBC 2001-2006, MTV 2017-2018) are fundamentally grounded in the adversities endured by their participants. Other programs, from the sphere of dating reality television, such as *Love Island* and *The Bachelor*, “have preyed on cast members’ vulnerabilities, which are often divulged to producers during the screening process” (Warren).

One of the most prominent characteristics of reality television is and has always been, the authentic and raw material, or as Annette Hill describes it, the “sometimes called nonfictional, unscripted, or factual television (Hill 2002 qtd in Montemurro 2008). On a construction level, Jon Dovey identifies a few additional traits that define the genre and are mostly evident in the dating game subgenre, such as “observational ‘actuality footage”, “first-person participant or eye-witness testimony” and “studio or to-camera links and commentary from authoritative presenters” (Dovey 159).

Penzhorn and Pitout state that “Reality television within an academic and philosophical context is synonymous with words such as controversy, ambiguity, inconclusiveness, and perplexity” (62). Within this context, exploitation is a recurrent theme associated with reality television, particularly within the docusoap and the dating game subgenres. It is a genre that “finds its most valuable content in the shameless display of individuals willing to part with their privacy, dignity, and poise” (Penzhorn and Pitout 62).

Contestant exploitation in dating reality shows emanates from continuous surveillance, particularly conspicuous in the genres where the cast predominantly comprises individuals navigating a constructed and closely monitored environment to garner public attention and secure a monetary prize. Catherine Lumby claims that one “of the central appeals of the genre lies in the opportunity it affords viewers to scrutinize the ordinarily private behaviors and responses of others” (19). The genre “packages human dilemmas and conflicts up for commercial purposes – pitting humans against each other

and exposing their weaknesses for no higher purpose than entertainment” (Lumby 20). “How participants react or handle the conflict contributes to their popularity or unpopularity with the public who, to a great extent, determine their fate” (Penzhorn and Pitout 66).

Adding to the above viewers’ participation by voting for the individuals who stay and thus determining the game’s progress “people competing [...] becomes a problem of exploitation where producers and contestants have ‘got to make you worth watching’ (Hill 48). Striving for high ratings engenders a cyclical relationship involving exploitative measures and production strategies, akin to those identified by Carter, in which the contestants

think they have to behave in more and more outrageous ways. And the producers can’t quite believe that the series is as interesting if they don’t intervene. So, they intervene in casting and the kinds of people who are applying (Carter in Hill 49).

Not only do “producers and participants create high drama and big emotions that can be circulated as ‘did you see that!’ mediated moments” (Hill 54) but by exploiting ordinary people as contestants, the environment forces them to perform exaggerated versions of themselves. This works to the benefit of the producers since ‘individuals are drawn to reality TV shows because they are simply curious about the private lives of others’ (Wong 36). Audiences want to see people doing the same things as them, such as “sleeping, taking a shower, drinking too much or too little [...] and a deep-seated need to touch and to be touched” (Penzhorn and Pitout 69).

While examining these types of shows, Kavka notices that they “combine this aesthetic of authenticity with narrative structures reminiscent of soap opera, producing a hybrid of fictional and factual programming styles that revived audience interest in television documentary” (Kavka 73). Deni Elliott adds that “reality TV is all about exploitation of private individuals who sacrifice dignity and integrity to achieve fame and fortune” (Elliott 144). He notices the ways that producers “snip and attach material to create a patchwork- quilt storyline of their invention” (Elliott 144). He also points out how they are frequently fabricating situations by taking clips and editing them out of context, creating not only false narratives but stories that are “exploitative, fictional and intentionally hurtful, according to the accounts of many of the wounded characters” (Elliott 144).

Wendy Wyatt recognizes that throughout the years, “members of the press have accused not only reality shows of being exploiters but also the media that cover those shows so incessantly” (Wyatt 159). Wyatt adopts Ruth Sample’s theory of exploitation and argues that according to Sample,

exploitation involves interacting with another being for the sake of advantage in a way that degrades or fails to respect the inherent value of that being. In other words, there is no commitment to the dignity of the other. Exploitation is, therefore, degradation (Sample qtd in Wyatt 163).

Applying the above definition within the context of reality television, Wyatt poses questions aimed at the production teams, such as “Do the producers of reality TV lack respect for those who take part in their shows? Do they fail to place value in the participants and fail to make a commitment to their dignity?” (Wyatt 163). A perceived lack of respect may manifest through actions such as neglecting participants’ well-being, capitalizing on instances of injustice, or treating personal aspects as market commodities. This type of “exploitative neglect involves *denying* the needs of those with whom one is interacting” (Wyatt 163). While the outcome of neglecting an individual’s needs may be more severe, it follows that “those producers fail to recognize the value of the participants (Wyatt 164). In addition, there seems to be a lack of respect by reality show producers toward their participants, which is at the heart of much exploitation and this gets to the heart of what reality television is all about (Sample in Wyatt 165).

The exploitative nature of dating reality shows leads to frequent conflicts and emotional outbursts among participants. In June 2017, a few months before what is described as “the most high-profile example of digital feminist activism” (Mendes et al 236), the #MeToo movement, Warner Bros announced that the studio was pausing the production of *Bachelor in Paradise* (ABC 2014-present) one of *The Bachelor’s* (ABC 2002-present) popular spin-offs. In all likelihood, the reason for the indefinite hiatus was a succession of troubling allegations that surfaced before the show concluded its production. It all started when “a producer came forward claiming to be uncomfortable with what was shot and filed a report of workplace misconduct, causing the production to be suspended pending a thorough investigation” (Kiefer).

According to Allie Jones’ report for *Vulture*, “Several media outlets have reported that contestant DeMario Jackson allegedly had a nonconsensual sexual encounter with contestant Corinne Olympios in a hot tub during filming” (Jones). She adds that “The *BIP* crew member [claimed] that the incident occurred after producers suggested Jackson and Olympios hook up” (Jones). Subsequently, team members conveyed additional information about the incident to the *Daily Mail*, claiming that during and after the act, Olympios appeared to be unconscious, and that “some of the crew came out and carried her off to her room” (Harbour et al). Other sources claimed that “Corinne was ‘stumbling drunk, eyes closed, slurring badly and wearing her clothes inside out” (Harbour et al).

Regarding the conduct of the production team at the time of this incident, the same anonymous source said that the most disturbing part was the way it was handled since “no one called a doctor or paramedic, which some felt they should have. Instead someone made the decision to just let her sleep it off” (Harbour et al). Since the filming was suspended, psychologists and lawyers intervened to question people on what they saw with the source revealing that “lawyers deposed those who witnessed the hook-up and told the cast and crew not to speak out about what they saw” (Harbour et al). Sources close to Olympios claimed that “she does not remember and did not consent to the sexual encounter” (Jones). “She thinks the producers were at fault for letting the incident unfold and has hired a lawyer to represent her going forward” (Harbour et al). A few weeks later,

Olympios came forward with her statement, claiming that “she’s in therapy for “physical and emotional trauma” (McHenry). By the end of the same month, Warner Brothers concluded its investigation, and the case was deemed dismissed since they “reviewed the tape and has not found evidence of misconduct” (Harris). They claimed that “the tape does not support any charge of misconduct by a cast member. Nor does the tape show [...] that the safety of any cast member was ever in jeopardy” (in Corinthios). Therefore, the “Production on this season of *Bachelor in Paradise* will be resuming” (Corinthios).

Another notable case is that of Tran Dang, a contestant from season five of *Love is Blind* (Netflix 2020-present). Despite not appearing in the aired episodes, Dang pursued legal action against the production company Kinetic Content. She asserts that “around May 3, 2022” (Jeffrey and Dasrath), she experienced sexual assault on set, perpetrated by her former fiancé, Thomas Smith, and alleges that Kinetic Content failed to intervene (Goldstein). Additionally, Dang contends that she was wrongfully confined during filming, and accuses the producers of acting negligently. Joelle Goldstein writes that “Dang has also sued production company Delirium TV, which Kinetic alleged that it “delegated responsibility for shooting the relevant season of *Love Is Blind*” (Goldstein). Dang’s lawsuit states that “the production companies are liable for Smith’s actions as they occurred during filming, or at their workplace, and as a contestant, he was an employee” (Jeffrey and Dasrath).

Individuals implicated rejected the accusations. Smith’s attorney denied all allegations (Jeffrey and Dasrath), as well as Kinetic Content and Delirium TV. In a joint statement, the latter claimed “We support and stand with victims of sexual assault, but Ms. Dang’s claims against the producers are meritless. We document the independent choices of adults who volunteer to participate in a social experiment” (Longeretta). They also claimed to have no knowledge or control over “what occurs in private living spaces when not filming, and participants may choose to end their journey at any time” (Longeretta).

The companies downplayed the situation, claiming that throughout Dang’s involvement with the production of the program, she did not bring any alleged misconduct to the producer’s attention, nor did she opt to withdraw from the experiment. The case has not reached a verdict yet. Dang’s attorney has accused the production companies of “spending an inordinate amount of money on losing legal positions that do nothing but delay the parties from having their day in court” (in Jeffrey and Dasrath).

Love is Blind faced similar allegations once more when Jeremy Hartwell, a second season participant, took legal action against “Netflix, production company Kinetic Content, and Kinetic’s casting company Delirium TV” (Spangler) reporting a series of violations of labor laws. The allegations included “fostering inhumane working conditions and paying cast members less than minimum wage” (Spangler). Hartwell claimed that “*Love Is Blind* producers plied the cast with alcohol and deprived them of food and water while paying rates that were below Los Angeles County’s minimum wage” (Spangler). While the production was taking place, the contestants were forced to work up to 20 hours per day and were paid a flat rate of one thousand dollars per week. This amount “works out to as

little as \$7.14 per hour, well under the minimum wage in Los Angeles County of at least \$15 per hour” (Spangler).

Participants told *Insider* that “their phones and passports were confiscated for the 10 days they dated in the pods and that they weren't even allowed to listen to music on the bus rides from the hotel to the set” (Warren). Hartwell added that they were “locked in the room for 24 hours straight when they arrived on set, and snacks and water were only doled out after hours of waiting” (Butterfield). The lawsuit reads that the production “regularly refused timely food and water to the Cast while on set severely restricting the availability of hydration opportunities” (Jackson) but at the same time, they “encouraged the cast members to consume alcohol throughout the entire day” (Jackson).

Jennifer Blair contends that these are known strategies among reality television producers and “include plying contestants with alcohol, sleep deprivation, the illusion of imminent harm, the disjuncture of normal time, concentration on apparent irrelevancies, the building up and dashing of hope, and the fostering of distrust and paranoia” (Blair 6). Hartwell’s attorney stated that all the above resulted in a strong desire for “social connections and altered their emotions and decision-making” (Spangler). Moreover, the above manipulation techniques were probably applied to “maintain a heightened degree of control and direct the conduct of the cast into making manipulated decisions for the benefit of the shows' entertainment value” (Jackson). People from the production team who anonymously reported against the production company claimed that “The PAs were forbidden from speaking with the contestants” (Warren), and that the latter’s isolation was the desired goal.

It follows that the production companies may have not had “contestants' best interests in mind” (Warren). Another second season contestant, Brianna Holmes, reported that when she had a panic attack while filming the show, the producers and the camera operator exploited the situation. As she later claimed. “They chased me off of the set to the trailers, cameras in my face” she explained (in Warren). The contestant quit the same day. Other reports read that Holmes “was struck by the sheer volume of alcohol on hand” (Warren) and even though she was trying to avoid drinking, the production staff were constantly providing her with bottles. An increased amount of information began to surface regarding the dire circumstances the contestants were put under during filming. As articulated by other cast members, “Being on *Love Is Blind* was a traumatic experience” (in Warren). Some of them reported that “During one-on-one interviews, producers preyed on contestants' anxieties, pushing them to divulge their deepest insecurities and traumas” (Warren).

In addition to the aforementioned psychological fatigue, there was also physical exhaustion. The contestants were subjected to such strenuous work conditions that they occasionally succumbed to sleep during filming sessions. Furthermore, there were reports noting their frequent observation while holding alcoholic beverages. Filming took place at a windowless set, which reflected in a very negative way on the participant’s mental health (Warren). Three contestants “had panic attacks while filming, and one said producers pressured her to stay on the show even after she confessed that she was having

suicidal thoughts” (Warren). Others reported that “they were left depressed and sought therapy after filming” (Warren), with one “even quit[ting] her job because she felt unable to return to her old life” (Warren). This can be attributed to the treatment received from the production company, as they failed to provide sufficient mental health support, both during the filming period and in the post-show aftermath.

The above examples of exploitation and legal actions spark a discourse on ethics and its impacts on reality television contestants. The ethical concerns raised “have tended to be translated as fears about the propensity of reality to promote voyeurism and to exploit ‘ordinary’ people and invade their privacy” (Lumby 12). Does this imply that participants are victims and the producers perpetrators? As noted by Blair, “A favorite defense of producers is that the contestants are not their employees and thus are not owed common employer-employee duties” (1). An alternative perspective is offered by Catherine Lumby, asserting that “the claim that this opening up of the private realm to public surveillance is automatically a degrading process does not necessarily follow” (Lumby 19). Therefore, the question arises: why do individuals, well-versed in the methodologies and tactics employed in reality TV, continue to participate in these shows in significant numbers?

Given that the prevailing conditions governing reality TV production practices are well documented and circulated in the media, what is it that motivates individuals to actively seek participation in these types of programs? Per employment lawyer Ann Fromholz, the considerable enthusiasm of individuals aspiring to enter the entertainment industry, whether as part of the cast or crew, creates a supply and demand imbalance, providing studios and networks with substantial leverage. “They’re always going to find someone willing to sign whatever they need them to sign because they think it might be the way to get into the entertainment industry,” (in Cullins) she states. “Maybe that’ll be their big break. That possibility is attractive enough [that some] people are willing to sign whatever agreement is put in front of them” (in Cullins). This question has also captured the attention of numerous academics, who, through the years, have provided their perspectives on the factors motivating young individuals to engage in such television programs.

Sue Collins suggests that “Reality TV invites new considerations for theorizing celebrity as a cultural commodity whose economic value is based on potential exchange” (87). Consequently, it also elicits fresh considerations regarding “production strategies of celebrity [culture], particularly concerning formats that do not deal in “talent” per se, but with the “performance of every day” (Roscoe 2001 qtd in Collins 88). The achievement of celebrity success is predominantly reliant on how one’s fame is distributed, particularly in cultivating enduring audiences for consumption. The fact remains that “The relationship of celebrity value to cultural production for producers is measured in terms of audience volume and its projected purchasing power” (Collins 101)

Celebrity is “distinctly a capitalist phenomenon” (Collins 90) and its making, “as with most cultural products, is configured around what has worked before” (Collins 89). This phenomenon aligns with shifts in communication technology that facilitate novel manifestations of social mobility. Collins asserts that the novelty introduced by reality

television, in contrast to other, older media, lies in the development of a distinct category of celebrity, the one she calls the “dispensable celebrity” (Collins 89). She claims that this new category “generates novelty out of audience self-reflexivity with minimal risk and temporal flexibility” (89). Drawing on Turner’s insights, Collins emphasizes the dependence of these emerging celebrities on the show that propelled them to fame and provided them with a platform. The network asserts accountability for the conversion of an average individual which is regarded as “raw material” (Collins 98), into a public personality, as well as for disseminating this image to the public. Consequently, due to its investment in the labor of celebrity construction, the resultant product is considered to be the property of the network. Moreover, reality television, which has been characterized as a playground “for ordinary, untalented people vying for potential fame” (Collins 97) is nearly limitless as the “production of short-term, nonskilled, nonunion celebrities generates novelty with minimal financial risk and greater control” (Collins 97).

Wyatt points out that “The fact that many participants in early shows became bona fide celebrities led to the willingness of many others to participate and then to the opportunity for other shows to take advantage of that willingness” (168). The allure that fame and the socioeconomic benefit that comes from it often outweighs concerns about the potential negative consequences of being in the spotlight. Graeme Turner notes that with its “omnivorous appetite for new “talent,” its extraordinary appeal for those wishing to make the transition from being an ordinary person to a media person” (309), reality television has arguably been “the most extensive and certainly the most industrially embedded mechanism for this renewed interest in the ordinary” (Turner 309).

Taking into consideration that in opposition to other, more traditional media, “television has always made room for ordinary people” (Wilson 424), it is evident that “Reality television purports to make stars out of real and ordinary people” (Wilson 424). Turner also notes that as a media phenomenon, “the rise of reality television is closely implicated in the expansion of celebrity culture” (Turner 309) or to a “lower stratum of celebrity value”, which “affords both a surplus for cultural industries and the maintenance of the larger system of celebrity valorization, which, as with other commodities, is based on scarcity” (Collins 89).

Laura Grindstaff remarks that “television from the very beginning has trafficked in “reality” in one form or another, in the sense of inviting ordinary people to share the limelight or subjecting them to the camera’s gaze” (23). She frequently employs the term “ordinary celebrity” (Grindstaff 324) but also claims that “other terms sometimes used to describe this type of celebrity include micro-celebrity, disposable celebrity, DIY celebrity, and D-list celebrity” (Grindstaff 324). Throughout the years, reality television has played a role in institutionalizing a domain for the systematic cultivation of ordinary celebrities. Based on that, Grindstaff also adopts the term “DI(t)Y” – do it *to* yourself celebrity” (325), claiming that “the agency of participants is more rigidly circumscribed by the dictates of the production process as well as generic expectations for what constitutes a successful performance” (Grindstaff 325).

Given that reality television celebrities enter a field saturated with an excess of unemployed individuals lacking specific talents, Mark Andrejevic describes these individuals as the “thousands of people [...] waiting for their 15 minutes” (11). He accuses reality programming of undermining the role and uniqueness of a celebrity since “The star quality that commanded large premiums has been rendered fungible” (Andrejevic 11). The proliferation of reality television formats has reached a juncture where they manifest as self-aware parodies of their initial premise, which centered around providing access to the unscripted interactions of individuals lacking a professional entertainment background. As Andrejevic articulates, the outcome is a system that increasingly depends on a roster of semi-celebrities sourced from aspiring actors who actively participate in reality television casting calls upon the guidance of their agents (3), alongside a plethora of “faded celebrities [...] attempting to use reality shows to launch a comeback, or at least to pay the bills” (Andrejevic 3).

However, is it imperative not to exclude the possibility that a participant in reality television may transcend into the more conventional media landscape, embarking on a trajectory toward attaining genuine celebrity status. The contemporary digital landscape assisted numerous reality stars in their transition into a mainstream media domain. As Marcus notes, “Celebrity has always required the reproduction and circulation of the celebrity’s image, words, or voice; the Internet era makes it easier to see that creating a celebrity and disseminating it are the same” (Marcus 3).

All the exploitation cases already discussed as well as other cases pertaining to different reality TV subgenres have led to a series of actions and various forms of activism by participants themselves. For example, former cast member of *Love Is Blind*, Jeremy Hartwell partnered with another contestant from season two, Nick Thomson, and Dr. Isabelle Morley, “a Licensed Clinical Psychologist with a specialty in couples’ therapy” (UCAN Foundation), who has previously focused on raising awareness about the problematic elements of dating reality programs. The result of this collaboration was the formation of the UCAN Foundation, “a network of reality TV participants and mental health and legal experts dedicated to supporting cast members” (UCAN Foundation). Their goal is to provide cast members with resources for informed decision-making, foster an understanding of the realities of productions, and facilitate access to assistance within a secure and supportive environment during and after the production.

Additionally, former reality star Bethany Frankel collaborated with legal professionals to establish a connection between current and former reality television stars and the actors’ union SAG-AFTRA. The primary objective was to extend protective measures to reality contestants through the guild. This initiative coincided with the 2023 actor’s strike, during which broadcast networks relied on game shows and other unscripted content for their fall schedules. Frankel and her legal team advocated for reality stars to be protected under the same laws as actors, aiming to curb exploitation. The heightened push for unionization among unscripted talent prompted NBCUniversal to revisit its workplace policies for reality TV series. This revision involved augmenting existing protocols, including areas such as alcohol training and mental health support.

Lastly, the UK's regulatory authority Ofcom issued new regulatory developments for communication industries and asked production companies to prioritize "the well-being and dignity" of reality show contestants (Nilsson), prompted by an incident during the seventh season of *Love Island UK*, wherein a contestant's explosive outburst led to a record-breaking number of viewer complaints, exceeding 25,000 grievances lodged with the regulatory authority. The incident garnered widespread condemnation from viewers and catalyzed renewed calls for enhanced regulation of reality TV programs, underscoring the imperative of addressing the psychological welfare of participants in the industry (Percival). It becomes clear that reality television is here to stay but industrial practices must amend their methods to protect their participants.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to offer a comprehensive historical panorama of the dating reality television subgenre within the American television landscape and examine the issue of exploitation within the subgenre. Discernible patterns employed by producers and production companies come to the forefront, revealing efforts to dismiss or simply disregard participants' allegations. The analysis of three cases unveiled a similar narrative that reveals how production practices often neglected the well-being of contestants, both in terms of their physical and mental health, and how the accused companies delay legal proceedings and effortlessly dismiss allegations. This broader perspective illuminated the considerable influence wielded by these production entities over contestants, underscoring the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between reality performers and the overarching industry apparatus. The ability to sidestep legal consequences with apparent ease underscores the entrenched authority of production companies, emphasizing the need to balance these power dynamics to ensure the protection and well-being of reality television participants.

While these issues have long been familiar to industry professionals, critics, and academics alike, the contemporary landscape and the growing awareness of the audience on the content consumed, calls for reexamination of protocols regarding the contestant's health, safety, and the recognition and rights afforded as employees. That is why, we are currently witnessing efforts for new regulation systems and revised protocols in both the USA and the UK that signal a paradigm shift towards cultivating a safer environment for contestants. This paradigm shift not only enhances the viewing experience for audiences but also establishes a positive precedent for the industry. Breaking away from the historical association with "low production values, high emotions, cheap antics, and questionable ethics" (Kavka 5), reality TV is progressively advancing, propelled by the collective aspiration of audiences and critics on ongoing efforts to cultivate a more caring and empowering space for all involved.

Additionally, this study has not only addressed its primary objectives but has also concurrently aimed to instigate a meaningful discourse surrounding the societal transformations that foster an increased production of programs featuring more open and sexually liberated themes. The implications of this research are anticipated to serve

as a catalyst for future endeavors, particularly within the domains of gender studies. By delving into a nuanced examination of how gender dynamics are perceived and portrayed in reality television programs with such themes, subsequent research will further illuminate the intricate intersections between media representation, societal attitudes, and gender roles. This contribution hopefully adds to ongoing scholarly discussions and inspire a deeper understanding of the evolving cultural landscape shaped by these influential media narratives.

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