“Where Do I Belong, from Laguna Beach to Jersey Shore?”: Portrayal of Minority Youth in MTV Docusoaps

SUNG-YEON PARK
Department of Telecommunications, School of Media & Communication, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, USA

MARK A. FLYNN
Department of Communication and Journalism, Coastal Carolina University, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, USA

ALEXANDRU STANA
Department of Communication, Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, North Carolina, USA

DAVID T. MORIN
Department of Communication, Utah Valley University, Orem, Utah, USA

GI WOONG YUN
Department of Telecommunications, School of Media & Communication, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, USA

Based on the notion that reality television is used by the youth to learn about various social identity groups, the portrayal of minority in MTV “docusoap” was analyzed. Whereas Whites were overrepresented, Asians were completely absent. Although a few of them were shown, Latinos were virtually invisible as central characters as well as in social and romantic relationships. Blacks were also severely underrepresented and the problem was more pronounced for women than men. Among the minority groups, only mixed-raced women were shown as normalized as White women and men. Implications and suggestions for future studies were discussed.

KEYTERMS reality TV, MTV, race, ethnicity, mixed race, content analysis

Address correspondence to Sung-Yeon Park, Department of Telecommunications, School of Media & Communication, Bowling Green State University, 302 West Hall, Bowling Green, OH 43403. E-mail: sunpark@bgsu.edu
In May 1992, *The Real World* debuted on MTV (Pullen, 2007). Since then, reality programming has become a staple in the cable network known for its powerful pull on youth culture (Jones, 2005). Critical scholars argue that reality shows exert a profound impact on our society by greatly reducing the psychological distance between the famous and the ordinary (Curnutt, 2009) and thus promoting a “celebrity culture” in which people become preoccupied with famous people and their lifestyles (Cashmore, 2006; Turner, 2006).

With the global reach of MTV reality programming, its influence also reaches beyond the United States. *The Hills*, an MTV reality series featuring posh city lives of attractive young people, became a sensation among Irish teens for its fashion and style (Kierans, 2009). A Spanish adaptation of *Jersey Shore* made a splash when it debuted in 2012 with an unprecedented audience share among 12- to 24-year-old television viewers (Rolfe, 2012). Except for a few studies (e.g., Baruh, 2009; Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, & Finnerty, 2007; Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007), however, systematic analysis of reality programming content is scarce.

Although the content of reality shows can be analyzed from various perspectives, the current study is focusing on the portrayal of minority women and men, as determined by their race or ethnicity. Developmental psychologists have long considered adolescence and emerging adulthood as critical periods for identity development (Arnett, 1995; Erikson, 1968). For minority youths in a multicultural society, maneuvering through these formative years can be even more challenging due to their marginalized position within mainstream society (Phinney, 1989). During this transitional period, the media also play an important role as a major reference for building one's social identity (Arnett, 2010). Of various domains of identity development, the current analysis focuses on a few concepts particularly relevant to the youth population: visibility; personal agency; social relatedness; romantic involvement.

To uncover how various racial/ethnic groups are depicted in these aspects, a sample of successful MTV reality shows is analyzed. In the minds of young television viewers, MTV reality shows comprise a class of its own, distinct from reality shows in all the other networks (Nabi, 2007). Thus, the focused scope of content analyzed in this study should effectively reflect what American youth have been watching intensely with loyalty. Because of the global reach of MTV expanding to 166 countries and territories and its iconic status as a conveyor of youth culture (Smith, 2005), accurate understanding of their reality television content should be of keen interest to researchers and educators in the US and other countries alike.

**PORTRAYAL OF MINORITY WOMEN AND MEN ON TELEVISION**

Although the content of reality television programming has not yet been studied extensively, U.S. television content in general has been closely analyzed
Minority Youth Portrayal in MTV Docusoaps

Analyses of U.S. television commercials and primetime shows in the 1990s revealed that only Blacks were represented proportionately, whereas Latinos and Asians were mostly invisible (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). More recent studies suggest little change: Racial/ethnic minorities, except for Blacks, were severely underrepresented across television programming (e.g., Greenberg & Worrell, 2007; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Messineo, 2008; Monk-Turner, Heiserman, Johnson, Cotton, & Jackson, 2010). Within individual minority groups, the findings concerning the gender ratio were mixed. Mastro and Stern (2003) found that men were portrayed more often than women in primetime television commercials, except for Latinos, among whom the gender ratio was more balanced. In contrast, a more recent analysis of primetime shows reported a higher percentage of women, as opposed to men, among Blacks as well as Latinos (Monk-Turner et al., 2010).

In terms of the importance of roles played by different racial/ethnic groups, Whites, Blacks, and Latinos were comparable in primetime programming broadcasted in 1996: The ratio of main characters—those essential to the story in each episode—and minor characters—those who are involved, but nonessential—was comparable across the three groups (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Ten years later (Monk-Turner et al., 2010), however, the percentage of major characters among all characters in each racial/ethnic group was the highest among Latinos (91%), followed by Whites (77%) and Blacks (61%). Because Latinos and Asians were disproportionately underrepresented, the comparable or higher percentage of major roles, as opposed to minor roles, played by the Latino may not be as meaningful. Still, one could conclude that at least Blacks were depicted in major roles more often than not in a substantial number. In primetime commercials, White and Black characters were shown using the advertised products frequently whereas Latinos and Asians were featured as supporting characters without any relationship to the products (Mastro & Stern, 2003).

As far as their social relationships were concerned, an analysis of 1996 primetime shows found Black characters to be less aggressive than White characters (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). The same study also found Latinos to be the least likely to be portrayed as lazy among Whites, Blacks, and Latinos. A follow-up study of primetime programming (Monk-Turner et al., 2010), however, did not find these relatively prosocial attributes of Blacks and Latinos. Instead, Latinos were mostly likely to be ridiculed, and Black and Latino characters were also shown to be more immoral and despicable than White characters. Another study revealed that, in television commercials, Asians were portrayed as hard workers, whereas all other groups were more frequently shown doing something other than work, such as recreation and domestic activities (Mastro & Stern, 2003).
In terms of romantic relationships, one study of U.S. primetime commercials in the early 2000s found that Latino characters were portrayed as having more romantic potential than other racial/ethnic minorities: The Latino characters were almost evenly split between those who gave or received sexual gazes and those who didn’t, whereas characters in all the other racial/ethnic groups were hardly shown engaging in either behavior. The same study also reported that Latino characters were shown to engage in alluring behaviors such as flirting more often than the other groups (Mastro & Stern, 2003). In another analysis of television commercials, it was found that Blacks were less likely to appear in a home setting and less likely to be romantically desired than Whites (Messineo, 2008). In addition, Black men were more likely to be portrayed as childless and spouseless than White men and Black women were less likely to be romantically involved than White women (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000).

REALITY TELEVISION AND SOCIAL IDENTITY OF YOUNG MINORITY VIEWERS

To date, several studies have illustrated the potential influence of reality shows on young viewers’ identity. According to the research, the motivations to learn about self and others, to compare self against others, and to feel important are primary reasons why young viewers watch reality television (Godlewski & Perse, 2010; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Research also suggests that the need to learn about one’s identity group and the need to assess the identity group’s social status and its relationship with other groups may direct television viewers’ program choices. In turn, the group-based program choices contribute to the viewers’ social identity (Abrams & Giles, 2007; Harwood, 1999).

Undoubtedly, gender is one important category shaping teen’s social identity as well as television program choices (Brown & Pardun, 2004). For minority youth, race or ethnicity also plays an important role in their identity development (Blackmon & Vera, 2008). Social identity theorists argue that this category can become particularly salient during television viewing because, through visual cues, race or ethnicity is more readily accessible than other characteristics (Abrams, 1999).

Indeed, minority viewers demonstrate strong preference for programs featuring ingroup characters (e.g., Anderson & Williams, 1983; Edwards, 2001), pay more attention to news stories featuring ingroup members (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008), and use ethnic media to strengthen ties to their heritage culture (e.g., Jeffres, 2000; Rios & Gaines, 1999). Underrepresentation of one’s group in the media is related to the perception of reduced group vitality (Abrams, Eveland, & Giles, 2003; Abrams
Minority Youth Portrayal in MTV Docusoaps

& Giles, 2007) and exposure to stereotypical portrayal of an outgroup leads to more negative perception of the outgroup and positive perception of one's ingroup (Mastro, 2003). Thus far, one systematic analysis of U.S. reality dating shows revealed that Whites were overrepresented, whereas Hispanics and Asians were severely underrepresented (Ferris et al., 2007). In the study, Blacks constituted the only minority group that was represented in proportion to their makeup in the actual U.S. population.

Docusoaps on MTV also constitutes a subgenre of reality programming that is deemed worthy of special attention. Earlier, Nabi (2007) conducted a viewing frequency-based factor analysis of reality programs. It generated six factors, one of which was MTV reality shows. All the other factors, on the other hand, were identified by the themes (e.g., dating, transformation, etc.) and none based on the network. Since its launch in 1981, MTV has positioned itself as the channel for teens and young adults, often defining what it means to be young and hip in U.S. society (Marks & Tannenbaum, 2011). In particular, its reality shows such as The Real World and The Hills frequently made the top 15 list of original cable series, contributing to its solid reputation as the most watched cable network among 12- to 24-year-olds (Viacom, 2010).

Similarly, a more recent factor analysis of reality programs identified four factors each named docusoaps, man shows, flavor of love, and network television competition shows. All of the shows that fell under the docusoaps factor were from MTV, E!, or VH1, the youth-targeted music-entertainment cable networks (Egbert & Belcher, 2012). Docusoaps are supposed to follow the unscripted real lives of people, and thus characters and events in the shows are presumed to be more relatable for general viewers. Indeed, a study of Belgian high school students revealed that exposure to docusoaps featuring particular occupations was related to more positive attitudes toward them and enrollment in related degree programs at a later time (Van den Bulck & Beullens, 2007).

Therefore, the following research question is posed to establish the baseline of minority visibility in a subgenre of reality programming that has been particularly successful with young viewers:

RQ1. How visible are ethnic/racial minority women and men among the characters of MTV docusoaps?

In terms of the specific nature of media representation, social identity theory suggests that a minority character must assume a regularly recurring role to have any meaningful influence on the social identity of viewers (Park, 2012). Regular characters can be again classified into two types—those who are central to plot development and those who are not. This distinction is important from the perspective of social cognitive theory as well. According to the theory, only central characters have individual agency to control their
environment in order to achieve objectives and accomplish desired outcomes (Bandura, 1989). In developmental psychology, high agency is related to a more exploratory and proactive, as opposed to self-limiting and evasive, mode of identity development (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). To assess plot centrality of minority characters in MTV docu-soaps, a research question is posed:

RQ2. How common is it for ethnic/racial minority women and men characters to play central roles in MTV docu-soaps?

Along with agency, successful establishment or reestablishment of relationships with others is crucial for healthy human development (Kagitcibasi, 2005). Research has shown that popularity among peers is related to adolescents’ positive ego development, secure attachment, and adaptive interactions with family and friends (Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005). On the other hand, being hated by one’s peer group(s) is related to antisocial behavior, social withdrawal, and emotional instability (Abecassis, Hartup, Haselager, Scholte, & Van Lieshout, 2002).

The notion of vicarious capability in social cognitive theory states that people can learn about how to interact with others not just from direct experience, but also from observing others’ action and its consequences for them (Bandura, 2009). Although most research has been conducted with children, the role of television to provide models for social interactions has been well established (Mares & Woodard, 2005).

Two critical analyses of U.S. reality shows concur that reality programs overemphasize infighting among racial/ethnic minority cast members. The programs were also found to reinforce the stereotype of violent and angry Black men who are generally disruptive of their external environment and thus disliked by others (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Drew, 2011). Because these observations were based on qualitative inquiries, two research questions are posed here to examine social relationship scripts involving minority youths in the MTV shows:

RQ3a. How common is it for racial/ethnic minority women and men characters to be popular among casts in MTV docu-soaps?

RQ3b. How common is it for racial/ethnic minority women and men characters to be hated among casts in MTV docu-soaps?

In adolescence and early adulthood, dating and romance is also very important part of social development (Huntemann & Morgan, 2012). Healthy self-esteem is an important factor in initiating and sustaining a steady and stable romantic relationship (Eryilmaz & Atak, 2011; Sternberg, 1999) and adolescents with a dating partner are perceived by their peers as having
higher self-esteem than those without one (Samet & Kelly, 1987). Television viewers consider romance as a primary theme, in addition to competition, of U.S. reality shows (Nabi, 2007). A survey also revealed that regular viewers of U.S. reality shows have above-average trait motivation “to feel romantic” (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004, p. 372).

Media effect literature chronicled the impact of television on young people’s attitudes toward dating and relationships (e.g., Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995; Ward & Friedman, 2006). Regular watching of reality dating programs was also related to a more adversarial view on dating relationships (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). However, little research has been conducted concerning whom reality programs promote as “eligible” for dating. Social cognitive theory emphasizes self-reflective capability of humans, of which vicarious verification and social verifications are two important modes (Bandura, 2009). By watching ingroup members on television being desired or in a steady relationship with either intergroup or outgroup members, minority viewers of television can see themselves in such situations and also perceive the scenarios as normative.

Because MTV reality shows center around the lives of adolescents and young adults, the significance of romantic relationships can be particularly high. Although no published study to date provides statistics concerning the race or ethnicity of characters involved in a dating relationship, a critical analysis of fashion and beauty-themed reality shows noted frequent remarks by the casts discounting non-Caucasian women’s beauty (Pozner, 2010). Thus, it may be fruitful to examine whether characters are in a steady romantic relationship and romantically desired by others. In addition, the analysis includes whether the romantic relationships featured in the reality programs involve members of the same racial/ethnic group or between members of different groups. Notably, a few existing studies of primetime shows and motion pictures reported that interracial relationships were very rare in the analyzed content (Eschholtz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Hence, the following three research questions are posed:

RQ4a. How common is it for racial/ethnic minority women and men characters to be in a steady romantic relationship in MTV docusoaps?

RQ4b. How common is it for characters to be in a steady relationship with someone from a different ethnic or racial group in MTV docusoaps?

RQ4c. How common is it for racial/ethnic minority women and men characters to be romantically desired in MTV docusoaps?

**METHOD**

**Selection of Programs and Episodes**

All MTV reality shows in the docusoap category were catalogued from the exhaustive list of all MTV/MTV2 shows on the network’s website. From the
list, five programs were selected: The Real World, Newport Harbor: The Real Orange County, Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County, The Hills, and Jersey Shore. These were the only MTV docuseries that made it beyond the first season and also garnered substantially higher ratings than the other shows on the list.

In addition, each show had unique qualities that made it significant in the history of reality television: The Real World has been the longest running reality show in television history and still continues to acquire high ratings among viewers aged 12-34 (Gorman, 2010); Jersey Shore was ranked as the most watched television show in the U.S.—broadcast and cable combined—among the 12-34 demographic during its run (Oldenburg, 2011); The Hills was widely recognized for its influence on popular culture (Marikar, 2009); Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County was the first cinema-style reality show with expository opening for more dramatic effect; Newport Harbor: The Real Orange County was conceived as the fourth season of Laguna Beach, although it featured a completely different set of cast members as well as a new location. An in-depth interview with college-age viewers confirms the special status of these programs among the age group. When asked whether they viewed the personalities on reality shows as peers, college students almost exclusively focused their conversation around the casts of The Real World, Laguna Beach, and The Hills (Potratz, 2007).

Once the programs were identified, their availability from various sources, such as MTV.com, Hulu.com, and DVDs/online streaming from Netflix.com, was investigated. Except for older episodes of The Real World, all episodes of the five shows produced to date were available. A total of 299 episodes were located. Thirty percent of each program’s available episodes comprised the sample, resulting in 91 episodes or 2820 minutes of programming to be analyzed. A breakdown of the final sample is as follows: 27 out of 93 available episodes of The Real World; 15 out of 45 episodes of Laguna Beach; four out of 12 episodes of Newport Harbor; 30 out of 102 episodes of The Hills; 15 out of 47 episodes of Jersey Shore.

Unit of Analysis

Individual characters in each episode were set as the units of analysis. The characters were identified prior to coding based on the cast list provided on the program website. Although multiple episodes of the same program were included in the sample, the shows had varying degrees of cast turnover by season. Also, each episode featured a theme or event, resulting in different roles for cast members and changing dynamics among them. A total of 622 characters were identified, among whom 376 (60%) were women and 246 (40%) were men.
Coding Variables

VISIBILITY: GENDER

As a viewer would assume while viewing, every character was classified into one of the two categories, woman or man, based on outward features (e.g., physical attributes, hair style, dress, voice, etc.).

VISIBILITY: RACE/ETHNICITY

Although characters’ appearance (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair texture, attire, etc.) and name served as the primary bases to determine their race or ethnicity, other information revealed during an episode and on the program website was also considered in the decision to classify the characters into one of these six categories: White, Black, Latino, Asian, mixed, and other.

AGENCY: PLOT CENTRALITY

Although all of the analyzed characters were regular cast members, not all of them were central to the plot of each episode. A character was determined central to the plot when the storyline of an episode would not sustain itself or would have to be altered significantly without the character. In making this decision, coders were instructed to ask themselves the following question: “Would the story be the same if this character were absent or replaced by another character?” This item was coded as a binary variable of “central” or “not central.” For example, in an episode of the Real World Denver, cast members Davis and Tyrie got into a verbal and physical altercation. Much of the episode sets the stage for this climactic confrontation at the end of the episode. Both Davis and Tyrie were thus deemed central to the plot because their absence would not allow the episode to function as desired.

RELATEDNESS: POPULARITY

A character was coded to be popular among the cast members—whether same sex or opposite sex—based on these criteria: (a) frequently talked about favorably by other characters in his or her absence; (b) shown to be visited by others and engage in a lot of dialogue and activities in his or her house/quarter of the house; (c) shown to have more than three friends outside of the core group. If a character met at least one of the above, the character was coded as “popular.” All others were coded as “not popular.” For example, in the first season of Laguna Beach, Lauren Conrad (LC) was routinely shown to be a popular character. Many episodes featured friends visiting her at her home, and others frequently talked about her positively in her absence.
Relatedness: Hated

A character was judged to be hated by other cast members if the person was a target of consistently negative comments and/or verbal/physical attacks by more than one cast member. For example, one comment from the Jersey Shore’s Snooki that contributed to fellow cast member, Mike, “being hated” was, “because you’re an *hole and we hate you and you’re a bad person and you were born in 1965.” “Being hated” was defined as a more severe, persistent, and socially isolating state than “being disliked,” a state defined here as describing transient conflicts between two characters. Again, each character was determined to be either “hated” or “not hated.”

ROMANTIC INVOLVEMENT: STEADY RELATIONSHIP

Characters were coded either to be in a steady romantic relationship or not, based on information revealed in each episode. If a female (male) character called someone her (his) “boyfriend (girlfriend)” or “partner,” the character was deemed to be involved in a steady romantic relationship. If two people went on a date during an episode but they did not acknowledge themselves as a couple and/or were open to other relationships, they were not considered to be in a steady romantic relationship. This was again coded as a binary variable.

ROMANTIC INVOLVEMENT: INTERGROUP RELATIONSHIP

When a character was identified to have a steady romantic partner, the race/ethnicity of the partner was examined to determine whether the relationship was between two different racial/ethnic groups or not. The criteria used to determine each character’s race/ethnicity were applied again to identify the partner’s race/ethnicity. Subsequently, a character was judged to be in an intergroup relationship if the character’s race/ethnicity was different from his or her partner’s. Otherwise, the character was determined to be not in an intergroup relationship.

ROMANTIC INVOLVEMENT: DESIRABILITY

A character was determined to be desirable when more than one person showed romantic/sexual interest in the person either through conversation (e.g., expressing the desire to date the character or praising the character’s sexual appeal) or action (e.g., flirting). Every character was assigned to one of these two categories, “romantically desired” or “not romantically desired.” For example, in multiple episodes of the first season of Laguna Beach, two cast members, Steven and Talan, pursued fellow cast member, Kristin,
through phone calls, prompts for dates, and visits to her home. Kristin was considered desirable in these situations.

Coding Procedure

Three graduate students served as coders. After multiple training sessions, all of them coded 12 episodes outside of the sample to calculate intercoder reliability scores. Because some measures yielded Krippendorff’s α reliability estimates under .8, the coders held additional training sessions. Randomly selected 12 episodes from the 91-episode sample were coded and the coders finally reached satisfactory levels of intercoder reliability for all of the coding categories: α = 1.0 for gender; α = .93 for race/ethnicity; α = .86 for plot centrality; α = .96 for popularity, α = .96 for hated; α = 1.0 for steady relationship; α = 1.0 for intergroup relationship; α = .97 for desirability. Afterwards, the coders evenly split the entire sample and coded the episodes independently.

Analysis

The makeup of different racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. population was available from the census data. Thus, visibility of the various groups in the shows (RQ1) was assessed by a statistical test comparing their percentages among reality show cast and among the U.S. general public. For plot centrality (RQ2), popularity (RQ3a), being hated (RQ3b), steady relationship (RQ4a), intergroup relationship (RQ4b), and desirability (RQ4c); however, no corresponding reliable social statistics were available and thus their percentages among the cast members were simply examined without further statistical testing. Instead, for RQ2–RQ4s, the percentage of characters featuring the examined attributes, as opposed to those who did not have them, was compared across the racial/ethnic groups to see if intergroup differences exist, even after the initial differences in visibility were accounted for. Furthermore, gender differences within each racial/ethnic group were examined and chi-square tests were conducted whenever the cell sizes were sufficiently large.

RESULTS

RQ1 Visibility

This research question asked how visible racial/ethnic minority women and men were among the characters of popular MTV reality shows. In comparison to the 2012 U.S. Census statistics (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), Whites were overrepresented while all minority groups, except mixed-race, were
underrepresented. Nonparametric tests with binomial option confirmed that the overrepresentation of Whites (88% vs. 64%) and underrepresentation of Blacks (7% vs. 13%), Latinos (2% vs. 16%), and Asians (0% vs. 5%) were all highly statistically significant, $p < .001$. The test result concerning mixed-race characters (3% vs. 3%) was not statistically significant, $p > .05$, leading to the conclusion that they were represented in proportion to their actual percentage in the U.S. population.

Within some racial/ethnic groups, gender imbalance was found. The percentage figures indicated that there were more men than women among Blacks and more women than men among mixed-race characters. Detailed statistics of characters simultaneously crosstabulated by gender and race/ethnicity are provided in Table 1.

RQ2 Agency: Plot Centrality

This research question explored how commonly racial/ethnic minority characters play central roles in the reality shows popular among young viewers. Racial/ethnic composition of the central characters was similar to that of group visibility, resulting in a disproportionately high percentage of non-Hispanic White central characters (89%) in contrast to the severely underrepresented Blacks (7%) and Latinos (1%). The percentage of mixed-race central characters (3%) was similar to their overall visibility in the general population.

When the ratio of central vs. noncentral characters within each group was examined, the intergroup disparities became even clearer. Among the entire 622 characters analyzed, 242 (39%) of them played a central role. The percentage of central characters among Whites (40%), Blacks (40%), and mixed-race (35%) was all comparable, $\chi^2(2, N = 609) = .172$, $p = n.s.$ In contrast, Latinos attained very low plot centrality (15%) and Asians showed zero centrality because of their complete invisibility to begin with. Because of the low expected counts of characters in the latter two groups, no statistical comparison between the high and low centrality groups was feasible.
When plot centrality between genders within each ethnic/racial group was closely examined, a difference between Black men and Black women was noticeable. Among Blacks, men (49%) were far more likely to be central characters than were women (10%), although the low count of Black women in central roles rendered a statistical test unobtainable. In other groups, no such gender difference was notable, including the only statistically testable difference between White women (39%) and White men (41), \( \chi^2(1, N = 544) = .185, p = n.s. \)

RQ.a Relatedness: Popularity

RQ3 inquired how common it is for racial/ethnic minority women and men to be popular among their fellow cast members. Whites (94%) accounted for the highest percentage of popular characters, followed by mixed-race characters (3%), Blacks (2%), and Latinos (0%).

The proportion of popular characters among all cast members was relatively small (14%). Within each group, the percentage of popular characters was the same for White and mixed-race characters (15%), which was much higher than the figures for Blacks (4%) and Latinos (0%). Still, the low counts of popular Black and Latino characters made statistical testing of the intergroup differences unviable. For the same reason, the gender difference within each racial/ethnic group was not statistically tested, except for Whites. A chi-square comparison confirmed no significant difference between White women (16%) and White men (14%), \( \chi^2(1, N = 544) = .592, p = n.s. \)

RQ3b Relatedness: Hated

This research question explored how common it was for racial/ethnic minority women and men to be hated by other cast members. The vast majority of hated characters were Whites (89%). Blacks (11) comprised the rest.

At the same time, the percentage of hated characters within each racial/ethnic group was higher for Blacks (13%) than for Whites (9%). In particular, a Black man (14%) was almost twice more likely to be hated than a White man (7%). None of the Latino or mixed-race characters were coded as being hated by their fellow cast members. There was no notable gender difference within each race/ethnicity, including the only statistically testable difference between White women (9%) and White men (7%), \( \chi^2(1, N = 544) = .685, p = n.s. \)

RQ4a Romantic Involvement: Steady Relationship

This research question inquired how common it was for racial/ethnic minority women and men characters in popular MTV reality shows to be in a
steady romantic relationship. The vast majority of those with a steady partner were Whites (94%), followed by the mixed-raced (4%) and Blacks (2%).

Although the low count of Blacks and complete absence of Latinos in a romantic relationship prohibited further statistical testing, a clear divide between Whites (21%) and mixed-raced characters (25%) on one hand and Blacks (4%) and Latinos (0%) on the other was notable. The first two groups were far more likely to be in a steady romantic relationship than the latter. There was little gender difference within each racial/ethnic group. The one statistical comparison conducted between White women (20%) and White men (22%) yielded a nonsignificant result, $\chi^2(1, N = 544) = .5, p = n.s.$

RQ4b Romantic Involvement: Intergroup Relationship

RQ4b was concerned with the frequency of intergroup romantic relationships. Less than 1% of characters, or four individuals, analyzed in the current study were engaged in a romantic intergroup relationship. When considering only those who had a steady romantic partner, the rate of intergroup dating was still only about 3%. All four characters in the intergroup romantic relationships were mixed-race women.

RQ4c Romantic Involvement: Desirability

This research question examined how commonly racial/ethnic minority women and men were romantically desired in popular MTV reality shows. A total of 99 characters (16%) were coded as “desired” by their fellow cast members. The vast majority of them were Whites (92%), followed by mixed-race characters (6%). The appearance of Blacks (2%) as desired characters was minimal and none of the Latino characters (0%) were romantically desired.

Similar to the results concerning steady relationships, a clear division between Whites (17%) and the mixed-raced (30%) in one camp and Blacks (4%) and Latinos (0%) in the other camp emerged when the percentage of romantically desired characters within each group was examined. However, the low frequency of Blacks and complete absence of Latinos in the “desired” category made a statistical test of this difference infeasible. In terms of within-group gender differences, further examination revealed a statistically significant gender difference among Whites. White men (25%) were more likely to be desired than White women (12%), $\chi^2(1, N = 544) = 16.03, p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

To advance our understanding of the portrayal of minority women and men in reality shows that are especially popular among young audiences, characters in a sample of episodes from MTV docusoap programs were analyzed.
In line with many previous studies that analyzed primetime programs and commercials (e.g., Messineo, 2008; Monk-Turner, Heiserman, Johnson, Cotton, & Jackson, 2010), Latino and Asians were severely underrepresented, whereas Whites were overrepresented.

In light of the fact that social learning and status motivations are primary reasons for young people to watch reality shows, current findings corroborate a previous audience study showing that non-White viewers of reality shows were less likely to identify with the characters than White viewers (Nabi et al., 2003). An autoethnography also poignantly illustrates the agony of a Black girl who kept searching for “people like her” on reality shows in spite of continued disappointment with scant representation of Black women and persistent negative stereotypes that often accompanied the few images that she found (Boylorn, 2008). Not being able to find someone who shares one’s social identity on popular MTV reality programming, often prized as the epitome of youth culture (Marks & Tannenbaum, 2011), may further exacerbate alienation from the mainstream culture and prolong the period of identity crisis among minority youths.

Although Asians have been underrepresented consistently, the complete absence found here is quite extreme. It is possible that producers of the reality shows might have subscribed—consciously or subconsciously—to the common stereotypes about Asians as physically inactive, social isolated, and not fun to be around (Lee & Joo, 2005; Mastro & Stern, 2003) and thus avoid casting them for the trend-setting shows. At the same time, having grown up with such perceptions of their social identity group, Asians might have refrained themselves from auditioning for the shows in the first place.

Latino women and men, in spite of now being the largest minority in the U.S., were scantily represented in the MTV reality shows analyzed. In fact, their visibility in these shows was poorer than in primetime programs (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Monk-Turner et al., 2010). Except for The Real World that began in 1992, all the shows analyzed here were produced after 2003 when the U.S. Census Bureau declared Latinos as the largest minority (Vries, January 21, 2003) and definitely more recently than the 1996 prime-time shows examined by Mastro and Greenberg (2000). Furthermore, Latinos were virtually invisible as central characters in the storyline or as characters who form significant relationships—whether social or romantic—with other characters (Table 2).

In recent studies and reviews, Blacks have been touted as a success story by having their media representation steadily improved both in terms of the numbers and the actual portrayal of attributes and activities they exhibit (e.g., Greenberg & Worrell, 2007; Mastro, 2009). The findings from this study could be considered as a setback in a subgenre that is quite significant in terms of the target audience and cultural implications. Overall, Blacks were significantly underrepresented. A closer examination based on show titles also revealed a twist. Blacks were not only underrepresented,
but completely absent in *The Hills* and *Newport Harbor*. In fact, these two shows featured zero minority characters out of their 169 and 27 characters each included in this study. *Jersey Shore*, the most recent hit, was not much different by featuring only four mixed-raced characters and not one Blacks, Latinos, or Asians. Similarly, *Laguna Beach* showed only two Black and two mixed-raced characters, with zero Latinos and Asians. *The Real World* was practically the only source of Black characters by featuring 63% Whites, 23% Blacks, 9% Latinos, and 7% mixed-race characters.

The nature of Black representation almost solely attributable to *The Real World* was highly problematic as well. A Black character was far less likely to be popular and more likely to be hated than a White character. Furthermore, a Black character was highly unlikely to be in a dating relationship or romantically desired by other cast members. The fact that the only characters involved in an intergroup dating relationship were of mixed-race highlights the indifference to the issue of intergroup relationship on the part of the cable network.

In contrast to these limited and discouraging representations of the primary minority groups, a completely new set of findings emerged regarding
the characters of mixed-race. In particular, mixed-raced women were found to be the most favorably portrayed group, even more so than Whites in some categories. Mixed-raced women were almost twice as visible in comparison to their actual percentage in the U.S. population and were also shown as central characters. They were as popular as Whites, without being hated at all. They were as likely to be in a steady dating relationship as Whites and the most likely to be romantically desired of all groups categorized by race/ethnicity and gender. This recognition of mixed-race people in the reality shows targeting the youth population can be considered a positive development. At the same time, the particular salience of mixed-raced women in romantic contexts in conjunction with the virtual absence of mixed-race men raises a suspicion that they might be mere reiterations of the old stereotypes about exotic ethnic/racial minority women, slightly modified to add to the aura of cosmopolitanism without being too different (Matthews, 2007).

To date, little attention has been paid to the media portrayal of mixed-raced individuals and more investigation is needed.

In spite of the interesting findings, this study is certainly not without limitations. First of all, the low counts of minority characters in the selected shows hindered more rigorous testing of intergroup differences and more detailed understanding of gender differences within each racial/ethnic group. Future studies examining the portrayal of racial/ethnic minorities should explore more creative solutions for this recurring problem (e.g., Greenberg & Worrell, 2007). One such solution may take a two-prong approach that accurately counts the number of characters in each group and then oversamples minority characters to closely scrutinize the nature of their representation.

Second, this study focused on a special subgenre of reality shows on a cable network. In comparison to even earlier primetime shows (Mastro & Greeberg, 2000) or reality dating shows on broadcast networks (Ferris et al., 2007), these shows are more limited in their representation of minorities. To get a bigger picture, researchers should expand the scope of analysis by including other reality shows heavily consumed by young audiences. Whereas the shows selected for the current study featured mostly privileged individuals, there are other shows specifically focusing on socially undesirable attributes of characters, and the racial/ethnic makeup of characters in these shows may be quite different from what were found here.

Another way to expand the scope of analysis is to include less commercially successful shows. If it is plausible that less successful shows feature more diverse casts with more positive representation, the selection of highly popular shows—extended beyond their first season—might have also contributed to the severely limited and negative depiction of minorities found in this study. A systematic comparison of the shows analyzed in this study and comparable, yet less commercially successful shows might be able to answer this intriguing question.
Last but not least, this study is inherently limited to revealing the content and cannot serve as evidence for any subsequent effects of exposure to these shows. Being aided by studies like this, though, researchers could design a survey or experiment better to examine the effects. Together, better understanding of the content of reality shows and their influence on young viewers’ social identity will be useful in monitoring and guiding media consumption of young people for healthy psychological development.

REFERENCES


