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“In a Competition Full of Hamburgers, You’re a Steak:” American Idol and the Role of Reality Television in the Maintenance of our Egos

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I graduated in May, 2008, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. This chapter is part of a larger thesis for the Gaines Fellowship in the Humanities. While an undergraduate student, I was involved within the Gaines Fellowship Program and the Honors Program. This work was presented as part of a panel at the 2008 Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Associations conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and as the 2008 Breathitt Lecture in the Humanities at the University

of Kentucky. While at the University of Kentucky, I was actively involved in research in several different areas. Working with my thesis committee, the interim director of the Gaines Center, and my psychology research mentor, I attempted to research and put forth information that is relevant to today's society but is not actively explored by members of academia. My experience with this Gaines thesis resembles what I believe to be the thesis process for Master's degree students; it was by far one of the most rigorous yet intellectually stimulating efforts I have completed in my undergraduate tenure. In the fall, I will begin a doctoral program in social psychology at Indiana University. The psychological issues that I discuss within this submission are issues that I will continue to explore in my research within the area of stereotyping and prejudice. I am interested in gaining a better understanding of the processes that we undergo in order to categorize other people and ourselves and the emotional and cognitive effects (i.e., increase or preservation of self esteem) of these categorizations.

Faculty Mentors:

Dr. Ron Pen, Professor, School of Music

Dr. Lisa Broome-Price, Acting Director, The Gaines Center

Katie Bruan has her finger firmly pressed on the pulse of the United States during the opening years of the twenty-first century. Observing attentively, she discerned that the juggernaut television "reality" show, *American Idol*, is a manifestation of our human condition revealed in the tripartite interactive relationship of contestants, judges, and audience. Katie documented the way that *Idol* reflects our aspirations and disappointments, our delusions and triumphs; and then she demonstrated the way in which we negotiate these sentiments through public reinforcement and humiliation. In particular, it is the public humiliation of the contestants that serves to validate our own personal self-worth and darkly feeds our *shadenfreude*, even while posing as wholesome, popular entertainment. I am delighted to see Ms. Braun's Gaines thesis transformed into this article for publication in *Kaleidoscope*. Her keen observation, articulate analysis, and engaging narrative postulated a cogent rationale for *American Idol's* remarkable popular reception and tenure. She is clearly "steak" in a world of "hamburger."



"In a Competition Full of Hamburgers, You're a Steak:" American Idol and the Role of Reality Television in the Maintenance of our Egos

Abstract

Over the past decade, reality shows have ascended to the top of the Nielsen rating charts and have assumed a dominance that is difficult to cast aside. One such reality show, *American Idol* has grown in popularity over its last six seasons. This chapter discusses one of the main arguments of a larger honors thesis that examines the underlying motives that keep American viewers watching. As a cultural commodity, *American Idol* can be viewed as a product of American values and holds a societal purpose for its viewers. Therefore, the arguments within this chapter propose that the great popularity enjoyed by *American Idol* is due to its ability to psychologically involve its viewers. More specifically, the psychological purposes of this show may lead to the amplified depiction of the humiliation of performing candidates. Current research within the field of media psychology suggests that the motives for viewing reality television can be explained by the uses and gratifications perspective, which includes the concept of social comparison, and by other more sociological means. The ability of social comparison to provide viewers the opportunity to protect and amplify their self-esteem is discussed. The potentially intensified emphasis on humiliation will be demonstrated through the aforementioned motives, due to their abilities to urge viewers to protect or increase their self-esteem.

Analysis

“You have invented a new form of torture,” “Shave off your beard and wear a dress. You would be a great female impersonator,” and “If your lifeguard duties were as good as your singing, a lot of people would be drowning” are a sampling of the brutal, and often quite accurate, comments that *American Idol* contestants and viewers have grown accustomed to hearing from one of the judges of the show, Simon Cowell, over the past six seasons. The seventh installment of the show opened earlier this year, as promised, with more outrageous and horrendous auditions by contestants with little singing ability; a majority of these contestants arrogantly asserted that they were the next *American Idol* and usually performed with the apparently sincere belief that they could sing well.

As in previous seasons, a large television audience, about 33 million people, tuned in for the first several episodes of the seventh season ready to view horrible auditions and to be a witness to the honest criticism and evaluation given to contestants (www.nielsenmedia.com). Although contestants and viewers have become more acquainted with the personalities and judging styles of the three judges with each passing season, they are still shocked by the blunt, and sometimes controversial, comments made by the judges. Over the past two seasons, these biting, personal critiques appear to be an intentionally, intensified focus of the show, thereby suggesting that humiliation may operate as part of the show’s popularity.

American Idol has been successful in many ways that other reality television shows have not. Not only has the show continued to dominate in its time slot no matter which day and time it is scheduled, the show has successfully launched the singing careers of its contestants and spawned 34 versions in other countries (www.americanidol.com). Undoubtedly, there are many aspects of *American Idol* that make it a satisfying, entertaining show to watch. As viewers, we are shown the interactions between the judges and the behind-the-scenes preparations, and we are given the opportunity to vote for our favorite contestants. We wait for the few performances that are so sublime that we are drawn to tears or are so awful that we try to contain our laughter. It is a fantastically successful formula, one that has many of us devoting two or three nights of each week to it.

By offering viewers the opportunity to witness the entire audition process, *American Idol* presents a novel format to its viewers and advertizes itself as a true look into the music industry. The process begins at massive open auditions, where thousands of contestants arrive days in advance in order to camp out in the extensive audition line. Due to the large numbers, many of the contestants do not make it to the final three-judge panel,

which includes Paula Abdul, Randy Jackson, and the notorious Simon Cowell. The show’s producers choose who will get the chance to perform in front of the celebrity trio (Cowell, 86). Undoubtedly, the producers deliberately push forward the craziest and worst performers while passing over the somewhat talented contestants. Why? With each progressing season, the number of viewers who watch the opening episodes and those who watch the season finale grow closer (www.nielsenmedia.com). The beginning stage of the audition process, in which the worst performances and the harshest comments are given, has become almost as popular to watch as the crowning of the contest’s new star.

American Idol’s depiction of the audition process is not always popular. After criticisms that are deemed to be unjustifiably cruel, viewers and the media community denounce this element of the show, as if the show, in their judgment, has crossed the fine line between what is entertainment and humiliation to them. A recent example includes one of season six’s opening auditions in which Simon Cowell made ridiculing comments about one contestant who appeared, and was later confirmed, to have a developmental disorder. Kenneth Briggs was stopped quickly into his audition and told that he couldn’t sing. Cowell deepened the blow by comparing Briggs’ face to that of a bush baby (Kelleher and Alexander, 1).

The day after the aforementioned controversial audition, *American Idol*’s audition process was fiercely debated. Although the judges responded that their comments were not meant to be insensitive, personal attacks, the long-standing discussion about the negative aspects of reality programming re-emerged. For those who refuse to watch reality television, their boycott received greater credibility, and more people, including Larry King, became attracted to their cause. Humiliation was charged as the driving force behind the show. Interestingly, critics claimed that the humiliation does not end in the first round of the auditions but is present throughout the whole process. Although the process of revealing which of the finalists will be sent home each week is purposefully prolonged and ends with the contestant’s repeat rendition of the song that has sent him/her packing, audiences do not react to this subtle form of humiliation as they did when Simon called someone a bush baby. Has *American Idol* truly gone too far? Or have we, as viewers, finally realized that the elements that draw us to our favorite shows are not so innocuous? In order to satisfactorily answer these questions, we must first understand how reality television emerged as a dominant, stand-alone genre.

Television programming is sensitive to changes within its interdependent relationship with the American viewing populace; the entertainment industry

changes when there are dramatic shifts in audiences' viewing preferences or drastic changes in the world that television attempts to mirror. Therefore, when the first "reality programs" hit prime-time television, the emergence of reality television as a genre appeared inevitable. Reality television, as the genre exists today, first appeared as the MTV hit series *The Real World* in 1992. By filming, for an extended amount of time, ordinary people in a novel environment with a group of diverse strangers, the producers Bunim and Murray were able to capture the pulse of a changing preference in television programming.

Unlike earlier examples of reality television, such as *Candid Camera* and *Cops*, *The Real World* offered a complete narrative for viewers and a greater opportunity for viewer involvement (Baker, 58). *Candid Camera* and *Cops* both offered a real sequence of events, but the shows did not provide the viewers with the information necessary to become psychologically close to the portrayed individuals. Viewers did not know who the people were, what they were thinking, and why they acted the way they did by the end of the program. The desire for the real has been satiated, but the longing for intimacy and inclusion were left unfulfilled by these examples of montage-like reality programming (Friedman, 273-275).

After the success of *The Real World*, major networks began investing time and money in exploring the new possibilities within reality programming. The major networks were at first anxious about devoting much of their efforts to reality programming because the use of ordinary people as characters was viewed as a risky business venture. Additionally, contemporary reality shows, such as *Cops* and *America's Funniest Home Videos*, were low budget productions that showcased video footage from family home videos, wild police chases, and vicious animal attacks. These shows were not appointment viewing shows; instead, viewers chose them by default after checking the shows available on other channels. Nonetheless, the success of *The Real World* in reaching out to the elusive, young adult audience persuaded the major networks of NBC, ABC, CBS, and FOX to try their luck at reality television.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *The Apprentice*, and *American Idol* made their entry onto the small screen. Across networks, producers and writers attempted to duplicate the success of these shows with their own versions, but the producers soon found that the original series held the greatest success. Because reality shows require smaller production costs and could penetrate different demographic areas of the viewing public, the networks were willing to throw out ideas without completely contemplating the shows' potential impact or problems. In 1999, only

four percent of prime-time shows were reality programs. By the 2003-2004 season, thirteen percent of prime-time shows were reality programs; twenty-one shows were on the six major networks alone (Andrejevic, 20).

Through reality television's dominance in the Nielsen ratings, its popularity is apparent, but less is known about the pleasure and enjoyment received by viewers, which motivate them to continue watching. Although there is not a large base of existing research on this topic, several early findings offer insight into the motives that draw us to subject our ears to horrible singers. Reiss and Wiltz offer the sensitivity theory as a possible means to understand the motives that draw us to watch. Sensitivity theory asserts that there are sixteen basic desires that motivate our behaviors. We are pushed to satisfy the basic motives that are most relevant to each of us by paying attention to the things that can lead to the satisfaction of the motives we value most. We act on these motives to experience the corresponding joy. For example, we may be motivated to physically exercise in order to feel the joy of vitality, or to seek or maintain a certain level of status in order to feel the joy of self-importance (Reiss and Wiltz, 363-366).

Reiss and Wiltz state that these motivations can be experienced through vicarious experience. Although the joys that result are subdued in intensity and short-lived, vicarious experience is still a useful way in which we are able to satisfy our basic motivations. Television emerges as a perfect medium for this process because it allows viewers to conveniently experience the sixteen joys repeatedly without having to expend more than minimal effort. Additionally, they found that "status is the main motivational force that drives interest in reality television" (373). This finding is not too surprising considering that a big draw to reality television is the fact that the characters are average people like the viewers who watch. When motivated by status, viewers can therefore receive the gratification of self-importance by perceiving that they hold a status similar to the ordinary people on the show; we may even fantasize that we can gain celebrity status like them. When the viewers perceive themselves as being of higher status than the ordinary person portrayed, viewers may feel an increased level of self-importance, especially so if the ordinary person is described as holding a lower-status occupation such as a pizza deliveryman.

Although the sensitivity theory may pinpoint specific motives that are at work within reality shows, the theory does not suggest what specific elements of reality programming allow for the complex gratifications we receive. Nabi et al (2006) have expanded the understanding of the psychological needs that reality television fulfills through the uses and gratifications perspective. This theory holds that a wide range of gratifications

exist for viewers. This perspective contends that we are aware, at some level, of our own needs and that we try to find media forms that will provide the gratifications we seek.

Specifically, concerning talent or competition reality programs, Nabi et al. found that these shows promoted the "judging others" gratification, and talent programs additionally supported parasocial relationships. We would expect shows that choose an eventual winner, especially those who have talent as the judging criterion, to satisfy the desire to judge others. In addition, talent shows can expectedly induce viewers to pick a favorite contestant with whom they will identify and form a relationship despite never having met or spoken with him or her. Although these programs did not show an effect specifically for comparisons made between the viewer and the shows' characters, this subgenre of reality television offers the gratification of judging others, a prerequisite for a social comparison to occur. Therefore, it is possible that, as viewers, we are comparing ourselves to reality television characters in order to maintain or evaluate our egos, without our full awareness.

Within the area of social psychology, there is an extensive literature concerning social comparisons. These judgments we make on a daily basis may appear to be trivial, but research has shown that they are a major factor in shaping our self-concepts. For example, how do you know if you are a good singer? You listen to recordings of your own singing, and you compare your singing with people who are of the same perceived age and ability as you. From a social comparison perspective, *American Idol* can provide this kind of social comparison that may enhance a person's self-evaluation or ego. This perspective assumes that we prefer a positive, self-evaluation and that we will seek the comparisons in a way that flatters the self (Tesser, 446). Although it is a statistical impossibility for each of us to be above average, we like to believe we are. We achieve the creation and maintenance of this self-concept through two prominent processes: reflection and comparison. The determination of which process we use is based upon three variables: the closeness of the other person we are comparing ourselves to, the outcome of the task, and the relevance of the task for us when making our self-evaluation (Tesser, 446-448).

During the first rounds of the show, all three variables involved in making social comparisons exist. The contestants are perceived to be psychologically close to us because good, mediocre, and poor singers are all showcased. All of the contestants want to become music stars, so they share the relevance for the task of obtaining a greater level of personal status that most of us share. Lastly, the judges decide whether or not each

contestant will continue on in the competition based upon his/her performance and perceived talent. When a contestant's audition is horrendous, our self-evaluation is maintained and even possibly enhanced. For example, you may know that you are an okay singer, but after a couple of bad auditions on *American Idol*, you may begin to see yourself as having greater talent than previously believed, when compared to the average singer. The beauty within *American Idol* is that, unless you have competed on the show, your own talent is not publicly compared against the contestants. Therefore, you may be the worst singer in the world, but by watching *American Idol*, you perceive your singing ability to be better than those who are rejected. In these instances when our positive self-evaluations hold, we feel positive emotions such as happiness and pride.

Conversely, when a contestant does amazingly well in his/ her first audition, our self-evaluation may be challenged. As with the progressing rounds of the competition, one would expect the best of the group to continue on to the final round. How can the continued viewership be explained once the opening episodes are over and the bad singers are dismissed from the competition? Although the opening rounds of auditions solicit greater viewership than the rounds between the beginning of the selection process and the season finale, *American Idol* continues to top the Nielsen ratings throughout the whole season (www.nielsenmedia.com). Therefore, viewers must have found a way to reconcile the acceptance that some average people have greater talent than they with their positive self-evaluations.

When others perform better than we do, we may distance ourselves from the contestants in one of two ways. When we perceive that a contestant is better than we are, we can decrease our identification with that contestant, possibly switching allegiances to another contestant who may not be as vocally strong. This possibility can explain how several of the contestants, who experience an early departure from the show, have the most successful careers in the music industry. We may distance ourselves from the contestants who are too good and become closer to contestants who have faults and appear more like us in order to maintain our positive self-evaluations. The most likely strategy is for us to decrease the relevance of the competition by considering the show to be only a singing competition and not one to establish a higher level of status.

With this possibility, we can still remain close with our favorite contestants by utilizing reflection processes instead of comparison processes. If our favorite contestants perform well, we can now reflect in their success without the distress of feeling inferior to them. In fact, we may even intensify our allegiances by viewing a success for them as a success for both us and them. Cialdini

(2001), a social psychologist, describes this particular process as BIRGing, basking in the reflected glory of others. Viewers could act much like the participants in his studies; individuals show open support for those they reflect with after victories by using language such as “we won.” If the reflected others lose or fail, individuals are more likely to describe the loss as a loss for “them” (Cialdini, 168).

Although *American Idol* may provide opportunities for both reflection and comparison, the show features mostly the comparison processes through large and small examples of humiliation. Comparing better with others not only boosts our egos, but it also may add to the enjoyment of the show. The producers have found that the structure of the show provides a double opportunity for us to feel good about ourselves. When others who are like us do not do well, we can feel good. When others with whom we reflect do well, we also feel good. In the attempt to maximize the pleasure of ego inflation, producers have walked the fine line between entertainment and humiliation by allowing the humiliation of contestants who are arrogant and appear deserving of such feedback.

Even a habitual viewer of *American Idol* may find that it is sometimes difficult to hold off cracking a smile or laughing out loud when observing the horrible auditions that characterize the opening episodes. For many of us, there is at least one contestant toward whom we knowingly feel happiness when he or she fails. These common experiences allude to the presence of the social emotion of *schadenfreude*, the feeling of pleasure experienced upon someone else’s misfortune or failure. Psychologists have isolated two factors that help in the determination of the expression of *schadenfreude*. If the person deserves the misfortune and is perceived to be similar to us, *schadenfreude* is likely to emerge (Feather and Sherman, 2002; Van Dijk et al., 2005). Deservingness is established when the individual foresees the potential misfortune but does not act to stop its occurrence or arrogantly dismisses the possibility of failure. With this knowledge, we can understand how *American Idol* provides us the opportunity to feel *schadenfreude*. Although this emotion is considered to be a socially undesirable feeling to openly express, we can feel free to be happy when an extremely arrogant contestant declares to the judges and the audience that he or she will be the next *American Idol* and then performs dreadfully; the sense of comeuppance is an intense sentiment to experience.

Viewers of *American Idol* can potentially feel *schadenfreude* when humble contestants fail, but the expression of *schadenfreude* will most likely be reduced in intensity. This may occur when viewers have their own similar outcomes upon which they can draw. If a

viewer has received negative criticism pertaining to his or her singing ability or to his or her overall ability to be successful, the viewer may be more likely to feel a degree of *schadenfreude*, even if the contestant is perceived as humble and undeserving of the failure. It is tempting to assert then that a part of us enjoys watching others fail, but we should be reminded of the backlash from the “bush baby” audition.

When the audition aired, members of the media were not the only group upset; viewers were outraged too. Part of the viewers’ response may be dictated by social norms because individuals attempt to conform to what is accepted behavior and fear being personally implicated in any action that breaks a social norm, such as humiliating an undeserving individual (Asch, 277; Chekroun and Brauer, 863). Although overt humiliation has a long history of acceptance, the society of the twenty-first century considers humiliating someone as an action that goes against social norms; the only apparent exception is when the humiliation is exacted as part of the punishment for some criminal act (Baumeister, 17-18). This argument cannot be the sole influence for the distress and uncomfortable feelings that viewers feel when a contestant on *American Idol* is humiliated. Viewers are upset on more levels than this social one. Individually, they recognize that pleasure is exchanged for pity and sympathy extended toward the contestants. Therefore, failing may not be as entertaining as first thought, unless deserving and arrogant contestants, who are not easily pitied, are the contestants involved.

Although our present society exhibits a highly individualistic, and often competitive, nature, we rely upon interpersonal relationships to gain a sense of where we stand among our peers not just in regard to talent but to acceptable behavior. In this globalized world, we are more aware of the behaviors and beliefs of others. Most instances of humiliation do not occur in private, therefore there are witnesses “who observe what happens and agree that it is disparagement” (Klein, 113). We, as witnesses, are in the position to determine, even if by gut feeling, the boundary between what is entertainment and what is humiliation. We should be reminded that the entertainment industry is dependent upon us to watch. Therefore, shows that we choose not to watch will likely be cancelled, and producers will have to find new or resurrect old elements to keep viewers watching.

There have been fewer reality television programs on the major networks in the past couple of years with the exception of the months following the recent writers’ strike (Friedman, 28). Although the decrease can be attributed to viewers’ potential boredom with this genre of television, it is possible that viewers have established a mental rubric, which can assist in determining the shows that have gone too far. *Superstars USA*, a talent

show that borrowed *American Idol's* format, attempted to find America's worst singer but left the contestants completely unaware of their purpose. When the media became aware of the great lengths to which the show tried to disguise this purpose, going as far as telling the audience that the contestants were terminally ill and to perform on stage was their life-long dream, the show was boycotted by the small numbers who were watching, and later cancelled. As the reality television boom was begun by viewers like us, the evolution of shows like *American Idol* into a tool for humiliation can be stopped by us when we stop watching.

To view videos that exemplify some of the points made in this article, go to: www.youtube.com Keywords: "Kenneth Briggs American Idol 6," "Simon Cowell Insults at His Best Part I and Part II," "The Worst American Idol Auditions Ever," "Kristy Lee Cook 'Forever' Elimination American Idol Season 7," "WB's Superstar USA Mario Rodgers vs. Jamie Duet Finally"

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