

WELCOME TO ADVERTAINMENT

A Capstone Experience Manuscript

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## Preface

After reading In Persuasion Nation, by George Saunders, I was intrigued by his mockery of our consumerist society. Prior to reading this book, I had taken a few courses concerning advertising with Sut Jhally, and felt as if I was well-versed in how consumer driven our modern American society is. However, somehow George Saunders with his great sense of humor and brutal honesty combined with satire made me even more critical about what our society has turned into.

Saunders's short stories mock and challenge both advertising and reality television in a wittingly, disturbing, and exposing manner. Of course as a viewer of television in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I watch reality television programming and am heavily exposed to advertising. I have always been intrigued or fascinated rather by my devotion to "my shows" especially *The Hills* on MTV. I could never understand why it is that even though I know, *The Hills* isn't "real," I still faithfully tuned into MTV, at 10 pm, every Monday night, even if it meant I had to forfeit other plans or dash like a mad woman to my room at 9:58. Or that I even still watched it after three seasons of knowing it isn't real. I was often forced to think about these issues whenever someone would ask "Why are you in such a hurry or why can't we meet at 10:15?" and I would simply answer "*The Hills*, DUH."

Needless to say, George Saunders gave me an excuse to critically think (and write an excessively long research paper also known as a thesis) about reality TV, *The Hills* and advertising. Although, I still cannot answer the question of why I watch *The Hills*, I have done an extensive amount of research that brings me much closer to answering that question. Additionally, I have been afforded the opportunity to create a product that will reflect my years at the University of Massachusetts Amherst as a Communication major.

I hope that Saunders can inspire intellectual curiosity, critical thinking and leave a lasting impression on the incoming students of *The Honors Seminar Series*, for whom we chose this book.

## I. Review of Literature

### A. Reality Television

There is a great deal of controversy about how to define popular non-fiction television also known as "reality television." Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, in the second edition of Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture, claim that reality television includes the traits of minimal writing and the use of nonactors and is an "unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of real." They argue it is this very definition of reality TV that makes it a "generic forum" for a range of developments that include the "merger of marketing and "real life' entertainment" among other things (3). Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, also attempt to define reality TV in Understanding Reality Television, referencing the work of Kilborn, in which he claims, Reality TV can be conceived as:

- A recording 'on the wing', and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals and groups;
- the attempt to simulate real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction;
- the incorporation of this material in suitably edited form into an attractively packaged television programme which can be promoted on the strength of its reality credentials. (qtd. in Holmes and Jeremyn 2)

Annette Hill claims "reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama (2).

Many authors also grapple with the issues of defining the relationship between representation and truth in reality TV shows. The concept of how much reality exists in Reality TV is just as controversial and ambiguous as trying to define it. According to

Clissold in “*Candid Camera And The Origins of Reality TV*”, “even though programmes are of course highly edited and constructed works, they still give the impression of being more ‘real’ than the other TV programming with which they compete in the ratings” (49). Here, Clissold makes an argument for the real in Reality TV by claiming it to be more ‘real’ than other TV programming. Similarly, Pullen, in his essay “Gay Identity and Reality TV”, claims “There is equally a necessary ambiguity here in that Reality TV has popularly been referred to as using ‘narrativisation’, ‘casting’ and ‘characters’ in the manner of soap opera...” (215). He continues stating that “While the producers of Reality TV clearly play a significant role in ‘characterising’ the participants, who do not of course get to ‘represent themselves,’ this is nevertheless not analogous to scripted drama” (215). Here, Pullen, like Clissold, makes the distinction between reality TV and other TV programming in which the concept of real is more obviously absent. Additionally, Pullen states “In the construction of the ‘reflexive reality environment’, producers and performers both possess ambivalent power to suggest the definition of the ‘normal’, the ‘extraordinary’, the entertaining and the periphery of ‘everyday’ existence” (227).

On the contrary, Gillan, in “From Ozzie Nelson to Ozzy Osbourne: The genesis and development of the reality (star) sitcom,” claims “Even though Reality TV can claim to be less contrived than such sitcoms given that it is unscripted, its producers deliberately cast players who represent a spectrum of different personality types and thereby guarantee that the group members will interact with each other in volatile and often predictable ways” (55). Gillan also writes, “One of the principal ways in which Reality TV programmes attempt to create meaning is through the illusion of transparency: the attempt to capture life ‘as it happens’, unedited and unmediated” (57). David

Escoffery, in How Real Is Reality TV?, claims that in a reality show, there is a representation which purports to present “the truth.” In this case, Escoffery defines the representation as “a TV program created for entertainment purposes” and “the truth” as the unscripted real activities of real people. Murray and Ouellette insist that this reality TV genre, despite its many formats, provides its viewers with an “unmediated, voyeuristic and often playful look” into the so called entertaining real (5).

In order to better understand Reality TV, it is important to understand the context from which it emerged. Murray and Ouellette give a brief historical background to reality TV, asserting that popular reality TV can be traced to existing formats such as the quiz formats of the late 1950s in which real people were placed in dramatic situations with unpredictable outcomes and stage prank shows like *Candid Camera* (4). Not since the quiz show craze has any nonfiction entertainment program dominated the network prime time schedule as reality TV has (Ouellette and Murray 6). Ouellette and Murray also claim that it was not until 1991, with the premiere of MTV’s *Real World*, that the many “textual characteristics” that define reality TV’s current form, emerged. Holmes and Jermyn also shed light on the economic, technological and institutional nature of the television industry in recent years, claiming that changes have been stimulated with the “impetus toward privatisation, deregulation, and the emergence of new distribution technologies” (13).

Simultaneously, the development of cable and satellite channels has increased the reach of television as well as helping television to cater to niche audiences. Reality programs were first aired on cable stations during prime-time. After the success of *Survivor* on CBS, networks began to follow suit (Ouellette and Murray 6). Television

networks are constantly in competition for who can hold the attention of viewers the longest, especially with the increase of channel availability. Because of this, there is more pressure for ‘watercooler TV’ programs -programs that generate conversation around the watercooler in the office (Holmes and Jermyn 14). Palmer, in “‘The New You’: Class and transformation in lifestyle television,” claims Reality TV is “cost effective and linked to the retail economy and, furthermore, that [this] form is low cost and repeatable” (174). Hill claims that “the late 1980s and 1990s were a period of increased commercialisation and deregulation within the media industries” (23). According to Raphael, in “The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV,” primetime producers faced an average cost of over \$1 million per episode for an hour-long drama by the end of the 1980s and costs were increasing by roughly 8 to 10 percent a year (126). These rising costs, most of which were made up of “above the line” costs such as scriptwriting, music composition, talent, direction, and location costs, were accompanied with smaller per-show revenues. Raphael claims “in 1986, producers were losing up to \$100,000 per episode per episode for half hour shows and 200, 000 to 300, 000 for hour dramas” (127). Additionally, there was a greater demand for stars, those whose names were associated with a prior record of success, in order to lessen the chance of the failure of a new show. In light of this economic situation, production companies and the networks began to cut costs by cutting back on staff. NBC shed 200 union jobs, in 1987 and by 1992 had eliminated 30 percent of its news division through layoffs and bureau closings (Raphael 127). In addition to the economic issues of the television industry, according to Raphael, the 1988 Writers’ Strike proved to be significant in the rise of reality TV (127).

Ted Magder, in “Television 2.0: The Business of American Television in Transition”, argues that the once coveted “Must See TV” on CBS which “embodied the classic elements of American Network Television” has progressively been replaced by reality television programming. Magder also argues that reality TV has largely influenced the changes in the business of American television, claiming that “the emergence of reality TV is most certainly part of the general effort to reduce production costs and financial risk” (149).

Reality TV encompasses a variety of formats or subgenres which include game shows, ‘real crime’ programming and make over TV (Holmes and Jermyn). The docu-soap format is the one that will be examined and discussed, as it the format for a number of Reality TV shows found on the MTV network. According to Dictionary.com, a docusoap is “a television documentary that follows the life of its characters, esp. a family or people of the same occupation, over time” (“docu-soap”). Gillan cites in her essay, “The term ‘docu-soap’ itself was coined by journalists keen to dismiss this new brand of factual television, which, in their estimation, contaminated the seriousness of documentary with the frivolity of soap operas” (60). Furthermore, Gillan states that docu-soaps “offer a documentary mode of representation that vacillates between observation and performance and is intended to be consumed by viewers who are both voyeurs and judges of the performance” (57). The docu-soap format combines ‘the factual/realist mode of the documentary with a privileging of the private, personal narrative values of the soap opera’ (Gillan 57). Susan Murray in “I Think We Need a New Name For It”, cites Stella Bruzzi who points out that non-fiction programs “combine many of the textual and aesthetics characteristics of direct cinema (handheld camerawork, synch

sound, focus on everyday activities) with the overt structuring devices of soap operas (short narrative sequences, intercuts of multiple plot lines, mini cliff hangers, use of a musical soundtrack, and a focus on character personality) (67). According to Jon Dovey, docu-soaps are considered examples of “first person media, a type of media that often foregrounds private issues at the expense of wider public debate about social and political issues” (qtd. in Hill 10).

Understanding the viewers of reality television is vital in trying to understand reality TV as well. Hill says “What audiences have to say about their experience of watching reality programmes is paramount (2). Murray and Ouellette claim “Despite the promise of “real” that hooks audiences, audiences are still very much aware and skeptical about the authenticity of reality TV programs (6). Yet, it is this very concept of authenticity of situations, people, discourses etc. that becomes the chief selling point of reality TV. “Audiences, Gillan cites, look for the moment of authenticity when real people are “really” themselves in an unreal environment” (58).

Gillan also refers to Hill when she says “Viewers arrive at their interpretation of a moment as a ‘real’ one through a combination of the knowledge they believe they have acquired about the characters and the knowledge they believe they have of themselves, and, ‘how they would act in a similar situation’ (qtd. in Gillan 59).

Hill says “Reality TV may be popular, but audiences are able to make distinctions between what they perceive to be good and bad reality programming” (9). She continues stating that “when audiences watch reality TV, they are not only watching programmes for entertainment, they are also engaged in critical viewing of the attitudes and behaviour

of ordinary people in the programmes, and the ideas and practices of producers of the programmes” (9).

Despite the various elements that characterize, define, make up and create reality television as well as the various commentary offered about reality TV, one thing that is agreed upon across the board is how pervasive reality TV has become in such a short span of time. According to a vast array of authors, Reality TV, in its various formats, has been able to resonate with its audience and redefine the business of television.

## **B. Advertising Industry**

In discussing advertisements and their place in society, Paul Rutherford in The New Icons?: The Art of Television Advertising, claims “advertising works its magic by using the tools of both spectacle and rhetoric to create pleasing images” (5). He asserts that commercials are a form of art because of their ability to merge “the world of symbols and the world of goods” (5). Rutherford claims “commercials have offered both realistic and crazed reflections of daily existence, of common fantasies, of accepted stereotypes, all of which make them the richest source of commentary on contemporary civilization” (6). Albert Lasker, one of the pioneers of advertising, defined advertising as “salesmanship in print” (qtd. in Randazzo 1). An even more direct way of defining advertising is as “truth well told,” stated by the McCann Erickson Advertising Agency (qtd. in Randazzo 1)

Randazzo, author of Mythmaking on Madison Avenue, claims “The unique power of advertising lies in its ability to build and maintain successful, enduring brands by creating perceptual entities that reflect the consumer’s values, dreams, and fantasies” (1). He also claims, “Advertising turns products into brands by humanizing them and giving them distinct identities, personalities, and sensibilities that reflect our own” (1).

Advertising’s most potent weapon is the concept of branding. As Randazzo says, “a brand is both a physical and perceptual entity. The perceptual aspect of a brand exists in psychological space, in the consumer’s mind (6). He claims “advertising allows us to access the consumer’s mind, wherein we can create appealing mythical worlds and characters” (Randazzo 10). Brand image and brand identity (often used interchangeably) are primarily important. Randazzo reports, “A brand’s image is a distillation of many factors: advertising, packaging, labels, product experiences, logos, and so on” (18).

Advertisers generally help to shape a brand's identity as it becomes increasingly important (Randazzo 19). Additionally, brand positioning, both in the marketplace and in the consumer's mind is "a crucial first step in developing and marketing a brand" (Randazzo 23). In this case, advertising, according to Randazzo, "creates a brand mythology that communicates important product-based and emotional/psychological benefits, which in turn work to position the brand" (24).

Rutherford explains the very beginning of commercials as when New York's WEAJ broadcast the first sponsored message on radio in 1922 (11). During this time, mass advertising began to stress the ability of goods to meet emotional needs or to create needs that had not been there before (Cox 17). From 1900 to 1920 advertising volume increased at an annual rate of nearly 9 percent (Cox 18). Cox, in Sold On Radio: Advertisers in the Golden Age of Broadcasting, claims that in less than a decade, the American system of broadcasting secured "the salesman [as] the trustee of the public interest with minimal supervision by a commission" (qtd. in Cox 18). He states, "The concept of radio's dependency upon advertising to pay its bills gradually evolved into general acceptance (18). According to Karen Buzzard in Electronic Media Ratings: Turning Audiences into Dollars and Sense, in the early days of radio, sponsors bought *air time*, a block of 15 or 30 minutes that they could fill however they wanted. Since advertisers produced most of the programs, the show would often carry the sponsor's name and the entire show was essentially a commercial (3).

Television, introduced in 1945, inherited the same structure of radio (Jhally) and soon after, in the early 1950s, it surpassed radio as an advertising medium (Rutherford 11). This is in part because of how swiftly television spread in the United States. By 1960,

three nationwide networks as well as 515 stations were able to reach 45, 750, 000 households (Rutherford 12). Additionally, by 1960, the television industry was earning over \$1.5 billion a year in ad revenues, making TV the leading medium in national advertising (Rutherford 12). Furthermore, in 1960, most ads ran sixty seconds or more which allowed ad makers the space and time to explain their brand and present it in a way that would fully convey their message to viewers (Rutherford 12).

The original format of advertising shifted from one advertiser controlling one show to multiple sponsorship or spot selling. In the case of spot selling, networks controlled programming and many advertisers bought spots in between programming, even those who before this could not afford to (Buzzard 4). A spot that only costs Bulova Watches \$9 on NBC in 1941 cost a buyer \$400,000 in 1990, during NBC's top ranked *'The Cosby Show.'* Television networks now sell the time blocks at the highest possible profit, which varies depending on the time of day, audience size, and demographics of the audience (Rutherford 171).

Because of the loss of control by advertisers, ratings became crucial. Buzzard says, "Advertisers sought methods to ensure that the network delivered the desired audiences and soon took a more active role in dictating audience research" (4). Thus, Nielsen ratings and their Cost Per Thousand (CPM) theory emerged and made it possible for advertisers to purchase a particular audience. The other method used to evaluate ratings was the Audimeter, now known as the household meter, which is a recording device attached to television sets themselves (Buzzard 6). Buzzard summarizes the importance of ratings in a pithy manner when she says, "the reason for ratings is that advertisers seek a unified system of manufacturing, distribution, marketing, and pricing that is objectively

based. What advertisers really want to know is whether their advertisement result in a sale” (Buzzard 12).

With the advancement of technology, advertising has been both aided and impeded. Advertisers are able not only to reach more people but also more specific people, their target audience. This is possible with the rise of cable and satellite television as well as the internet. However, remote controls, VCRs, TiVo, etc., all devices that allow viewers to skip advertisements, prove to be a huge problem for advertisers. By the 1990s, Network TV began a decline from 90% to a 65% share of the TV market (Buzzard 10).

Some authors, such as Kevin J. Clancy and David W. Lloyd, claim the effectiveness and efficiency of television advertising has declined. They credit media fragmentation, television fragmentation, advertising clutter, zapping and zipping, and rising costs to the decline of advertising effectiveness (1). They state, “today there are six broadcast television networks, almost 200 cable television networks, literally thousands of special interest magazines, hundreds of FM radio stations ...and the Internet, which today has more World Wide Web Sites than one could visit in a lifetime” (1). Randazzo, on the other hand, says, “Advertising is still the most powerful tool businesses have for building and maintaining brands” (25).

One of the most monumental changes in advertising was the switch to lifestyle advertising which was pioneered by the campaigns of Marlboro cigarettes, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi-Cola. Suddenly, drinking Pepsi was not merely buying a soda to quench one’s thirst, but instead, it said something about one’s personality and way of life (Rutherford 37). Lifestyle advertising can be thought of as the branding of certain lifestyles that lead

people to a deeper connection with products as opposed to one product or brand. In part, due to this shift, advertising became more influential and more powerful. Consumers were now expressing their personality through a product and were linked to a particular way of life (Rutherford 37). While creating an effective ad cost around \$6,000 in 1965, by the mid-1980s, the average cost for an effective ad was about \$200,000 (Rutherford 171). Lifestyle advertising proved to be influential when Marlboro's sales jumped from 6.4 billion in 1955 to 19.5 billion in 1957 after launching their campaigns with the trademark cowboy (Rutherford 39).

Despite debates on how effective advertising is now or how challenging it has become to achieve efficiency, there is no doubt that advertising is everywhere and permeates contemporary America.

## **II. Introduction**

There is a great deal of controversy about how to define popular non-fiction television also known as "reality television." In recent years, reality TV has become a catch-all phrase, making it harder and harder to define precisely. The term reality TV may be a misnomer given that the shows are often scripted, programming is heavily edited and casting for reality TV stars is similar to that of actors and actresses. Once used to describe shows like *Cops*, reality TV has taken on various forms and is actively marketed by producers, and most enthusiastically embraced by viewers (Holmes and Jeremyn). Despite the continuous debates on defining reality TV as a genre, it is clear this medium has permeated contemporary American society and has claimed a place at the forefront of contemporary television culture (Holmes and Jeremyn).

Simultaneously, the prevalence of advertising in contemporary American society has increased. Advertisers have gone beyond selling and branding products to selling and branding people, as well as lifestyles. Reality TV has emerged as a genre of television exceptionally well suited for new experiments in product placement and corporate sponsorship (Leppert and Wilson). Examining the docu-soap format, in particular, it is arguable that advertisers seized the reality TV genre in order to enhance the strategy of lifestyle branding as well as to commodify reality TV.

Lifestyle branding, according to Joseph Turow, arises from processes of increased market segmentation, where "the new portraits of society that advertisers and media personnel invoke involve the blending of income, generation, marital status, and gender into a soup of geo-graphical and psychological profiles they call 'lifestyles'" (qtd. in Leppert and Wilson, par. 27). It seems that it is no longer about the value of a product but instead it is about the lifestyle associated with a product. Lifestyle branding "relies

less on demographically imagined audiences— characterized by shared gender, race, or income— and are instead engendered to speak to the identities, experiences, and values of particular lifestyle groups” (Leppert and Wilson, par. 27). This is to say that lifestyle branding has a different effect on the relationship between consumers and products by creating a more personal and emotional connection with consumers.

The participants of a reality TV show may potentially make lifestyle branding strategies more effective because of how intensely viewers identify and idealize the lifestyle of these people. In the case of idealizing reality TV show participants, even if a product may not be attainable, viewers are more inclined to dub the product as a must have item in order to identify with their idol much more closely. In part, viewers/consumers build a personal and emotional connection with these people that lead to the emotional and personal connection they have with a product. Additionally, being able to identify with these participants lead viewers to believe products are much more attainable than they really are. Furthermore, reality TV shows provide viewers with continuous opportunities both to watch how reality TV show participants consume and to consume as they do. In light of all of this, “advertainment” emerges.

### **III. Reality TV**

“Why would she do that? She is such an asshole! OMG! Who really just does that or even says that?” It’s Monday night and televisions all over the world are tuned into *MTV*. Viewers are shouting at their TV screens, huffing and puffing every time a commercial comes on, and swearing the clock is wrong when they realize that thirty minutes has passed. “I can’t believe her! How could she just throw away her friendship over something so stupid? I didn’t like her from the beginning. If I were in her shoes...” Welcome to the medium that has claimed its place at the forefront of contemporary television culture, reality television.

In general, television has a salient presence in contemporary culture. Someone somewhere is watching something on TV most of the time. 50 percent of the time Americans spend with media is with TV. On average, each American household watches over 1,600 hours of TV a year.

In the recent years there has been a surge of reality television shows on all networks, all over the world. Due to this, the term reality TV has become a catch-all phrase. Many attempts to define reality TV have sparked controversy among scholars. Annette Hill, Professor of Media at University of Westminster and author of several books focusing on media audiences, claims “reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama” (Hill 2).

Rather than defined, reality TV is often characterized. Its traits include the use of minimal writing and nonactors (Murray and Ouellette 3). Richard Kilborn, senior lecturer in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of Stirling in Scotland, more explicitly addresses the traits of reality TV, stating that reality TV can be conceived as:

- A recording ‘on the wing’, and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals and groups;
- the attempt to simulate real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction;
- the incorporation of this material in suitably edited form into an attractively packaged television programme which can be promoted on the strength of its reality credentials.

Here, Kilborn describes the nature of reality TV programming. Although these traits may not define reality TV in precise terms, emphasizing the format traits that most reality TV shows share, helps to define the genre.

The most controversial trait of reality TV is its blurring of fact and fiction (Holmes and Jermyn). The relationship between representation and truth in reality TV is a source of great trouble. Although reality TV gives the impression of being more “real” than situational comedies or various other programming with which they compete in ratings (Clissold), “its producers deliberately cast players who represent a spectrum of different personality types and thereby guarantee that the group members will interact with each other in volatile and often predictable ways” (Gillan 55). Equally, Bruzzi claims, “the closer one gets to the document itself the more aware one becomes of the artifice and the impossibility of a satisfactory relationship between the image and the real” (qtd. in Pullen 227).

In addition, the content characteristics of reality TV make it more slippery to define. Gillan in describing *The Osbournes*, a reality TV show that premiered on MTV in 2002, explains “*The Osbournes* offers us all of the melodrama of a soap opera, the real-

time footage of the documentary, the voyeuristic snooping of the celebrity house tour, the interaction of the incompatible and competing personalities of the ‘gamedoc’, all combined with the themes, issues and framing of a sitcom” (57). The additional element Gillan does not mention is the blurring of fact and fiction. A show like *The Osbournes*, in addition to combining all of these elements, also purports itself as reality or truth. Viewers are less likely to question the truth of the show and the family shown because it falls underneath the genre of reality television. It is often common knowledge that sitcoms and dramas are scripted, and although viewers may still identify with the content of a sitcom or drama, they are removed from it, simply because they know it isn’t real. The underlying assumption however, is that reality TV is undoubtedly real, when instead it is “popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (Murray and Ouellette 3).

Despite the debates on the discrepancy between how much reality or truth is in reality TV, it is clear that reality TV provides its viewers with an entertaining real that keeps them tuned in (Murray and Ouellette).

Reality television can be traced back to quiz show formats of the 1950s in which real people were placed in dramatic situations with unpredictable outcomes. Examples of this include shows like *The Price Is Right* or *Candid Camera*. However, not until 1991, with the premiere of MTV’s *The Real World*, did reality TV include the textual characteristics that currently define reality TV, emerge (Murray and Ouellette).

Additionally, the economic context from which reality TV emerged helped it to prosper and very quickly. The development of cable and satellite channels not only allowed the increase in the reach of television and catering to niche audiences, but also

increased competition among television channels (Murray and Ouellette). Increased competition as well as the dilution of advertising spending created pressure on broadcasters and cable casters to cut per program production costs. The invention of VCRs, fragmentation of audiences and spreading of advertising revenues among a larger pool of distributors, among other factors, also led to the emergence of reality TV as a fiscal strategy. Primetime producers faced an average cost of over \$1 million per episode for an hour-long drama by the end of the 1980s with costs increasing by roughly 8 to 10 percent a year (Raphael). These soaring costs, most of which were made up of “above the line” costs such as scriptwriting, music composition, talent, direction, and location costs, were accompanied with smaller per-show revenues. Raphael claims “in 1986, producers were losing up to \$100,000 per episode for half hour shows and 200,000 to 300,000 for hour dramas” (127).

Notably, there was a greater demand for stars whose names were associated with a prior record of success in order to lessen the chance of a new show failing [For example, in the top five most expensive 30-second commercial slots during the 2000-2001 season, according to *Advertising Age*, was the hit sitcom *Friends* on NBC at \$540,000]. Each half-hour episode of *Friends* cost \$5.5 million [a cost made up of the licensing fee NBC paid to Warner Bros. Television] in order to air each show twice and control all advertising placed around the shows and the 22,500 per episode five-year contracts of the six main actors and actresses that soared to \$1 million an episode by 2002 (Magder). Needless to say, scripted sitcoms as well as dramas are extremely expensive to produce, with costs that only increase over time.

In light of this economic situation, production companies and the networks began to cut costs by cutting back on staff. NBC, for instance, shed 200 union jobs, in 1987 and by 1992 had eliminated 30 percent of its news division through layoffs and bureau closings (Raphael). Furthermore, large amounts of debt accrued by the three major networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC, after being sold in the mid- 1980s and changes in audience measurement techniques, designed to identify niche audiences, led to production budget cuts (Raphael).

Reality TV, with its lack of need for high-priced stars and union talent, came as a saving grace to producers and distributors. In addition, the 1988 Writers' Strike, which delayed the opening of the fall season, proved to be significant in the rise of reality TV (Raphael). Not only did this strike draw attention to the progress of reality TV shows, as they were largely unaffected by the strike, but also allowed producers and programmers to fabricate potential future shows that did not rely on writers. Best articulated by Peter Brennan (of *Hard Copy*), who when asked about a possible SAG strike in 1992, said "Remember the Writers Guild Strike in '88...that was the year that gave rise to reality TV" (qtd. in Raphael 129). It became clear that reality TV was a savvy economic solution to a television financial crisis.

Reality TV led to large cuts in production costs. In the early 1990s, while one hour dramas and 30-minute sitcoms were losing \$100,000 to \$300,000 an episode, reality TV was the only division of prime-time programming that was not deficit-financed (Raphael). "NBC's Must See TV embodied the classic elements of American network television: to capture and hold a large audience over the course of an entire evening with a mix of situation comedies and one-hour dramas," says Magder. "NBC reigned supreme

atop the network heap. That reign came to an end in 2003. Must See TV now serves as a nostalgic reminder...” (Magder 141). Using NBC as an example, Magder points out the deterioration of sitcoms and dramas with the rise of reality TV.

The reality TV program *Survivor* is a prime example of reality TV’s sudden reign over the business of television programming. *Survivor* reached over 50 million people with its season finale in the summer of 2000. Instead of paying a license fee like they did for *Friends*, CBS shared advertising revenue yielded from *Survivor* with the producer. Advertisers, realizing that *Survivor* wheeled in viewers in the 18-49-year-old age bracket, paid close to 12 million dollars each even before the show aired (Magder). This allowed for the covering of production costs and lucrative success for the CBS network. Overall, *Survivor* cost less to produce with its lack of writers, actors, etc., reached an enormous amount of viewers and brought in more money to networks and producers in a quicker amount of time.

Additionally, reality TV’s ability to sell abroad has made it even more appealing to producers and network investors (Raphael). Basically, prime-time reality TV shows earn back production costs after the first U.S. showing allowing for any other syndication to become pure profit.

Due to cultural and social resonance of reality TV programming as well as the aforementioned reasons, it has become a part of the business model of American television.

In order to lessen the confusion when labeling reality TV shows, various genres including game shows and ‘real crime’ programming (Holmes and Jermyn), have been established. Additionally, there is the docu-soap or docu-show format. Not only is this

formatting very successful in the television industry but it is very often used on *MTV*, one of the major cable television networks. The popularity and prevalence of this genre even earned it a place in the dictionary. According to Dictionary.com, a docu-soap is “a television documentary that follows the life of its characters, esp. a family or people of the same occupation, over time.” Gillan cites in her essay, “The term ‘docu-soap’ itself was coined by journalists keen to dismiss this new brand of factual television, which, in their estimation, contaminated the seriousness of documentary with the frivolity of soap operas” (Gillan 60). The docu-soap format can be best described as the combination of direct cinema which includes handheld camerawork, synch sound, and focus on everyday activities with soap operas which include short narrative sequences, intercuts of multiple plot lines, and a focus on character personality (Murray). Furthermore, as Gillan states, docu-soaps “offer a documentary mode of representation that vacillates between observation and performance and is intended to be consumed by viewers who are both voyeurs and judges of the performance” (57).

#### **IV. Advertising and Television**

"It is important not to oversimplify matters in dealing with advertising.

But we also must not underestimate or neglect advertising's influence upon

us as individuals and its influence upon our society and culture.

Advertising now permeates American culture and has affected, in profound ways, everything from our food preferences and our body shapes to our politics." (Berger 21)

Advertising is one of the central institutions in American society. Not to mention, Americans are exposed to advertising more than people in any other society. Some estimate that Americans are exposed to 15,000 commercial messages each day (Berger). Rutherford claims "it is almost impossible in North America to escape advertising, whether at home, on the street, in the car or on the subway, at the doctor's office, at the movies, or anywhere else" (6). It is fair to say that "not only does advertising shape American culture; it shapes Americans' images of themselves" (qtd. in Berger 1).

New York's WEAJ broadcast of the first sponsored message on the radio in 1922 marked the very beginning of the commercials we are all so familiar with in our modern society (Rutherford). During this time, mass advertising began to stress the ability of goods to meet emotional needs or to create needs that had not been there before. From 1900 to 1920 advertising volume increased at an annual rate of nearly 9 percent (Cox). In the early days of radio, sponsors bought *air time*, a block of 15 or 30 minutes that they could fill however they wanted. Since advertisers produced most of the programs, the show would often carry the sponsor's name and the entire show was essentially a commercial (Buzzard). In 1926, RCA set up NBC as the first radio network with each station reaching a particular audience, generating income primarily from advertising. Soon thereafter, CBS, their rival network formed in 1927. Not only did CBS generate

money from advertising but they allowed direct advertising. In this same year, although the FRC was established to allocate broadcast licenses, instead of passing a Radio Act that would allow for a mixed system of public and commercial, they chose a commercial system that would sell audiences to advertisers (Jhally)

Television, introduced in 1945, inherited the same structure of radio (Jhally) and soon after, in the early 1950s, it surpassed radio as an advertising medium (Rutherford 11). This is in part because of how swiftly television spread in the United States. By 1960, three nationwide networks as well as 515 stations were able to reach 45, 750, 000 households (Rutherford 12). Additionally, by 1960, the television industry was earning over \$1.5 billion a year in ad revenues, making TV the leading medium in national advertising (Rutherford 12). Furthermore, in 1960, most ads ran sixty seconds or more which allowed ad makers the space and time to explain their brand and present it in a way that would fully convey their message to viewers (Rutherford 12).

When the media for advertising shifted from radio to television, the marketing strategy (how marketers perceive consumers) shifted from non-rational to motivational research. Similarly, the advertising strategy shifted from product symbols, where consumption is social and based upon how others see you to personalization, where consumption becomes related to identity and based upon how you see you. In this way, the elements in advertisements went from focusing on product qualities and symbolic attributes to the product and personal prototypes (Jhally).

The original format of advertising shifted from one advertiser controlling one show to multiple sponsorship or spot selling. In the case of spot selling, networks controlled programming and many advertisers bought spots in between programming,

even those who before this could not afford to (Buzzard 4). A spot that only costs Bulova Watches \$9 on NBC in 1941 cost a buyer \$400,000 in 1990, during NBC's top ranked *'The Cosby Show.'* Television networks now sell the time blocks at the highest possible profit, which varies depending on the time of day, audience size, and demographics of the audience (Rutherford 171).

Because of the loss of control by advertisers, ratings became crucial. Buzzard says, "Advertisers sought methods to ensure that the network delivered the desired audiences and soon took a more active role in dictating audience research" (4). Thus, Nielsen ratings and their Cost Per Thousand (CPM) theory emerged and made it possible for advertisers to purchase a particular audience. The other method used to evaluate ratings was the Audimeter, now known as the household meter, which is a recording device attached to television sets themselves (Buzzard). Buzzard summarizes the importance of ratings in a pithy manner relating, "the reason for ratings is that advertisers seek a unified system of manufacturing, distribution, marketing, and pricing that is objectively based. What advertisers really want to know is whether their advertisement results in a sale" (Buzzard 12).

Paul Rutherford claims "Advertising works its magic by using the tools of both spectacle and rhetoric to create pleasing images" and that advertising in the form of commercials, has "offered both realistic and crazed reflections of daily existence, of common fantasies, of accepted stereotypes, all of which make them the richest source of commentary on contemporary civilization" (6). Randazzo explains, "Advertising turns products into brands by humanizing them and giving them distinct identities, personalities, and sensibilities that reflect our own" (1)..

Markedly, the most monumental change in advertising was the switch to lifestyle advertising. In this case, the marketing strategy became market segmentation and the elements in an advertisement began to focus on the product and activity, people and settings (Jhally). This was pioneered by the campaigns of Marlboro cigarettes, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi-Cola. Suddenly, drinking Pepsi was not merely buying a soda to quench one's thirst, but instead, it said something about one's personality and way of life (Rutherford). Lifestyle advertising can be thought of as the branding of certain lifestyles that lead people to a deeper connection with products as opposed to one product or brand. In part, due to this shift, advertising became more influential and more powerful. Consumers were now expressing their personality through a product and were linked to a particular way of life (Rutherford 37). While creating an effective ad cost around \$6,000 in 1965, by the mid-1980s, the average cost for an effective ad was about \$200,000 (Rutherford 171). Lifestyle advertising proved to be influential when Marlboro's sales jumped from 6.4 billion in 1955 to 19.5 billion in 1957 after launching their campaigns with their trademark cowboy (Rutherford 39).

Generally advertising works by having advertising agencies purchase space in order to advertise. These spaces include newspapers, magazines, billboards, the internet, and more recently reality TV programming. Ads are designed in order to attract the attention of people within certain demographics for a product or service. Advertising agencies have the propensity to target people of the 18-34 demographic. According to Dee, brand loyalty, the concept that claims if you get your audience early, you will be able to have the customer's fidelity for life, is what has led to the 18-34 age bracket as the

target demographic. In essence, advertisers advertise in hopes that their advertisements will move people from desiring a product or service to purchasing that product or service.

It is often argued how effective advertising really is on individuals. Advertising agencies and marketing companies often claim that they have very little to no effect on consumers, when being attacked. However, they must prove to their clients that they have some effect on the purchasing choices of consumers. It is often hard to prove the direct effects of an advertisement on a consumer. Because of this, Berger argues that the social-psychological model for measuring the impact of advertisements should focus on advertising as a cultural phenomenon, measuring cultural behavior and the collective unconscious, rather than individuals or groups of individuals. Also, because advertisements are a large part of our cultural experience, they teach us, even if incidentally, about life and how to live it. Again, although test studies may show advertising plays no significant role in the decision making of an individual, understanding advertising as a cultural phenomenon leads to the understanding of how pervasive advertising is and how it shapes American culture as well as the images of Americans themselves.

The social effect of advertising, according to David Potter is "to make the individuals like what he gets-to enforce already existing attitudes, to diminish the range of choices, and in terms of abundance, to exalt the materialistic virtues of consumption" (qtd. in Berger 23). Additionally, "advertising manufactures desire and shapes it and thus creates people who are insatiable and who have been conditioned to continually lust for more things" (Berger 29). Advertisements also serve as a spotlight upon an aspect of ordinary life, be it marriage, homecoming, sexual display, partying, etc. ( Rutherford).

Due to this, lifestyle programming, arguably, is especially effective because it incorporates all of these aspects and more. In light of this, one product or several can be associated with several aspects of ordinary life, which, in turn, creates more incentive to purchase it. Berger claims commercials employ "all the techniques of the theater and the cinema to achieve their aims. They use language brilliantly, they are dramatic, they employ the most sophisticated techniques of lighting and editing, they have wonderful actors who use body language and facial expressions to get their message across..." (13) Reality TV shows, particularly the docu-soap formats that include lifestyle programming employ the same techniques, thus being synonymous to commercials. Reality TV shows however, hold the attention of an audience for much longer, include more narratives and themes simultaneously, and create a more in depth personal connection with viewers. Thus, reality TV programming emerges as a suitable space for advertisers to enhance the strategy of lifestyle branding as well as a space suitable for commercialization especially when there is a limit for commercial time.

## ***V. MTV and The Real World***

The Music Television Network (*MTV*) was created by American Express and Warner Communications, two of America's largest conglomerates, in the late 1960s (Denisoff). During that time, it is said that *MTV* was able to help revive a sluggish record business with music videos and a few years later, with the apparel industry suffering from heavy price cutting, designers had hoped that *MTV* could revive their industry as well (Denisoff). Denisoff claims "there is no doubt that *MTV* was the prototype for a marketing strategy on Fashion Avenue" (261). *MTV* is "almost a subliminal fashion show," said Judy McGrath (qtd. in Denisoff 258).

Fast-forward to decades later and *MTV* undoubtedly continues to have a major impact on the aforementioned industries as well as various other industries. *MTV*, now owned by Viacom, one of the largest global media empires, reaches 300 million households in 83 countries worldwide (Craig and Douglas). Its brand identity is extremely strong and appeals to teens throughout the world. Programs can be rapidly distributed through *MTV* Europe, *MTV* Latin America, *MTV* Brazil, *MTV* Asia, *MTV* India, *MTV* Mandarin, *MTV* Japan, *MTV* Australia, and *MTV* Russia. *MTV*'s brand identity even extends to *MTV* Books, *MTV* Films, and *MTV* On-Line, as well as to more than 50 international licenses. Not to mention, *MTV* On-Line has become the most heavily visited area of America Online (Craig and Douglas). According to Viacom's website, "From music to fashion, politics to lifestyles and sports to trends, only *MTV* offers fresh, honest and innovative content across linear and on-demand screens." In addition, the website claims *MTV* is "entertainment for the way our audience lives."

In the case of *MTV*, presence in multiple geographic markets strengthens its visibility and perceived value of the brand to teens and young adults. "The pervasiveness

of the brand and its projection of a common music and video culture create a universal language that bonds young adults in markets throughout the world,” claim Craig and Douglas (19). Craig and Douglas do not mention here however, that *MTV* goes beyond the music and video culture and lends itself to an online culture and a programming culture, which includes reality TV programming.

It seems as though through reality TV programming, *MTV* is the most effective in providing lifestyles for its audience. *MTV* has also been able to define and redefine reality TV via its various options and stages of reality TV programming. According to Murray and Ouellette, the use of textual characteristics that currently define reality TV emerged from *The Real World* on *MTV*.

The producers of *The Real World* were influenced by *An American Family* when developing the format for *The Real World*. Their original intention had been to make a soap opera, but, due to over budget costs, they decided to use real people, hence developing a ‘living soap’ (Pullen 215). Hartley claims, “How to live together ‘with tolerant mutual accommodation’” was one of the central aspects of *The Real World* (qtd. in Gillan 55). *The Real World* is characterized as casting young adults in order to ignite conflict and dramatic narrative in a house with cameras and microphones and ‘employing rapid editing techniques in an overall serial structure’ and arguably ‘trained a generation of young adult viewers in the language of reality TV’ (Ouellette and Murray 5). According to Viacom’s website, *The Real World*, connects with its audience by delivering cutting-edge music and topical, real-life situations.” Thus, *The Real World*, combines elements of other forms and genres of television programming, such as soap operas and melodramas, with a cast of “real people” who change each season. The

narration given over the title sequence describes *The Real World* best when it states, “This is the true story... of seven strangers... picked to live in a house...work together and have their lives taped... to find out what happens... when people stop being polite... and start getting real...*The Real World*.”

It is worthy to mention when *The Real World* first aired in 1992, it dealt with a lot of serious issues that were present in American society, through its cast. It included an emphasis on the difference between black and white, working class and middle class, gay and heterosexual as well as religious tensions (Pullen). *The Real World* forced viewers to pay more attention to issues such as HIV/AIDS and homophobia, rather than products and brands.

The best example of this is *The Real World San Francisco* (1994), which featured Pedro Zamora, a homosexual, AIDS educator living with the syndrome and of Cuban descent (Pullen). In the second episode of the series titled “Love Stinks,” in the following scene, real issues of religion, disease, and the effects of ignorance emerge:

**Pedro: I think out of everybody, the only two people that I have friction with is Rachel and Puck. Rachel, her religion tells her, I am evil because I am gay. If that’s where she’s coming from, there’s a barrier there (pounds fist into hands) because we are never going to be able to sit at the same table.**

*(The Real World, episode 2)*

It is clear that Pedro feels uncomfortable knowing that Rachel's religious beliefs conflict with his identity. Rachel confirms this conflict when she speaks directly to the camera and says the following:

**Rachel:       Some people might say oh that's ignorant, we all know HIV cannot be transferred, but you know what I don't know; I've never lived with anyone with HIV.**

*(The Real World, episode 2)*

Both Pedro's sexuality and his disease raise profound issues that make the audience as uncomfortable as Rachel is. It also raises very important questions about education, especially in the realm of sexually transmitted disease. In this case, *The Real World* can be seen as a site of transgression, as it places such issues on public radar.

Notably in this scene, there are no logos present and the camera shots focus on the overall scenery of the house and mostly zoom in on the faces of the housemates. At one point, Puck and Pedro go to the grocery store and although there are camera shots of the food inside the grocery store, we do not see any food labels nor do we know what grocery store they are in. Equally, back at the house, Pedro is pouring soda into a cup and the soda brand is unidentifiable. Within this same scene, Puck even compliments Rachel on her shoes and even though Rachel looks down at her feet, the camera does not follow. Lastly, towards the end of the scene, a mini argument between Puck and Pedro takes place about a jar of peanut butter that has been noticeably stripped of any logo or branding.

Later in the season, producers air a very controversial exchanging of vows between Pedro and his partner. As Munoz states, “The scene of two men of color, both HIV positive, in bed together as they plan what is the equivalent of marriage is like none that was then or now imaginable on television” (qtd. in Pullen 227). Again, in its early stages, *The Real World* can be seen as a site of transgression, placing serious issues at the forefront of the show’s discourse.

As time has passed, the content of *The Real World* although it still deals with serious and deep moral issues, among a plethora of things, is now known mostly for its display of constant personality clashes, fights, and drama even more so than ever before. Ken Tucker in an Entertainment Weekly article titled “The Real World: Philadelphia (2004-2005),” claims:

“By now, *The Real World* has become as quaintly, reassuringly predictable as a Road Runner cartoon, or a P.G. Wodehouse novel. We know that certain conventions will be observed. Upon arrival at the house — in this case, a big stone heap in downtown Philadelphia — some participant will comment on the excellence of the living arrangements (“Our bathroom is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen in my life!”); someone will divulge gratuitous personal information (“I’ve always been comfortable with my body, especially with my boobs, because they’re not really mine”). *The Real World* has become comfort food for people who can remember vividly the last time they got loaded and barfed up their comfort food.”

Here, Tucker describes the predictability, as well as the triviality of the content of *The Real World*.

Although more serious issues may be undermined by trivial matters on *The Real World*, it would not be fair to completely discredit *MTV*'s effort to deal with serious issues on its network and within *The Real World*. Instead, *MTV* has established a variety of reality TV programming that has adopted similar textual characteristics of *The Real World*, which preserve *The Real World* as a site of transgression. Among these programs is *MTV*'s *The Hills*.

## **VI. Lauren Conrad, The Hills and Lifestyle Branding**

Randazzo claims, “Within a perceptual brand space we can create appealing mythical worlds and characters that, through advertising, become associated with our product, and that ultimately come to define our brand” (8). Randazzo uses the Marlboro Man as the classic example of a mythical brand character that has come to define a brand, Marlboro cigarettes. Arguably, the Marlboro Man, established in 1955, has been replaced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a different kind of mythical character, the so-called every day, real people who star on reality television shows. The best example of our modern Marlboro Man is Lauren Conrad (LC), narrator and star of MTV’s *The Hills*. One of the main differences between the Marlboro Man and Lauren Conrad, besides the fact that Lauren is a person, is what they each represent.

While the Marlboro Man clearly represents and defines Marlboro, the cigarettes, as well as concepts such as masculinity, strength, and freedom, Lauren represents much more and cannot be tied to one product or brand. In fact, Lauren herself, the person, has become the product and brand. The Marlboro Man, used in a campaign, caused the sale of Marlboros to jump from 6.4 billion in 1955 to 19.5 billion in 1957 (Rutherford 39). *The Hills*, above and beyond a campaign, is MTV’s highest rated reality TV series with its Season three averaging 3.9 million viewers (Stack). “With Lauren Conrad, a whole generation of women see themselves in her,” says Tony DiSanto, MTV's exec VP of series programming and development (qtd. in Stack). This notion of women seeing themselves in Lauren Conrad lends itself to Randazzo’s notion of perceptual brand space. Lauren Conrad (both our character and brand) in the mythical world of *The Hills* has been able to invade the psychological space of the consumer’s mind.

This is not the first time a person or glamorized lifestyle has been used in order to push the agenda of advertisers. Television and film celebrities have been connected to products for years. For example, there are the famous “Got Milk” ad campaigns that feature a vast array of celebrities. However, there is something different about *The Hills* and Lauren’s role.

What do *The Hills* and Lauren have to do with advertising and consumers exactly? Well, through *The Hills* and Lauren, advertising has become much more pervasive. Not only has it become much more pervasive but advertising is no longer as concerned with just the value of a product. Instead the lifestyle associated with products becomes more salient. The significance of lifestyle is explained best by Mike Featherstone, as he relates:

“The new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance, and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle. The modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but also home, furnishings, decoration, car, and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste.” (Qtd. in Berger 24)

This has been seen before in the aforementioned Marlboro campaign as well as in Coco-Cola and Pepsi campaigns. However, more recently, one’s lifestyle (Lauren Conrad’s) on a reality TV show (*The Hills*) as opposed to a campaign for a product is what is being sold. Using a reality TV show rather than a campaign enlarges the mythical

world, thus creating a larger space for products to be associated. It is this very method that causes advertising to be more pervasive. Arguably, advertisers want and need this increased space in order to be more effective. And so, rather than wanting just the lipstick or bag seen on a commercial or on Lauren, one also wants to eat at the same restaurants, go to the same clubs and go on the same vacations Lauren goes on in addition to the lipstick and the bag because one product no longer sends the message of taste, rather one's lifestyle does. Furthermore, Leppert and Wilson state, "Through branding Lauren's lifestyle, *MTV* provides the viewer who aspires to be Lauren or be like Lauren with never-ending opportunities to consume as Lauren does" (par. 2). Within this increased space, provided by a reality TV show, viewers are exposed to more products. When the identification with Lauren and her lifestyle is added, viewers also associate more meaning to more products.

Palmer claims, "Lifestyle programming in all its forms operates on exactly this assumption-that all goods function as signs of identity-they tell others who we are" (178). Lauren's goods play a large role in telling us the story of who she is and for those who identify with Lauren, acquiring the same goods as her allows them to communicate aspects of their own identity, but as it relates to Lauren and her lifestyle. As Palmer relates, "The significance of reality TV, and lifestyle programming in particular, may lie in the ways in which it helps to mould and to legitimize our class membership" (189). Notably, a show like *The Hills*, because of its promise of reality and its claim to the discourse of the real, is much more effective in doing so as well as in convincing viewers of what goods can communicate their identities best, than, say, a thirty second commercial for a single item.

There are a number of things that make Lauren and *The Hills* much more influential or more effective than a repeated commercial on television or an ad campaign. For one, viewers tune into *The Hills* voluntarily which can hardly be said for a commercial. On the contrary, viewers do everything they can to skip commercials with devices such as TiVo or methods like zipping (switching channels during commercials with a remote) and zapping (fast forwarding using VCRs or now DVD players) (Clancy and Lloyd).

Secondly, Lauren is a *real* person that viewers can connect to. Hill claims “Viewers arrive at their interpretation of a moment as a ‘real’ one through a combination of the knowledge they believe they have acquired about the characters and the knowledge they believe they have of themselves, and, ‘how they would act in a similar situation’” (qtd. in Gillan 59). In this way, the knowledge acquired about *The Hills*’s cast, and more specifically, Lauren, combined with the knowledge viewers believe they have of themselves, makes Lauren seem more real to viewers than she may be. This, in turn, leads to the belief of more ‘real’ moments on *The Hills* and provides the show with more credibility. In order to truly understand how Lauren has been able to convince viewers of her realness, as well as her influence and lasting impression, one must learn of Lauren’s history and rise to stardom.

Lauren Conrad, once known as or referred to as LC, began her reality television career on MTV’s *Laguna Beach*. *Laguna Beach* debuted in September of 2004, soon after the teen soap opera, *The O.C. The O.C.*, set in Orange County, California represented the so-called fake Orange County because of its use of script, actors, and actresses. *Laguna Beach*, on the other hand, according to MTV.com, “featured gorgeous teens leading

glamorous lives” and allowed viewers to discover “what lay beneath the surface of this seemingly perfect community” in the “real Orange County.” One of the main plots of *Laguna Beach* was the love triangle between Lauren, Stephen Colletti, and Kristin Cavallari, which marked the beginning of the relationship between viewers and LC. *Laguna Beach* went on to last for three seasons. In the first episode of the first season, Lauren, as the narrator of the show introduces everyone in the cast and dubs herself as always having been “the nice one.” Lauren’s traits of being nice, considerate and sweet are apparent throughout the season and are constantly commented on by her peers. It is these traits that cause viewers to relate to her more than the other female characters of the show.

The second season of *Laguna Beach* often features LC although she was no longer a part of the regular cast, reinforcing the connection between her and viewers. During the second season, on the episode titled “I Saw You Kiss Her,” LC and a friend of hers organize a benefit titled “Fight the Slides” to help the victims of a recent land slide incident. Lauren is dating Jason, who is a part of the regular cast and who has also recently gotten out of a relationship with Jessica (who is also a part of the regular cast). In the scene titled, “Did I Just See That,” Jason and Jessica are seen frolicking the entire night and one of LC’s friends draws attention to Jessica sitting on Jason’s lap. It is very obvious that Jason is enjoying the attention and that he makes no attempt to move Jessica or get away from her. When he returns to LC’s side the following conversation takes place:

**LC: I don’t like other girls in your lap.**

**Jason: Babe, she just sat down. I just wanna be with you. Sorry, I didn't mean to make you mad.**

**LC: It makes you mad when I *talk* to a guy. You had a girl dancing in your lap.**

*(Laguna Beach, episode 15)*

Here, LC makes it clear that she is upset about what she just saw and Jason apologizes in an attempt to move on as quickly as possible. LC will not just let go or brush the topic aside and so, Jason is compelled to explain himself. Part of the conversation below is one that most people would be familiar with, having been in a relationship or having had friends in one:

**LC: We need to talk.**

**Jason: I didn't know what to do. (walking away from LC)**

**LC: Just talk to me for a minute.**

**Jason: What do you want to talk about?**

**LC: you make it so hard Jason.**

**Jason: I do?**

**LC: Like what was the point of that, do you still like Jessica?**

**Jason: I wanna be with you too, but it's just like annoying like that you don't trust me. It's like...(trails off)**

**LC: I don't trust you?**

*(Laguna Beach, episode 15)*

Watching this conversation take place between the two of them, viewers feel bad for LC, as they know her relationship history from the previous season of Laguna Beach. Not to mention a conversation that took place among Jessica and her friends earlier in the scene, in which one of them says “she’s not the smartest cookie when it comes to guys either.” Additionally, it sets up the events that follow. Firstly, LC directly takes out her frustrations on Jessica.

**Jessica: Why are you looking at me funny?**

**LC: Right now you are a very rude girl. You're sitting on everyone's laps. You're dancing around. You need to-**

**Jessica: (cutting LC off) Whose lap was I sitting on?**

**LC: get your makeup. Well you should know that k? So you jus wanna put your make up on-**

**Jessica: (cutting LC off) Whose lap was I sitting on?**

**LC: I can't even talk to her she's like a 2 year old right now. Jessica- just fix her makeup put on her clothes and make her walk. If she falls, it's her own fault.**

*(Laguna Beach, episode 15)*

Even LC's friend, Jen, calls her out saying, "You were such a bitch to Jessica" and LC admits that she got just a little angry. Jen claims that she has never seen LC act in such a way and viewers can say the same. Soon afterwards, as if matters could not get worse, Lauren walks towards the back of the room and sees Jason and Jessica kiss.

As the episode wraps up, LC points out, "You know what I'm not in high school anymore, I just don't think I should have to deal with this, I'm so beyond it." The episode ends with a confrontation between LC and Jason in which she repeats again and again to Jason "get away from me," and claims "I don't like it when people make me look dumb," while everyone in the room is watching. She then breaks down crying to one of her guy friends, Dieter and hurriedly leaves the place. When Jessica is asked via telephone if she kissed Jason, she lies, claiming that she didn't kiss him at all. The scene ends with LC leaving and Jason sitting with a regretful look on his face.

A situation such as this one draws sympathy from viewers and solidifies Lauren's image as the nice, relatable and "real" young woman. Leppert and Wilson claim, "Lauren is represented as a unified self, whose intentions and commitments, both professionally and personally, remain transparent, sincere, and consistent" (par. 11). In the instance of the above mentioned episode, Lauren is the victim in a situation that many female viewers could identify or empathize with. Although Lauren is no longer a part of the regular cast, her guest appearance on *Laguna Beach* reminds viewers of her reality TV identity. Later, this reminder proves to be essential to the success of *Laguna Beach's* spin-off, *The Hills*, as viewers hardly question the authenticity and sincerity of Lauren's identity.

According to Brian Graden, president of entertainment for MTV Networks, “LC is a very compelling character to me and our audience as well...she very much wears her emotions on her face. Her reaction is apparent to things around her. In a reality series where you don't control the lines, that's a pretty important tool for telling a story” (qtd. in Leppert and Wilson par. 3). In saying this, Graden proves the essential role Lauren plays in convincing her audience of her realness, despite the lack of real found “in a reality series where you don't control the lines.” A clear example of Lauren's compelling character and ability to “wear her emotions on her face” is evident in the aforementioned episode, “I Saw You Kiss Her.” While everyone is jumping around, laughing and having fun, it is obvious that something is bothering her. While watching Jason and Jessica, viewers see a faint smile on Lauren's face and watch her sigh often, as she tries to play it cool. When Lauren sees Jason and Jessica kiss, the shock and hurt is written all over her face. At no point in the episode, or ever, is it not evident what has happened or how Lauren feels about something based on the look on her face.

Due to this, LC received her own show, *The Hills*, which premiered in August of 2006. *The Hills* was an instant success, averaging 2.3 million viewers its first season and 2.5 million its second season (Leppert and Wilson, par. 3). By season three, *The Hills* was the highest rated show for its time slot among viewers age 12-34 and even reached 4.6 million viewers during its season three finale, which could be called an advertiser's dream (Leppert and Wilson). This makes it very clear that viewers willingly and enjoyably turn their televisions to *MTV* on Monday nights at 10pm to watch this show, even with the annoying commercials. It is also obvious that viewers have made a connection with Lauren. Whether this connection is a good or bad one does not matter

because it is one that is deep enough to keep viewers tuning in every week and watching faithfully.

Markedly, by this time, Lauren and *The Hills* or *MTV* rather has hooked its audience, as *The Hills* is a spin-off of *Laguna Beach*. It is highly likely that viewers of *Laguna Beach* would go on to watch *The Hills*, thus forging a deep-rooted connection between them and the members of the *Laguna Beach* cast who moved into *The Hills*. Reality TV shows are especially popular with “young viewers who have watched reality shows in far bigger numbers than anything else on television and are the consumers most coveted by advertisers”(Hill 5). In this way, *MTV* has hooked the coveted target audience of 18-34 (Dee). *Laguna Beach*, which followed a cast of teenagers, now merges into *The Hills*, which follows some of those same teenagers, more grown up. Although, *The Hills* mostly follows Lauren as she lives, works, and parties in Los Angeles. Thus, if you identify with Lauren from the time that both you and Lauren were 18, naturally you would feel the need to progress in the same way that Lauren has. This is in part because Lauren is a real person just like you are and so if Lauren can have that bag, so can you. Clissold claims, “Nothing provokes existential crisis quite like the inability to distinguish the real from the non-real or the manufactured” (48). It is in fact this crisis that enhances the effectiveness of lifestyle branding and product placement. Again, the belief that the lifestyle of a reality star is in fact real or true makes it seem more attainable and encourages people to buy.

It is also noteworthy to mention that Lauren’s wealth and celebrityism is hidden on the show so that viewers can identify with her as a real person just like them as opposed to the celebrity she in fact is. According to Stack, Forbes estimated Lauren’s 2007--08

income to be \$1.5 million and since *The Hills* premiered in 2006, Lauren has already launched her own clothing line (in partnership with *MTV*), which is sold in 500 boutiques across the country, has landed endorsement deals with *Mark* cosmetics and *AT&T*, has a book proposal in the works, and wants to launch her own television and film production company. However, on *The Hills*, Lauren is portrayed as a hard working young woman just trying to make it in the fashion industry, as she interns at *Teen Vogue* and later, *People's Revolution*. Viewers are hardly given the opportunity to realize that Lauren's success of upward mobility is primarily because of her reality stardom.

As mentioned before, Lauren becomes more real because of the way that she is presented to us and how it is viewers *identify* with her. When we first meet Lauren on *Laguna Beach*, she is a teenager and makes mistakes just as any real or normal person would. She is in love with a young man, who is playing with her emotions and who causes her to be in a love a triangle, which brings her much heartbreak and grief in addition to drama. As viewers watch Lauren making mistakes and her interactions with others, viewers fabricate a connection between their lives and Lauren's life. They identify with the problems Lauren faces and how she handles situations. The more a viewer can identify with Lauren and her situations, the more real she seems to them.

It seems the audience is more concerned with the ability of *The Hills* and its cast to convey the complexities of everyday life rather than how well or how much it conveys realistic representations. There is a different experience for viewers when they watch *The Hills* as opposed to a television drama such as *The O.C.* This is in part because *The Hills* gives viewers a promise of reality. Pullen explains, "While the producers of reality TV play a significant role in 'characterising' the participants, who do not of course get to

‘represent themselves,’ this is nevertheless not analogous to scripted drama” (215). This is to say, Lauren’s identity as well as the rest of *The Hills* cast, characterized, in part, by the producers is not interpreted the same as the identity of Marissa, a cast member of *The O.C.* Again, the illusion of reality and finding “real” moments in reality TV and in this case, *The Hills*, create a different experience for viewers that lead to a stronger connection with the show’s participants.

Additionally, the narrative structures of reality TV, and more specifically, *The Hills* makes the medium and show well-suited for advertising, product placement, and most importantly lifestyle branding.

*The Hills* as a docu-soap combines the factual mode of the documentary with the private, personal narrative values of the soap opera. In soap operas, the more one watched the program, the more one believes they have become an expert in evaluating character and behavior (Gillan). Additionally, as Tania Modelski notes, “on soap operas, action is less important than reaction and interaction” (qtd. in Leppert and Wilson, par. 17) In fact, *The Hills* mostly focuses on conversation. Very rarely are there actual events on *The Hills* and the show revolves around personal problems that Lauren and her friends discuss continuously. A student explaining her dislike of *The Hills* and lack of activity claims, “The Hills is about nothing. They sit and talk about what they are going to do that afternoon or night...and then they go there, they talk some more, go home, only to then talk about what just happened that afternoon or night.” This is in fact right on target when discussing *The Hills*. In an episode from the second season titled “With Friends Like These...,” Lauren discusses Heidi’s (her best friend) relationship with Spencer and how it

is destroying their friendship to Audrina, a friend, in the beginning of the episode. Lauren then discusses Heidi, as well as her plans for her friend, Jen, to Whitney, her co-worker. The scene cuts to Spencer and Brody who are also talking about Jen's birthday. Soon after, all the ladies go out to dinner and then out to a club for Jen's birthday. Eleven minutes into the episode, not much has gone on besides conversations that are obviously setting up the main conflict of the episode, Jen making out with Brody, Lauren's love interest. Right after the club scene, Lauren is shot with Whitney again discussing her night at the club and her conflict with Jen and Heidi. Following this scene is one of Audrina at work discussing Lauren's conflict with Jen and Heidi. The episode ends with a confrontation between Heidi and Lauren about Jen as well as Lauren and Heidi's deteriorating relationship. This episode clearly depicts the lack of action in *The Hills*. It also goes back to the discussion of Lauren's reality TV identity, as she is again the victim of a melodramatic event. Each discussion solidifies Lauren's identity as the nice girl and essentially, everyone is on her side. Also, Lauren's ability to wear her emotions on her face is also evident, especially when she is talking to Heidi at the end of the episode. Her lip quivers, tears stream down her face and hurt is written all over her face.

Clissold argues that "*Candid Camera* is taught in university and college psychology courses because of the unscripted insights into human behavior and social relationships that its gags provide" (50). This can be said for a show like *The Hills* where human behavior and social relationships make up the majority of the show's plot. Notably, it is the unscripted aspect of a reality TV show that makes it more "real." By watching someone live their life within the context of reality show, their reality becomes more convincing and real. Reality TV shows play a major role in this renegotiation of

realism. As mentioned before, it is the reaction and interaction, as well as discussion that prove to be more important for a show like *The Hills*. It is also these aspects that make up the narrative structure of *The Hills*. Gillan claims, "After all, even the most common reality TV format, in which a bunch of strangers are placed in a house equipped with cameras that record whatever occurs, is a kind of technologically advanced version of a classic sitcom scenario" (55). Similarly, *The Hills* can be said to also be a "technologically advanced version of a classic sitcom scenario." According to Leppert and Wilson, *The Hills* adapts key soap opera conventions to emotionally connect the viewer with Lauren's "real life" melodrama as well as uses a cinematic aesthetic in attempts to designate the real. Notably, many components of cinema can be found in situational comedies. Some of these components include ensemble casts, exposition, cause-effect chain and climax (Shabazz). Exposition describes the use of characters with established pasts and relies on repetition for viewer knowledge (Shabazz). *The Hills* employs this very well with its opening theme, in which the scenery of *The Hills* is shown, as well as marked moments of Lauren and the cast are shown, thus reestablishing characters and the environment. Additionally, viewers are reminded of characters as their name and role appears on the bottom of the screen once they appear. *The Hills* also employs the use of the cause-effect chain primarily by ending each scene with a small climax and its constant narrative segmentation and interruption. Of course this is mostly so that advertisement time may be sold and because of each viewer's investment in the show, they will remain tuned in to see what is going to happen next. The peak climax of *The Hills* is usually at the end of each episode, leaving viewers wanting more and tuning into next week's episode. Although sitcoms may sometimes reach narrative closure or

dénouement, the central enigma of *The Hills* is never answered. In this way, *The Hills* becomes realer since the problems on the show are never solved and it never offers viewers ready answers to problems. Such an aspect of *The Hills* solidifies its role in presenting “real” life since real life as we know it does not include answers to all of our problems. Additionally, because of its lack of dénouement, *The Hills* makes it so that there is always more to learn about the cast, and more importantly, Lauren. In this way, viewers become accustomed to the desire to live their lives similarly to Lauren and consume just as Lauren does.

Equally, lifestyle branding is a focal point and central narrative of *The Hills*. The stories of the Hills’s stars are told through their products, the clubs they go to, and restaurants they eat at, among other things. Because very little action occurs on *The Hills*, the message of advertisers and consumption are hardly ever undermined. In the above mentioned episode titled “With Friends Like These,” the first scene opens with a still shot of Lauren’s lavish apartment. Following this, while Lauren and Audrina are talking to each other the camera zooms in on Audrina’s bracelet, before it shoots her face. Later, while Jen and Heidi are walking together, there is a still shot of the store, Lisa Kline. Following this, we see Jen and Heidi shopping in what we can assume is Lisa Kline. In the scene of Lauren at work, Lauren compliments Whitney on what she is wearing, soliciting an explanation from Whitney about her clothes. When the girls go out to dinner, the camera shot of the restaurant the ladies are about to go into is on screen for just as long as the camera shot of the ladies walking all together (showing what each of them are wearing), demonstrating the importance of the clothes and the restaurant. The best example of how the stories of *The Hills*’s cast are conveyed through their products is

when Lauren and Heidi present Jen with her birthday present. They give her a charm bracelet that has one charm, a diamond martini glass. Jen is in utter disbelief that her friends would have gotten her real diamonds and Lauren says to Jen, “I’m not going to give you fake diamonds on your birthday.” Notably, a transcription of what Lauren says comes up on the bottom of the screen, as well as the rest of the conversation about the gift, even though the ladies are speaking with audible voices. In this instance, diamonds are given a specific meaning; they indicate solid friendship, birthdays, and good friends.

## **VII. “Advertainment”**

Viacom reports that its goal is to be “the world’s leading, branded entertainment company across television, motion pictures and digital media platforms.” They continue, stating:

“We focus on our consumers, enhancing our existing brands, developing new brands and executing on our multiplatform strategy to reach this objective and sustain growth. By capitalizing on our creative strengths and deepening our relationships with audiences, advertisers, distribution affiliates, talent and licensees, Viacom is positioned to achieve continued or greater global success.

Among their television platforms are the MTV networks and with the success of a hit series like *The Hills*, Viacom is well on its way to achieving its goal.

Max Stubblefield, Lauren's agent at UTA, claims "I see her [Lauren] as a global brand, fashion and beauty are the drivers, but we've had a lot of interest from a lot of different categories" (qtd. in Stack). According to Women's Wear Daily, "Since the MTV reality show *The Hills*, based on Teen Vogue intern Lauren Conrad, returned in mid-January, newsstand sales for the CondeNast teen title have increased by double digits over last year" (qtd. in Leppert and Wilson 4).

Additionally, MTV Networks Music Group created the Creative Music Integration (CMI) team to oversee creative integrations of music in all of MTV and VH1's long-form programming (Viacom.com) The goal of the CMI team is to provide promotional programs across on-air and digital platforms to drive music discovery for fans, and sales for artists (Viacom) According to Amy Doyle, EVP of Music and Talent for MTV, "With the CMI team, we have been able to connect music in our shows to the overall music strategy by creating a trajectory for artists that can start with a high profile placement in *The Hills*" (Viacom) Leppert and Wilson note that the association between the music and moments in Lauren's life on *The Hills* "softens the overt marketing and develops a new form of promotional vehicle for popular musicians associated with MTV" (par. 24). It is in this way advertisers have been able to commodify reality TV. Furthermore, Lauren's life, as well as her lifestyle provides advertisers a way to enhance the effectiveness of lifestyle branding.

As if the integration of music within programming was not enough, according to The Wall Street Journal, MTV Networks has joined with RealNetworks and Verizon in a digital music initiative that offers a music store, Rhapsody America, in order to reach across the PC, digital music player and mobile phone platforms. Ethan Smith and Nick

Wingfield report, “MTV Networks will contribute cash, a five-year note for \$230 million and its Urge subscribers to the venture, according to a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission. RealNetworks, which will contribute cash and its Rhapsody subscribers, will retain a majority ownership stake in the venture.” This merging is evident in later seasons of *The Hills*. While watching *The Hills*, the moment a song begins to play to connote an exciting, heart-breaking, or serious moment in the show, the name of the song playing and the artist, as well as the instructions to download (buy) the song flash onto the bottom of the screen. There is even a website, [rhapsody.com/thehills](http://rhapsody.com/thehills) that offers soundtracks of *The Hills*, organized by episode. The articulation of Lauren's emotional life through a song that captures the moments reveals the synergies between melodrama, reality television, and new marketing ventures pioneered by *The Hills* (Leppert and Wilson).

Beyond music, MTV and *The Hills* allow viewers to fully embed themselves into the lifestyles of the cast with MTV's Virtual Hills. Viacom describes this phenomenon best claiming:

“MTV Networks is the first media company to embrace and develop its own virtual worlds. The platforms seamlessly combine television and 3D virtual communities into one integrated 4D system that allows our audience to walk through the television screen and participate in a fully engaging experience. The first virtual world launched in September 2006, Virtual Laguna Beach (VLB), has helped define the next generation of media and advertising models, earning acclaim in the industry and

media for creating an experience where viewers can live out the stories they see on-air.”

On the Virtual Hills, you can play games like “Get Me My Coffee” or “Decorate Your Crib,” participate in forums, post on blogs and of course, shop.

Furthermore, the SeenOn! MTV website allows viewers to “get the look” of cast members on *The Hills*. Viewers can shop by episode, brand, or category. It is the productive tension between viewer identification with Lauren and other cast members and idealization of their lifestyles that potentially makes lifestyle branding strategies, such as “get the look” more effective. Most of the products available are high priced items (five hundred dollars and upwards) by designers like Chanel, Christian Louboutin, David Yurman, and other high-end designers. *The Hills* becomes an immeasurable source of value not only for MTV, but also for a host of lifestyle and cultural industries associated with the program. For example, if you click on an item by David Yurman, you are directed to the Saks Fifth Avenue website in order to purchase the item.

Rutherford claims, “Commercials do provoke a response from viewers, whether or not they are interested in the goods advertised” (4). Reality TV, specifically *The Hills* both provokes responses from viewers and goes even further by engaging its audience in such a way that forces interest in the goods advertised. In turn, the goods advertised resonate better and have a longer lasting impression on viewers and certifies reality TV as the genre of television best-suited for enhancing the strategies of advertisers. Once the identification with Lauren is added to the equation, lifestyle branding emerges as a powerful and effective tool that not only enhances the consumption of viewers but also enhances the power of advertisers themselves. In this way, the goods within the

programming become as much of a source of entertainment as the programming itself, thus causing the emergence of advertainment.

*The Hills* brings the power and value of traditional forms of product placement and lifestyle branding into the aesthetically dismissed space of reality television, which, in turn, brings significant economic benefits for MTV and its advertisers, as well as a broader network of lifestyle and cultural industries (Leppert and Wilson). Advertising has become the discourse that dominates our contemporary society because of its pervasiveness. The choice to skip an advertisement by skipping a commercial no longer exists when the programming itself *is* a commercial. Americans can not escape the innumerable amount of commercial messages nor can we underestimate or neglect the influence of these commercial messages upon us as individuals, upon our society and culture and upon our definition of citizenship.

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