

Motives for Engaging with the Kardashians' Reality Television Family

Kayla Hammer

*Cinema and Television Arts
Elon University*

Abstract

*Reality television has been around for more than a half-century, dating back to the hidden cameras in *Candid Camera* in 1948. Today, one of the most popular reality television shows is *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, an inside look at a celebrity family based in Los Angeles. This study explored why college-aged women feel a personal connection to the show and why they've been following the family for nearly a decade. Based on six interviews conducted with interested viewers, the study found that these women watch the series to escape reality, participate in surveillance, and feel personal connectedness.*

I. Introduction

Reality television is nothing new in today's society. From the start of hidden cameras in *Candid Camera* in 1948, to putting civilians in a controlled setting in *The Real World* in 1992, the lifestyles and personalities revealed in reality television are endless. Now, anyone can get a behind-the-scenes look at the life of an Alaskan fisherman or what it's like to be a sister wife. Celebrity families are on top when it comes to today's most popular reality television content (IMDb, 2014).

Networks such as E!, MTV, VH1, and Bravo have TV schedules filled with shows exploring the lives of celebrity families. More widely known programs like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives* have outperformed others in ratings for years, reaching up to almost 3 million viewers, according to Nielsen ratings ("I Am Cait," 2015). However, contrary to previous season premieres, season 11 of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* had a record low of only 1.9 million viewers, according to Nielsen (Maglio, 2015). The Bravo network keeps finding new cities and more real housewives to put in the spotlight. But what makes these programs stand out in the ratings, and why are viewers still interested after all this time?

For most reality television production companies and networks, their target audience remains between 18- and 25-year-olds, mostly college students (Reality TV, 2008). This research study aimed to uncover why this demographic is so interested in the Kardashian family and what keeps drawing them back to the screen? This study explored the concepts of voyeurism and social comparison and how they relate to reality television as well as to age, gender, ethnicity, social status, or socioeconomic status of viewers.

Keywords: reality television, Kardashians, celebrity family, social comparison, power of connectedness
Email: khammer3@elon.edu

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II. Literature Review

To better understand the popularity of reality shows, one must first explore what defines reality television. Then, one must look to the audience to find the motives for watching reality TV so intensely, such as parasocial interaction. These answers are key in understanding why reality television is so successful, especially when it comes to celebrity families like the Kardashians.

Defining Reality-Based Television

Because the literature and research on reality television was limited even after decades of its increasing popularity, a 2003 University of Arizona study attempted to define this topic. Varied categories for reality television included talk shows, nonfiction narrative programs, broadcast news programs, and local news programs. News programs fall under reality-based television because viewers see the majority of the content as nonfiction. (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003).

The researchers asked 112 Tucson, Arizona, residents awaiting jury duty to complete a grouping task. In the exercise, the participants organized 48 television programs into groups on the basis of similarity, using whatever criteria they deemed appropriate. The list included programs like *Friends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, *Today Show*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Cops*, *The Real World*, and *Survivor*. The researchers found the following definition of *reality-based television programming*: programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur. Several factors contribute to this definition, including those on reality TV portraying themselves, without a script, filmed at least part in their living or working environment, and primarily for the purpose of viewer entertainment (Nabi et al., 2003).

Para-Social Interaction

In a 2009 study by Laken, para-social interaction was defined using three characteristics. First, this interaction between the viewer and the celebrity must be mediated. Mediation can occur through a wide range of media, including the Internet, cellular applications, magazines, television, and film. Second, the relationship must be one-sided. The viewer recognizes a relationship or connection to the celebrity, but the celebrity does not have any kind of relationship with the viewer. Last, but the most important in this study, this interaction between viewer and celebrity is seen as “mimicking real-life friendships.”

Laken explored how this relationship is formed by conducting a survey with 536 college students and created a 10-item Likert scale on parasocial interaction to measure the level of parasocial interaction. The scale focused on the intensity of the viewer's relationship with celebrities only. The study concluded that the viewer “acquires a history and a set of shared experiences with the celebrity through mediation, which create a bond. This bond is symbolized by allusions that lack meaning to the casual observer” (p. 7). The study found that with time, the viewer feels that he or she knows the celebrity better than others do and “appreciates his or her values and motives more than others do” (p. 7).

Voyeurism

A study by media psychologist Baruh (2010) used a panel of 18-year-olds to explore voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies of viewers while watching reality television. Voyeurism is attributed to someone seeking the inaccessible, what he or she cannot see in a mostly mediated way. When voyeurism is pathological, that person or viewer has a strong urge to be sneaky and seek out the unseen views, such as when the characters on a show engage in sexual behavior, etc. This power imbalance is pleasurable to these voyeurs, and they continue to watch because of the sexual gratification. This type of voyeurism is less common. Survey responses show that most people just want to satisfy their “inner nosy person.”

Baruh's study also determined that voyeurism can be measured using participants in a survey and ranking their answers on a percentage scale (100 being most voyeuristic tendencies and 0 being least voyeuristic). Possible answers included never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, and always. Each of the five available answers had a different percentage weight. Questions ranged from “You can see your friend's texts over her shoulder. Do you read them?” all the way to more specific questions regarding television, like “I enjoy watching programs that reveal private moments between celebrities.”

The voyeuristic appeal of reality television comes from the negotiation of reality and the possibility

of seeing moments when those contrived curtains fall and honest selves are revealed. After measuring viewers' voyeuristic tendencies, it could be easy to infer why they enjoy endless hours of reality television. They understand that some reality is scripted and forced in a certain setting, but the anticipation to see a true moment unfold keeps them coming back for more (Baruh, 2010).

Defining and Measuring Social Comparison

Like voyeurism, social comparison tendency is another potential reason people are drawn to watch reality television. Those audience members who feel the need to evaluate themselves should have a higher tendency to watch reality television (Baruh, 2010). Evaluating oneself could mean many things. This could mean an individual watches reality TV to see how significant others interact with one another. It could mean that someone watches to see how those who are wealthier deal with their social status or how to obtain that social status. In Baruh's study, after watching 18 reality television programs, an online panel of 18-year-olds and older were asked a series of questions regarding social comparison and voyeurism tendencies. The study found that reality television programs that showed more private details of a person or family's life had higher views from voyeurs in direct correlation with their social comparison tendencies.

Another study (Ramdhany, 2009) found the same result with 178 adolescents rather than adults. The lower the life satisfaction of the students, the more they watched reality television. Age didn't play a huge factor in this study, but gender did. Girls needed more peer acceptance; therefore, they watched more reality television. They believed everything they saw as real and would implement that new knowledge in their daily lives.

The Power of Connectedness

If it's not voyeuristic tendencies that are keeping reality TV ratings high, then what other factors play a role in keeping viewers' eyes glued to the screen? Patino, Kaltcheva, and Smith (2012) focused on what they called "connectedness," the "level of intensity of the relationship(s) that a viewer develops with the characters and contextual settings of a program in the para-social television environment" (p. 289). Connectedness is measured on a 9-item, 4-point scale from "strongly-disagree"/"strongly-agree." The authors believed that someone's psychographic and demographic characteristics played a role in how connected they were with reality television. Their study found that 1,098 young people, ages of 12-18, more often than not, viewed celebrities and participants on reality television shows as opinion leaders and role models.

Based on the literature review, this research created the following research question:

RQ1. To what extent do voyeuristic tendencies or social comparison tendencies drive female college students to continue to watch *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*?

RQ2. What other motives may have contributed to female college students following the show and on social media?

III. Method

For this study, the current author selected six female, college-aged students, who individually participated in an interview, lasting 45 minutes to one hour, to discuss the Kardashian family, their presences on social media, and their reality television show. The method of interviews has both strengths and weaknesses. The major strength of this qualitative method is to give the researcher the chance to stratify the multiple interviews and find the similarities and differences between each interview, and that the interviews give the participants a chance to explain their answers rather than be limited to certain answers in a survey. It also has shortcomings. The researcher could have had an influence on the answers in the interviews, and the interpretation of what was said during the interviews could have a degree of bias (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

The author screened sampled students to select only those who expressed a great interest in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and revealed that they follow the family's day-to-day life. All six selected participants grew up or came from a predominantly white neighborhood. Two of the six participants came from upper-class families, while the other four from upper-middle class families. One participant had divorced

parents, and the rest had parents who were together. All participants had an immediate family of five members or smaller. All participants were between the ages of 20 and 22. They were all enrolled as full-time students at a small private university in the Southeast. Participant living conditions and locations varied as well as majors and on/off campus employment.

The author took brief notes and tape-recorded the session during each interview, while each interview was held in a private study room. At each interview, participants were asked their name, year in school, grade point average, and major. Then they were asked open-ended questions about both the Kardashians show and their family in general. They were asked to elaborate on why they were interested in the lives of the Kardashians and why they feel a specific way about the show. Other interview questions included the following: Do you feel do you know the exact reason for your interest in the show?; Do you think the show touches on any moral or societal issues? By accident? On purpose? How often do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with the actions on the show? Do you see any member of the Kardashian family as a role model? An inspiration? What social media platforms do you follow the Kardashians on? What are your favorite aspects of the show? These questions were either borrowed or inspired by Corrie-Metcalf's (2005) study on the appeal of reality television. All participants were promised confidentiality in order to get the most honest responses.

Transcribed interviews went through two rounds of qualitative coding used by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). Here the researcher went through the transcribed text first to find similar themes; then went back to the text for a second look to see if any new ideas or concerns appear. These themes were used to capture and explicate the participants' motives.

IV. Findings

Viewing Habits

Asked how long they spent watching television per week, all but one participant answered that they watched television at least 10 to 15 hours per week, and at least 8 hours on social media outlets for pop culture and entertainment news.

The participants said they had kept up with the Kardashian show since high school, starting with its third season and catching up with the first and second seasons through reruns on E!. One participant expressed less interest in the show in recent seasons, but she still follows certain family members like Kylie Jenner and Khloe Kardashian on social media and in tabloids. Another participant said she would rather follow the family on social media outlets like Snapchat because it "makes them seem more like real people." Another participant said she doesn't follow the family on social media at all and would rather watch them on television.

Once the interview established whether the participant followed the Kardashians on mostly the show, social media, or both, other interview questions were asked to explore the key research questions.

Voyeurism

Similar studies mentioned in the literature review showed participants watching reality television shows with voyeuristic tendencies. These tendencies could include getting pleasure from seeing intimate sexual relations on reality television or other intimate moments that the viewer believes to be the realest moments of the show. In this study, voyeurism was the least discussed topic with participants. When asked about their favorite parts of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, no participant displayed voyeuristic tendencies, nor did they mention anything relating to voyeurism when asked about whether they believed they got pleasure from seeing the family's most intimate moments. One participant commented:

"What do you mean by intimate? Because if you mean sexual, then no, I don't find those parts of the show any more interesting than the next, but if you mean intimate as in moments that are really personal or close to them, then yes. I think those moments are really interesting because that's when the show becomes more real."

Personal Connectedness

Most of the participants' answers fell in this category. Asked why they stayed connected to the show after so many seasons, all participants stated that they felt connected to the family and their stories. One participant commented:

"I think I'm so in tune to their lives because I've grown up with them. Kendall and Kylie [Jenner] were around my age when I started watching and so I could relate to their stories. It's like we've watched them change and grow over the years that we feel like we've changed and grown alongside them."

Another participant commented:

"Even though I can't relate to their lifestyle, because they're so wealthy, I can still relate to how they feel in certain situations. They go through things that all of us have gone through before: break-ups, fights with your siblings, not getting along with your parents, trying to be independent. They might handle things differently than I would, but I can still relate to how they feel, and honestly, I feel for them, not just with them."

Differently from what Patino et al. (2012) found about the power of connectedness in relation to viewers seeing the characters as role models or opinion leaders, the current study could not find any link between connectedness and their feelings toward the characters as their role models. One participant stated:

"I don't see the Kardashians as role models at all (laughs). I don't look up to them for advice on life or how to handle a relationship. If anything, I look up to them for maybe beauty tips or inspiration for style choices, but that's it. I think I'm at a time and place in my life where I've really found out who I am as a person, and reality television stars like them don't really phase me as far as being role models or anything."

Participants also felt connected to the family because of their presence on social media. Almost all of the Kardashian and Jenner clan have Instagram accounts, and some can be found on Snapchat and Twitter as well. All participants in this study mentioned that the family's interaction with their fans seemed genuine and personal, stating that when they post intimate moments or events in their lives on Snapchat or Instagram, it makes them seem more like "real people." Participants felt less connected when any Kardashian would post a "selfie" rather than a picture from a wedding or red carpet event. A "selfie" has no context, where as a picture from a private event lets viewers get a sneak peek into their daily lives.

Social Comparison

After all participants stated that they don't see the Kardashians as role models, they were asked if they compared themselves to any of the family members or ever got jealous or felt inferior when watching the show or looking through their social media. One participant stated that every time she saw Kylie Jenner on Instagram, she would automatically get jealous of how small her waist looked. Another participant agreed, but further commented that even though she got jealous, she knew that wasn't a realistic body type she could achieve. When asked if that made her feel inferior she stated:

"We all know they [the Kardashians] have make-up artists and personal trainers and hair stylists and skin care specialists waiting on them hand and foot, and we, as normal civilians, just don't have that. I can get jealous all I want of Kylie's figure, but I know she didn't get that way alone. They have a lot more resources to look the way they do, and I get that. That's why I don't get too worked up over it or try to look like them because it's not realistic, and I hope other people see that, too."

Most participants, as previously stated, have smaller families or they don't have any siblings at all. When asked if she compared her own family to the Kardashian and Jenner clan, one participant, an only child, said she always watched and wished she had more siblings or even a sister, but never thought her home life was "terrible or anything like that." Another participant said, "The Kardashians are so out-there and crazy that there's no way I could even compare them with my family. We're nothing alike." No participants felt the need to evaluate themselves based on the Kardashians' way of living.

Surveillance

Surveillance can be defined as the act of watching reality television to see how a certain part of society works and interacts. This issue was examined by asking how real or genuine they perceived *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* to be. It can be noted that this category also overlaps with voyeuristic tendencies in the way that some viewers watch reality television simply for the pleasure of finally getting to see the curtain drop and a true, genuine moment revealed. All participants agreed that they understood the role producers play in setting up situations to happen on the show, but they also all believed that the characters' feelings and reactions were all real. One participant stated:

"I know some people watch the show because they want to see what it's like to live like the Kardashians, and for the most part, I think their show is very real in that way. I'm very media literate and I know that the producers could sometimes tell them to sit down and talk about a certain subject, but I think their feelings and reactions in those situations are real. I don't think people should assume this is how all wealthy people live, but I know people will. People will always generalize parts of society, but I don't watch for that aspect. I watch to catch a glimpse into a lifestyle I'll never have."

When asked if after watching the show they had a better sense of living a wealthy lifestyle, all participants agreed. They did not agree, however, that the Kardashians were comparable to other reality television families that were wealthy or celebrities. One participant stated, "The Kardashians are a rare breed. They're loud and not afraid to talk about things and be blunt with one another. I don't think you can watch the show and assume that's how all rich families act."

Diversion

In this study, participants explored diversion for "emotional release" or "escape from routine." One participant stated that, along with watching for personal connectedness, she watched the show if she needed to improve her mood. When asked if this was her go-to show to escape a bad mood, she stated:

"Not always, but there's so much humor in [Keeping Up with the Kardashians] that it's easy to forget about all your problems and stress and schoolwork for a little bit. I mean, most of the time when you turn on E!, especially in the mornings, reruns of the show are always playing. It's easy to sit back and relax and enjoy the family's outlandish behavior because it's mindless television. You don't need to think too hard to watch it."

One participant noted that she usually watches the show when she needs a break from studying or homework. She stated that she doesn't watch the show right when a new episode airs, but she will catch up by watching it online. When participants were asked if they felt antsy or upset when they miss an airing of a new episode or season premiere, all said no. One participant commented:

"They're [the Kardashians] everywhere these days. Even if I miss an episode or a premiere, I know exactly what happened on the show just by scrolling through Twitter or looking at pop culture websites. Other girls my age are bound to be talking about it, too, so there's so many different outlets where I can catch up even without watching the show, so I don't worry."

Youthful Vulnerability

A concern for the younger generation naturally came up in interviews even without being asked. Most questions involving social comparison or personal connectedness led to unexpected responses from participants that included some sort of talk about the "younger generation"-- considering all the participants were ages 20 to 22, it's easy to assume they're talking about pre-teens and teenagers.

Although all participants agreed they didn't see the Kardashians as role models, they all expressed concern or interest for the younger generation because it could be influenced by how the Kardashians live their lives. One participant explained:

"I'm not really influenced by them, I would say, but I could definitely see how younger

girls could be impacted by them. I mean, look at Kylie Jenner. She was named one of the most influential teens this year. She's everywhere. She's got a huge following, but she started sexualizing herself on social media at only like 16 years old. That's crazy."

Other participants had similar comments, while mentioning the Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge: "It went viral so fast. All the teenage girls were doing it to look like her, to have her lips. I'm pretty sure she even sent out a statement where she said she had no idea how influential her small lip injections would be. Well, now she does." When asked why she thought only teenage girls were trying it, the same participant said:

"I think it all has to do with the place they are in their lives. As college women, we've kind of found our place and our niches and our paths and how we want to define ourselves. For middle schoolers and high schoolers, it's a different story. They're at that stage where you can really still be molded and highly influenced by others around you and what you see on television. It's a time where you're trying to define who you are and if all you see on social media and television is skinny waist, fat a\$\$, small legs, then there's this pressure put on that that's what you need to look like."

Another participant expressed an interest in the younger generation but in a more positive light. About the possibility that the Kardashians could be seen as role models, she said not for herself, but "definitely for the younger girls." She highlighted Kylie Jenner's new campaign against bullying and Kendall Jenner's aspirations to become a model. She commented:

"Kylie and Kendall have always had a camera in their face, ever since they were little. They had to grow up fast, at least that's what it looked like to me. Now they're using their influence toward more positive things. Kylie has dealt with so much bullying because of fame that she wants to help others going through similar situations. Kendall has wanted to be a model for so long and now she's doing it and encouraging other women to work hard and follow their dreams. Yeah, they can be a little too revealing for my taste on social media, but I think they're doing more good than harm at this point."

When asked why they thought this younger generation was so invested in the show and the family, most participants credited it to Kylie and Kendall. They believed that 20-year-olds are so invested because they've grown up with the family, but they felt teenagers got connected through the spotlight Kylie and Kendall have been in. Participants felt this age group (about 15- to 18-years-olds) is still searching for role models and inspiration for their lives, whereas college-aged women most likely are not.

V. Conclusion

The current study aimed to answer to what extent voyeuristic tendencies and social comparison tendencies drive college-aged women to follow a celebrity family on television. Participants in this study felt that most of their reason for watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* was purely for entertainment purposes or to stay up-to-date with the family's lives.

The participants did not regard the Kardashians as their role models or inspirations, but they think the younger generation might feel that way, as Patino et al. (2012) found in their study about adolescents. These participants believe they don't need to compare themselves to the Kardashians because they feel like they are at a time and place in their life where they are content in their own skin, unlike how girls in high school or middle school might feel. Therefore, the participants feel their main reasons for watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* are based on entertainment value, escaping reality, and feeling connected with the family.

For college-aged women, the show is mainly for entertainment. The family is outlandish enough to be entertaining but real enough to get personal and share their true feelings and reactions on screen. The Kardashians have been doing this for more than seven years now, and they've mastered it. That's how they keep people coming back. They know what viewers are looking for, but that's also why they get so much flack for putting marriages or break-ups on television because people automatically assume it's just for publicity and ratings. Based on this research, reality television stars in general should realize how influential they might be on their audience members and use that for the greater good.

The concern all the participants had for other audience members, especially young teenage girls, can be interpreted through what Davison (1983) found in his study, the third-person effect. The college students might feel the topic of the question at hand had a greater effect on others than on themselves.

Regardless of influential power, it seems the Kardashians are keeping their large audience thanks to their level of connectedness with their viewers. By sharing their most intimate moments in all aspects of media, the family is able to build that relationship with their followers. As Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) found, the more realistic a reality television show can be, the more viewers keep up with it and the more they feel they can relate to it, even if the characters are wealthier or their 18-year-old daughters already have their own houses and clothing lines. It's a connection to the feelings and hardships portrayed on the screen.

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