

The 'Reality' Of Life: Reality Culture And Consumer Buying Habits In North America

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From talent quests to singing competitions to "real" lives of reality TV stars, consumers in the United States are tuning in to reality TV programmes almost every night of the week.

With such voyeuristic pleasures and vicarious indulgence, has reality TV culture transformed the lives of the average American consumer more than we know?

Commercial opportunities

- People remember things emotionally and they buy with emotion. So if they are enjoying that experience on TV and they are relating to it, they then feel like they can replicate what they see at home.

- "Hands-on" product integration has a huge impact on consumers by enjoying longer memory retention time in their minds. For example, an episode of "The Amazing Race" where contestants had to create a chocolate Travelocity Gnome (the company's mascot) was voted the most recalled reality TV in-programme placement of its month.

Background

Reality is more than a TV genre now in the United States; it has become a way of life for many people. From reading obsessively about them on magazines and blogs, to giving nicknames to friends just like they do on "Jersey Shore," to emulating the fashion sense and preferences of products favoured by Kim Kardashian, reality is transforming consumers in more ways than they know. Consumers are also inspired to become reality TV participants themselves by making their lives almost public. 15-year high school student Jessica Baker from Ohio said gleefully: "My life is on display on Facebook just like Kim's (Kardashian) on TV. If people are interested in what I am doing and where I have been, I take it as a compliment. Maybe I'll go on a (reality) show one day too!"

Indeed, reality TV is becoming a valid career choice. The New York Times estimated that at any given time, there are 1,000 people on air as reality TV stars. For a few talented individuals, such as contestants from "American Idol" and "The Contender," they have made possible actual real-life careers after their TV stint. For others, it has enabled a life of lucrative salaries and endorsements. Members of the cast of "The Hills," for instance, reportedly earn up to US\$90,000 an episode and the "Real Housewives" about US\$30,000.

Bringing back old trends

Extreme couponing, a consumer trend spurred on by the reality TV series of the same name, is bringing back the until recently seemingly out-of-fashion trend of coupon buying. In the first half of this year, consumers redeemed 1.75 billion coupons for savings of US\$2 billion, according to Illinois-based NCH Marketing Services.

Many consumers are taking their cues from blogs, websites, and "Extreme Couponing," which features regular folk sharing their couponing exploits and started its second season in October. The deals come in all shapes and sizes, from gift cards to groceries to tech support. 38-year old April Blum, a mother of eight from Pennsylvania, who appeared on the show's second season premiere, said she has saved US\$50,000 since she began hunting deals in February 2009. "My husband is a fire-safety officer and we were struggling to make ends meet," Blum said in a telephone interview. "Then I just started stock-piling stuff and saw how easy it could be." Since the "Extreme Couponing" debut, traffic to shopathome.com, a site offering printable coupon from over 50,000 stores, has more than doubled to 15 million visits a month, according to founder Marc Braunstein. "The show created an awareness about coupons and made people see that, with a little effort, they could save a lot," Braunstein said.

Viewers getting ads and entertainment together

Tune in to just about any reality TV series and consumers get something more than their fix of entertainment "they get product placement as well. Reality TV has embraced and perfected the integration of products into shows. No longer are products simply slipped into the backdrop, they are now featured as part of the content itself. Contestants on "Project Runway" have been asked to make outfits just using materials purchased in a pet store, and yet their design room could not be more high tech filled with Intel and Hewlett-Packard products. On "American Idol," the judges always have a Coca-Cola cup sitting next to each of them. "Every brand is dabbling in this area, and some want to glom onto [seize upon] any celebrity no matter how fleeting or newly minted," said David Reeder, vice president at GreenLight, a consultancy that marries brands with famous faces.

Product placements with a social conscience

TV networks have realised that product placement techniques can also be used for social issues, making them more

marketable to their target audience as well as earning the approval of parents. MTV made the network more relevant to teenagers by depicting the reality of parenthood to young people on its "16 and Pregnant" show. Eric Asche, chief marketing officer for the American Legacy Foundation, which created the 'truth' anti-smoking campaign "a campaign employing the use of living people to represent statistical deaths caused by tobacco smoke - said he has more luck integrating stop-smoking themes into reality TV shows For example, trying to quit smoking became a topic of conversation between two fishermen throughout a season of ESPN's "Bass Masters."

I want my life to be "real"

Reality TV has become staple entertainment for many young people in the United States but not many of them know that these shows are anything but "real". According to a new survey of 1,144 girls aged 11 to 17 girls around the country by the Girl Scouts Research Institute, eight out of ten who regularly watch 'real-life' shows like "Jersey Shore" and "The Hills" they are true to life, describing them as "mainly real and unscripted." Caeley Looney, a Girl Scout and high school sophomore, who sat on a panel about girls and reality TV, thinks that reality TV creates low self-esteem among many viewers. "The girls on these shows are looking bigger than life, perfect hair, perfect make-up, and girls are saying why am I not like that?" US President Obama recently shared his sentiment on reality TV by saying, "I don't want my daughters watching the 'The Kardashians' either." However, it is not all bad news. Most respondents to the survey said that watching reality TV served as a learning tool and inspired conversation with their parents or friends, and that reality TV depicts people with different backgrounds and beliefs teaching them new things that they would not have learned about otherwise.

Outlook

With reality shows regularly being the highest rated shows on American television, product placement in reality TV shows is only set to increase. Many industry watchers predict that social media postings and discussions on reality TV shows may be the new tracker for consumer trends and buying habits.

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