TEENAGERS, SEX, AND VIDEOTAPES

Raenette Marino

Hawai’i experienced a seismic jolt on the eve of the Interscholastic League of Honolulu’s 2003 championship football game pitting Kamehameha School against rival Saint Louis School when six of the Kamehameha players were suspended for allegedly “videotaping a sexual episode with at least one female student” (Viotti A15). Sportscaster Steve Uyehara reported that other students had seen the recording of the accused students having consensual sexual relations in a campus parking lot. Following an investigation by school administrators, five of the six football players were expelled (Viotti A2). Because the school is known for its academic and moral standards, shock waves stemming from the incident continue to reverberate within the community.

Allegations of teenagers videotaping sexual escapades are not isolated to Kamehameha Schools. Recently, Los Angeles Times staff writers Allison Hoffman and Wendy Thermos reported that two high school junior boys and one sophomore girl were expelled from Stephen S. Wise Temple School, an exclusive school in the Sepulveda Pass, for allegedly videotaping their sexually explicit acts and distributing it on campus (B3). Similar to the Kamehameha Schools incident, revelations of the videotape surfaced after students viewed the tape and reported it to an adult. These events raise a number of concerns about the factors driving teenagers to videotape their sexual acts and distribute them among their peers.

Teenagers engaging in risky sexual behaviors are not exclusive to the current generation. Kamehameha School alumnus Tim Marino said that he knew of a male student who had an affair with the wife of one of the faculty members during the late 1950s. At the time of the affair, the student confided in one or two of his closest friends and remained at the school until graduation. The distinguishing feature separating this generation from its predecessors is the random manner in which the teenagers chose to publicize their sexually explicit acts. In the past, teenagers chose to disseminate information regarding their sexual exploits, to a certain degree, with discrimination. Fearless of consequences, it appears the teenagers in the two aforementioned incidents candidly publicized their sexual deeds.

A glut of pseudo-reality television programs targeting teenagers and young adults have inundated prime-time airwaves within the last three years. As a result, the networks have profited from a larger, younger audience (Chunovic 18). Unlike the real-life drama of COPS on FOX, which has been on television for over a decade, the new wave of real-life television is far removed from reality. Shows such as FOX’s Temptation Island and CBS’s Joe Millionaire serve as life-scripts for teenagers, exposing them to the glamour of sex, the thrill of exhibitionism, and the supremacy of physical attractiveness. From Survivor to The Bachelorette, these programs have transformed virtual unknowns into celebrities, seemingly overnight. Although there are innumerable societal factors that shape beliefs and values, pseudo-reality television programs are influencing teenagers—at a time when the formation of their beliefs and values are in the developmental stages—to believe there is power in publicizing sexual exploits.

Teenagers are learning behavior from these television programs merchandized as real life. Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura theorized that behavior is learned by observing real-life situations and by observing situations depicted on film or television (Strasburger 8). Although 7 of 10 teenagers will reach full cognitive operational thinking by age 16, studies show they are more susceptible to assigning reality to fantasy (Strasburger 42). In a survey of high school junior and seniors, researcher M. Larson found that students who watched more daytime soap operas believed single mothers held high-paying jobs and led problem-free lives (Brown 43). Pseudo-reality programs compound the problem. The events are not unfolding naturally and haphazardly, as reflected in our mundane lives. The events are staged and edited, as reflected in fantastical lives. Andrea Wong, ABC’s senior vice president for alternative series and specials, said that they edit the programs “to make compelling drama” (Gourley 4). Incognizant of this fact, teenagers thus confuse fantasy with reality. Because teenagers observe actions on shows they perceive as real, they may act out the observed circumstances. When the situation of television results in a reward, such as fame and power, that possibility is heightened.

A soured relationship is usually the only negative consequence resulting from casual sexual behavior, according the pseudo-reality programs such as Temptation Island, in which four couples are tempted by beautiful men and women to cheat on their companions. “Commitment, Contraceptives, and consideration of Consequences” are rarely depicted, Jane Brown reported in the Journal of Sex Research (42). In all of the programs, no one gets pregnant, no one contracts a sexually transmitted disease, and everyone becomes famous, including the jilted Joe or Jane. Sexual exhibitionism is fuel for fame.

Because the negative consequences of sexual exhibitionism are not depicted, teenagers perceive sexual exhibitionism as a means of fun and fame. Since seventy-five percent of all children in the United States have a television in their bedroom (Brown 42), teenagers are considered to a powerful group of consumers. According to M.B. Holbrook’s article “The Millenial Consumer in the Text of Our Times,” marketers are using “experience, entertainment, and exhibitionism” to appeal to younger audience members (178). Teenagers can now view sexually explicit exhibitionism in the privacy of their own bedroom, as seen in shows as Girls Gone Wild, in which physically attractive young women, often in their late teens, flaunt and flash lots of flesh for fun and fame. Within-your-grasp fame for the beautiful is power.

Physical attractiveness is a key factor in participation or achievement on pseudo-reality television. The power of beauty is the theme of the program Average Joe, in which the beautiful Melana Scantlin must
choose a suitor among several physically unattractive and handsome men. In the end, Scantlin did not decide on an average Joe, but instead selected the still living with parents, chiseled face hunk Jason Peoples over plain but nice Wall Street stockbroker Adam Mesh.

In spring 2003, American Idol judge Simon Cowell told contestant Clay Aiken that it was imperative he abandon his geeky appearance in order to be competitive. Aiken’s talent—his powerful singing voice—was insufficient to become famous. Aiken’s physical attractiveness, according to Cowell, would ultimately determine his failure or success. America watched as Aiken transformed into an image-conscious performer. America also watched Aiken become increasingly popular. Thus, pseudo-reality programs are seducing teenagers into believing that physical supremacy supercedes education, skill, and talent in attaining stardom.

No longer does one need to follow the traditional approach for achieving fame. No longer does one need to have intelligence or talent. No longer does one need to work hard to pay their dues. Fame is instant, and power usually tags along. All one needs is a degree of beauty, a lack of inhibition, and a video camera. With a flick of a switch, teenagers can achieve instant thrills, notoriety, and power. Although there is no evidence that the scrutinized teenagers watched pseudo-reality programs, this concept of instant stardom and power for the promiscuous, uninhibited, and beautiful is an indication of the culture in which American teenagers are growing up.

The teenagers who were expelled at the exclusive preparatory schools do not represent all teenagers; they do represent the tragedy of modern society. American novelist E.B. White said “I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover either a new and unbeatable disturbance of the general peace, or a soaring radiance in the sky” (qtd. in Strasburger 1). Our love affair with television has turned into a marriage gone awry. As feared by White, we do not like what it has become and we do not like what we are becoming because of it. Still, life without it is unimaginable. Television has become such an integral part of our existence that we look to it for validation and legitimize its portrayals.

Divorce from pseudo-reality television appears unlikely because it validates the values of modern society. As long as we give power to those who glamorize sex, trivialize exhibitionism, and reward fame on the basis of physical attractiveness, pseudo-reality television will continue its course and we will continue to be enamored. However, as in every troubling relationship, it is the consummation’s offspring that will pay the price in the end.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This paper is an argument regarding the media that was written for English 315, Advanced Composition.

Works Cited


Gourley, Catherine. “How Real is Reality TV?” Writing 23.6 (April/May 2001): 4-7


---. “Kamehameha Expels Students in Sex Case.” Honolulu Advertiser 9 Nov 2003: A2