girl scouts

real to me: Girls and Reality TV

Girl Scout Research Institute

Reality TV has become staple entertainment for young people and adults alike. In our survey of more than 1,100 girls around the country, we found that the most popular genres of reality TV are competition (American Idol, Project Runway, etc.) and real life (Jersey Shore, The Hills, etc.). Many girls think these programs reflect reality, with 75% saying that competition shows and 50% saying that real-life shows are "mainly real and unscripted."

While many in society might view reality TV as a relatively benign phenomenon, our research shows significant differences between those girls who consume reality TV on a regular basis and those who do not. Of girls surveyed, regular reality TV viewers* differ dramatically from their non-viewing peers in their expectations of peer relationships, their overall self-image, and their understanding of how the world works. Our findings also suggest that reality TV can function in the lives of girls as a learning tool and as inspiration for getting involved in social causes.

Finding 1: Relationship Drama

All of the girls in our study feel that reality shows promote bad behavior. The vast majority think these shows "often pit girls against each other to make the shows more exciting" (86%), "make people think that fighting is a normal part of a romantic relationship" (73%), and "make people think it's okay to treat others badly (70%)."

Regular reality TV viewers accept and expect a higher level of drama, aggression, and bullying in their own lives as well. They are considerably more likely than non-viewers to agree that:
- "Gossiping is a normal part of a relationship between girls" (78% vs. 54%);
- "It's in girls' nature to be catty and competitive with one another" (68% vs. 50%); and
- "It's hard for me to trust other girls" (63% vs. 50%).

Regarding boys, regular reality TV viewers are more likely than non-viewers to say "girls often have to compete for a guy's attention" (74% vs. 63%). As well, they admit they are happier when they are dating someone or have a boyfriend/significant other (49% vs. 28%).

Finding 2: Two Sides to Self-Image

In our study, we found that girls who view reality TV regularly are more focused on the value of physical appearance.

- Seventy-two percent say they spend a lot of time on their appearance (vs. 42% of non-viewers).
- More than a third (38%) think that a girl's value is based on how she looks (compared to 28% of non-viewers).
- They would rather be recognized for their outer beauty than their inner beauty (28% vs. 18% of non-viewers).

At the same time, regular reality TV viewers are more confident than non-viewers.

- This group of girls is more self-assured than non-viewers when it comes to virtually every personal characteristic we asked girls about, with the majority of regular reality TV viewers considering themselves mature, a good influence, smart, funny, and outgoing.
- They are more likely than non-viewers to both aspire to leadership (46% vs. 27%) and to think they are currently seen as a leader (75% vs. 63%). In addition, they are more likely to see themselves as role models for other girls (75% vs. 61%).

Finding 3: Success = Meanness + Lying

Our research indicates that regular reality TV viewers emphasize being mean and/or lying to get ahead. A higher percentage of these girls as compared to their non-viewing counterparts claim that sometimes:

- "You have to lie to get what you want" (37% vs. 24%);
- "Being mean earns you more respect than being nice" (37% vs. 25%); and
- "You have to be mean to others to get what you want" (28% vs. 18%).

Finding 4: Positive Spin-Offs

In our study, the benefits of reality TV most frequently noted by all girls were opening the lines of communication, serving as a learning and motivational tool, and encouraging girls to be active in social causes.

- Seventy-five percent of girls say that reality shows have inspired conversation with their parents and/or friends.
- Many girls receive inspiration and comfort from reality TV, with 68% agreeing that reality shows "make me think I can achieve anything in life" and 48% that they "help me realize there are people out there like me."
- Seventy-five percent of girls say that reality TV depicts people with different backgrounds and beliefs. Furthermore, 65% say such shows introduce new ideas and perspectives, 62% say the shows have raised their awareness of social issues and causes, and 59% have been taught new things that they wouldn't have learned about otherwise.