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TEACHING SOCIOLOGY THROUGH REALITY TV:

Understanding Society through the Small Screen

Monica Bixby Radu, Ph.D.

Abstract

This article explores reality TV's value in teaching sociological concepts and theories for a better understanding contemporary society. Reality TV serves as a rich canvas for illustrating key tenets of major sociological theories such as structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. By analyzing reality TV through a sociological lens, insights into societal dynamics emerge, revealing how individuals navigate social norms. Additionally, reality TV serves as a cultural mirror, reflecting and shaping societal values. Globally, it influences cultural attitudes and social dynamics, transcending geographical boundaries through adaptations and social media engagement. It promotes inclusivity by showcasing underrepresented voices and challenging stereotypes. As an educational tool, reality TV offers concrete examples for teaching sociology, facilitating the exploration of social concepts such as inequality and gender roles. Ultimately, reality TV provides a window into human behavior and societal structures, offering valuable insights for sociological inquiry.

Keywords: teaching sociology, cultural representation, application of theoretical perspectives, sociological imagination, toxic masculinity

The Sociological Application of Reality Television

While often dismissed as mere entertainment, reality TV holds significant value as a subject of sociological study (Montemurro, 2008). In this article, I will explore why reality TV serves as a valuable teaching tool for sociology, particularly in how it can help students develop sociological insights and apply the sociological imagination to better understand its underlying dynamics. By examining reality TV through a sociological lens, we can uncover profound insights into contemporary society and the complex ways in which individuals navigate social norms and structures within the confines of the screen (Thompson & Mittell, 2013). I argue that reality TV serves as a cultural mirror, reflecting and sometimes reframing societal values, attitudes, and beliefs. By analyzing these representations, sociology instructors can help students apply key terms and theories to better understand the underlying power dynamics, inequalities, and cultural trends that shape both the content and reception of reality television (Porter & Standing, 2020). Through this application, students can engage with concepts such as socialization, gender roles, and media influence, deepening their grasp of sociological theories like symbolic interactionism, conflict theory, and structural functionalism. Reality TV provides a practical and relatable framework for exploring these sociological ideas in action.

Reality TV is important from a global perspective due to its multifaceted role in shaping cultural attitudes and global interconnectedness (Chalaby & Plunkett, 2021; Rodríguez, 2018). Chalaby (2016) argues that through formats like international versions, co-productions, and adaptations, reality TV franchises have become ubiquitous, transcending geographical boundaries. These shows often feature contestants, challenges, and themes that reflect diverse cultural

backgrounds, fostering cross-cultural understanding and dialogue (Beaty, 2021). Additionally, social media platforms amplify this interconnectedness, allowing audiences worldwide to engage with and react to reality TV content in real-time (Rodríguez, 2018). This creates a global community of viewers who share experiences and perspectives regardless of their geographic location (Rodríguez, 2018). Reality TV reflects global trends, values, and social issues, addressing universal concerns such as poverty, discrimination, and mental health within various cultural contexts (Schauerte, Feiereisen, & Malter, 2021). By showcasing underrepresented voices and marginalized communities, reality TV has the potential to promote inclusivity and challenge stereotypes, contributing to greater representation on a global scale (Beaty, 2021). Furthermore, reality TV cast members wield global influence, shaping trends, consumer behaviors, and social movements across borders (Rodríguez, 2018). Through the study of reality TV's impact on global audiences, sociologists gain valuable insights into the mechanisms of cultural diffusion, media influence, and celebrity culture in the contemporary digital age (Montemurro, 2008). Additionally, research suggests that reality TV shows often portray important social issues such as inequality, gender roles, race relations, deviance, and the construction of identity (Nikunen, 2019).

When viewers engage with reality television, it may appear to be a form of casual entertainment. However, upon closer examination, reality TV serves as a window into the dynamics of human behavior and societal structures. Through a sociological lens, the interactions and narratives depicted in these shows offer valuable insights into the functioning of our social world. By critically analyzing the relationships, conflicts, and cultural representations presented on screen, we can deepen our understanding of societal norms and processes (Scharrer, Ramasubramanian, & Banjo, 2022).

The Sociological Imagination

The sociological imagination, a concept introduced by sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1959, refers to the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and larger social structures (Mitra & Sarabia, 2005). Essentially, it allows people to understand how personal challenges are influenced by broader societal issues and how these issues are shaped by historical and cultural contexts (Massengill, 2011). When students apply the sociological imagination to reality TV, they can look beyond the surface-level narratives and delve into the underlying societal dynamics at play. Through this lens, students can recognize that cast members' behaviors are shaped not only by their individual personalities but also by broader societal norms. For instance, in shows exploring themes like romance, friendships, or family dynamics, the sociological imagination allows students to see how cultural expectations, gender roles, and media influences shape the portrayal of relationships and interpersonal conflicts (Anderson, 2016). Students can better understand how personal struggles depicted on screen are linked to broader social issues, such as power dynamics and social inequality (Montemurro, 2008). This approach helps students critically engage with the media they consume and challenge the systems of power and oppression perpetuated by these shows.

Teaching the *Sociological Imagination* with *Jersey Shore*

The enduring cultural relevance of *Jersey Shore*, despite its initial premiere over a decade ago, speaks volumes about the impact and evolution of reality television in modern pop culture. Originally debuting in 2009, *Jersey Shore* quickly became a cultural phenomenon, capturing the attention of audiences with its depiction of a group of young adults living and partying together in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. The main cast members, known for their distinctive personalities, include Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi, Mike “The Situation” Sorrentino, Paul “Pauly D” DelVecchio, Jenni “JWoww” Farley, Vinny Guadagnino, Ronnie Ortiz-Magro, Sammi “Sweetheart” Giancola, and later Deena Cortese and Angelina Pivarnick. The show gained significant attention for its portrayal of the cast members' party-centric lifestyle, frequent conflicts, romantic entanglements, and unique catchphrases (e.g., “Gym, Tan Laundry” (GTL), “Smush”, and “The cabs

are here!”). The cast members’ antics, from fist-pumping at nightclubs to navigating tumultuous relationships, provided endless fodder for tabloids and social media discussions (Wayne, 2015). The show also sparked conversations about topics such as identity, social norms, gender roles, and the influence of media on behavior (Wayne, 2015).

Fast forward to today, and the franchise remains relevant with its revival, *Jersey Shore Family Vacation*. This reboot brings together the original cast, showcasing their lives as they navigate adulthood, marriage, and parenthood. The shift from the wild party antics of their youth to the responsibilities and challenges of maturity offers viewers a compelling narrative arc that resonates with audiences. The cast members’ personal growth and transformations add depth to the narrative, keeping the franchise fresh and relevant. As they navigate the challenges of adulthood, viewers witness their struggles, triumphs, and moments of vulnerability, making them more than just reality TV personalities but rather fully developed characters with whom audiences can empathize and root for.

A popular reality show like *Jersey Shore* offers a unique opportunity to teach students about the sociological imagination by exploring the relationship between personal problems and broader social issues (Massengill, 2011). In the show, the cast members navigate various personal struggles such as romantic relationships, insecurities, and conflict, often in exaggerated or dramatic fashion. Using the sociological imagination, students can be guided to recognize how these personal experiences are shaped by larger societal forces like family expectations, gender norms, media influence, and cultural expectations around behavior, especially for young adults (Nikunen, 2019).

Classroom Activity: In a class activity, students could watch selected scenes from *Jersey Shore* and then categorize the challenges faced by the cast members as either personal problems (individual-level) or social issues (structural-level). For example, they might analyze Snooki’s struggles with public perception and body image and connect these challenges to larger societal issues, such as media portrayals of women and the pressure to conform to certain beauty standards. Another example could be examining the constant partying and substance use, and linking it to societal expectations around youth culture, peer pressure, and the normalization of certain behaviors in media.

Follow-Up Assignment: As a follow-up assignment, ask students to choose a reality show they watch and write a brief reflection analyzing a particular situation using the sociological imagination. Students should identify personal troubles depicted on the show and connect them to broader social issues. For instance, they could reflect on Ronnie’s toxic behavior in relationships and relate it to societal expectations of masculinity and emotional suppression (Romaniuk, 2020). Alternatively, they might examine how the show’s glorification of partying and materialism reflects broader cultural norms about success and young adulthood. This method engages students by utilizing familiar media while encouraging them to think critically about how individual experiences are shaped by societal dynamics (Massengill, 2011). By applying the sociological imagination to *Jersey Shore*, students can see how personal troubles are often connected to structural issues, making the concept more relatable and applicable to everyday life.

Teaching Sociological Theories Through *Jersey Shore*

Using reality television, specifically *Jersey Shore*, can be an effective way to teach students how to apply sociological theories to popular culture and everyday social interactions. By analyzing issues depicted on the show, students can engage with key sociological perspectives such as structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism, and see how these theories manifest in the interactions between cast members. Below are examples of how *Jersey Shore* can be utilized to explain each theory, along with practical ideas for classroom discussions and writing prompts that help students grasp these concepts.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism is a sociological theory that views society as a complex system made up of interdependent parts, each of which serves a specific function that contributes to the overall stability and equilibrium of society. This perspective suggests that institutions, social structures, and norms work together to maintain social order and meet the needs of society. From a structural functionalist perspective, *Jersey Shore* serves multiple functions within society by reflecting and reinforcing cultural norms and values. The behaviors and attitudes of the cast, though often exaggerated for entertainment, mirror important aspects of American culture. For instance, the emphasis on partying, materialism, and physical appearance reflects consumerist and individualistic values prevalent in American society. Additionally, the camaraderie and conflicts among the cast highlight social dynamics within groups. Despite frequent disputes, the cast members often show loyalty and solidarity, reinforcing the importance of social relationships and communal ties in maintaining social stability. This portrayal of group cohesion supports the structural functionalist view that such bonds are essential for the stability of society.

Teaching Example: In *Jersey Shore*, the loyalty displayed by Pauly D towards Vinny Guadagnino during his struggle with mental health issues provides a compelling example of how friendships serve vital functions within social structures, as understood through structural functionalism. When Vinny grapples with anxiety and depression, Pauly's unwavering support and empathy not only aid his friend's well-being but also reinforce the cohesion and stability of the group dynamics. Pauly's actions, such as providing a listening ear, offering reassurance, and advocating for Vinny's mental health, contribute to maintaining a sense of solidarity and trust within the cast. Structurally, their friendship acts as a stabilizing force, ensuring the group's continued functioning amidst challenges. Additionally, Pauly's loyalty to Vinny reinforces the importance of supportive relationships in fostering resilience and addressing individual needs within the broader social context of the shore house. Through this lens, their friendship emerges as a functional component within the social structure, enhancing the overall loyalty and functionality of the group dynamics.

Class Discussion: Ask students how the support among cast members functions to maintain social stability within the group. What societal values or norms are reinforced through their interactions?

Writing Prompt: Analyze a scene from *Jersey Shore* where the group responds to a crisis (e.g., Snooki being punched at a nightclub). How does their collective reaction reinforce social cohesion and protect the group's integrity? How does this reflect broader societal norms around loyalty and protection?

Conflict Theory

Jersey Shore provides ample material for exploring conflict theory, which focuses on power dynamics, competition, and inequality. Conflict theory is a sociological perspective that focuses on the inherent power struggles present within society. It emphasizes how dominant groups maintain control over resources and institutions, often at the expense of marginalized groups, leading to continuous tension and inequality. Conflict theorists focus on how inequalities are produced and maintained, and how those who hold power use it to control and suppress the less powerful. *Jersey Shore* illustrates power and stratification in terms of social status within the group itself. Certain cast members are elevated to positions of influence and power, while others may feel marginalized or excluded. This hierarchy within the group reflects broader social dynamics of popularity, where individuals with certain attributes or characteristics are valued more highly than others. This competitive dynamic not only fuels intra-group conflicts but also reinforces existing power hierarchies and

reinforces social stratification. For example, Mike wanted to be the leader of the group; however, his aggressive behavior and attempts to dominate often backfired, leading to tension and conflict with other members.

Teaching Example: Conflict theory can be applied to analyze the portrayal of conflicts between the cast members and individuals outside their group, such as local residents, romantic interests, or rival factions. These conflicts may stem from territorial disputes, cultural misunderstandings, or perceived threats to the cast members' social status and identity. In one particular incident, tensions between cast male members Ronnie Ortiz-Magro and Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino escalated into a physical altercation. The conflict began during a night out at a club when Ronnie became upset with Mike for spreading rumors about him and his girlfriend, Sammi "Sweetheart" Giancola. As the argument intensified, Ronnie and Mike exchanged heated words, eventually leading to a physical fight. The fight resulted in Ronnie pushing Mike, who then retaliated by throwing a punch at Ronnie. The incident not only reflects the volatile nature of the relationships within the group but also underscores the role of alcohol, jealousy, and unresolved tensions in fueling such conflicts.

This portrayal of violence (among others) raises questions about the normalization of aggressive behavior and the glamorization of conflict within reality television (Sherry & Martin, 2014). As audiences are repeatedly exposed to scenes of physical altercations and verbal clashes, it prompts reflection on the societal implications of such portrayals (Anderson & Bushman, 2018). This perpetuation of aggressive behavior as a marker of masculinity not only reinforces harmful stereotypes about men as inherently violent or aggressive but also reinforces societal expectations that men should assert dominance through physical means. While the altercation between Ronnie and Mike was undoubtedly sensationalized for entertainment purposes, it also serves as a stark reminder of the real-world consequences of unchecked aggression and violence.

Studying instances of conflict, aggression, and violence in popular culture provides an opportunity for students to engage in discussions about socialization and the social construction of gender, race, and class (Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati, 2020). The ways in which aggression is framed and portrayed on TV shows often reflect gendered expectations and stereotypes about masculinity, as well as racialized narratives about violence and criminality (Sherry & Martin, 2014). By deconstructing these narratives, students can gain a better understanding of how social identities intersect with power dynamics and influence behavior.

Class Discussion: How do the power dynamics in *Jersey Shore* reflect broader societal struggles for dominance and status? How do the conflicts between cast members mirror issues of gender or social class in the real world?

Writing Prompt: Choose a moment of conflict on *Jersey Shore* and analyze it from a conflict theory perspective. How do the characters assert dominance or power over one another? How does the show reflect or challenge social inequalities in terms of gender or class?

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the importance of symbols, language, and social interactions in the construction of reality and the formation of individual and collective identities, and in *Jersey Shore*, symbols play a significant role in shaping the identities of the cast members and the dynamics of their relationships. For example, the distinctive styles of clothing, hairstyles, and accessories worn by the cast members serve as symbols of their cultural identity and social status. The use of specific language, catchphrases, and slang within the group further reinforces their sense of belonging and solidarity. Symbolic interactionism can also be applied to analyze the portrayal of space and place in *Jersey Shore*. The beach house where the cast members reside serves as a symbolic setting that shapes their experiences and interactions. It

represents a temporary escape from their everyday lives and a space where they can express themselves freely and engage in leisure activities. The various locations visited by the cast members, such as nightclubs, restaurants, and beaches, carry symbolic meanings associated with socializing, the specific geographical region, and nightlife and partying culture.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the ways in which individuals construct meaning through their interactions with others and the symbols present in their social environment, and the interactions among the cast members on the show are rich with symbolic meaning. From playful banter to heated arguments, these interactions reflect underlying social norms, values, and power dynamics. Additionally, the portrayal of intimate partnerships and romance on the show can be analyzed through the lens of symbolic interactionism. The exchange of gestures, gifts, and expressions of affection between cast members symbolize intimacy, attraction, and emotional connections. Conversely, conflicts and betrayals within romantic relationships can signify ruptures in trust and the negotiation of symbolic boundaries. Sammie and Ron's tumultuous relationship provides a rich context for understanding dynamics of romance, conflict, and identity formation through the lens of symbolic interactionism.

Teaching Example: In the case of Sammie and Ron, their relationship was characterized by intense emotions, frequent arguments, and dramatic reconciliations, all of which were laden with symbolic significance. Their interactions often revolved around symbols of affection, such as gestures of love, verbal expressions, and physical intimacy. These symbols served to communicate their feelings and reinforce their bond as a couple. However, conflicts between Sammie and Ron were also rife with symbolic meaning. Their arguments were often fueled by jealousy, mistrust, and insecurities, which were communicated through verbal insults, accusations, and confrontations. These conflicts served as symbolic expressions of deeper issues within their relationship, such as unresolved tensions, communication breakdowns, and conflicting expectations.

The on-again, off-again nature of Sammie and Ron's relationship exemplifies the negotiation of symbolic boundaries and the construction of relational identities. Each breakup and reconciliation represented a renegotiation of their roles as partners and individuals within the social context of the group. The symbols of love, commitment, and loyalty were constantly redefined and reinterpreted through their interactions, contributing to the fluidity and complexity of their relationship dynamics. Additionally, symbolic interactionism can help us understand the influence of social context and peer dynamics on Sammie and Ron's relationship. Their interactions were not only shaped by their personal experiences and emotions but also influenced by the expectations and norms of their social environment, including their fellow cast members and the broader cultural context of reality television.

Class Discussion: How does Sammie and Ron's on-again, off-again relationship in *Jersey Shore* illustrate the principles of symbolic interactionism, particularly in the way they negotiate their relational identities? In what ways do their breakups and reconciliations reflect the shifting meanings of love, commitment, and loyalty within their social context? How do you think their relationship was influenced by the expectations of their fellow cast members and the broader cultural norms of reality TV?

Writing Prompt: Analyze how a specific character on *Jersey Shore* constructs their identity through symbolic interactionism. How do their behaviors, language, or social interactions shape the way others perceive them? In your analysis, consider the influence of symbols such as love, commitment, and loyalty, and how these were redefined through their interactions.

Table 1. Sociological Theories Applied to Reality TV

Theory	Major Tenants	Application
Structural Functionalism	Focuses on how society is structured to maintain stability and order.	A sociologist applying this theory to reality TV might analyze how reality TV shows serve certain functions within society. They might examine how these shows reinforce social norms, values, and roles. For example, they could look at how reality TV portrays family dynamics, gender roles, or social hierarchies. They might also explore how reality TV provides entertainment and escapism, contributing to social cohesion by offering shared cultural experiences.
Conflict Theory	Emphasizes the role of power dynamics, inequality, and conflict in shaping society.	A sociologist using conflict theory to analyze reality TV might focus on how the genre reflects and perpetuates social inequalities and power struggles. They might examine how reality TV often sensationalizes conflict, competition, and drama to attract viewership. They could also explore how reality TV perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces existing social hierarchies based on factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, they might investigate how producers, networks, and advertisers wield power to shape narratives and manipulate participants for profit.
Symbolic Interactionism	Examines how individuals construct meaning through their interactions and interpretations of symbols.	A sociologist employing symbolic interactionism to study reality TV might focus on how participants and viewers interpret and assign meaning to the events, behaviors, and symbols depicted on these shows. They might analyze how reality TV influences self-perception, identity formation, and interpersonal relationships. They could also explore how participants engage in impression management, presenting themselves in ways that align with perceived social expectations or desired images. Additionally, they might investigate how viewers negotiate meaning and construct social reality through their consumption and discussion of reality TV content.

Using *Jersey Shore* to Teach about Toxic Masculinity

Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity refers to a set of cultural norms and expectations surrounding masculinity that are harmful to both men and society as a whole (Harrington, 2021). These norms often promote behaviors and attitudes that prioritize traits such as dominance, aggression, emotional repression, and the suppression of vulnerability (Harrington, 2021). Toxic masculinity perpetuates the idea that men must conform to rigid stereotypes of strength and invulnerability, while also discouraging expressions of emotion, sensitivity, or perceived weakness (Alexander & Woods, 2019). Exploring the concept of toxic masculinity through the lens of reality television, such as *Jersey Shore* can serve as a powerful educational tool for teaching students about this term (Springer & Yelinek, 2011). By analyzing the behaviors and attitudes exhibited by the cast members, students can gain a deeper understanding of how toxic masculinity manifests in real-world contexts and its harmful impact on individuals and society as a whole (Radu, 2024).

Throughout the series, viewers witness a pervasive culture of hypermasculinity, where traits such as aggression, dominance, and promiscuity are celebrated and valorized (Papp, Ward, & Marshall, 2022). The male cast members, including Ronnie Ortiz-Magro, Mike “The Situation” Sorrentino, and Vinny Guadagnino, often engage in behaviors that reinforce traditional norms of masculinity, such as objectifying women, engaging in physical altercations, and boasting about sexual conquests (Bond & Drogos, 2014). Throughout the series, there are numerous instances where the male cast members talk about women in a derogatory manner, reducing them to mere objects of sexual desire and entertainment (Fugère, Escoto, Cousins, Riggs, & Haerich, 2008). For example, Vinny’s discussions about “bringing home girls” or

“smushing” with women depict them as interchangeable and disposable, devoid of individuality or agency. By reducing women to mere objects of sexual gratification, Vinny and other male cast members contribute to a culture of objectification and dehumanization, where women are valued primarily for their physical appearance and sexual availability (Bond & Drogos, 2014). Cast members used the term “grenade” to refer to unattractive women, and “DTF” was used to identify which women were willing to have sex after a night out at the club.

One of the most striking manifestations of toxic masculinity in *Jersey Shore* is the recurring pattern of conflict and aggression among the male cast members. Whether it is verbal arguments or physical altercations fueled by jealousy or ego, these displays of aggression perpetuate the idea that violence is a legitimate means of asserting dominance and resolving disputes. The constant emphasis on hooking up and “bringing home girls” reinforces the notion that sexual conquests are a marker of masculinity and social status. The male cast members often equated a “successful night out” with their ability to bring a woman home. In the context of the show, the notion of “success” became intertwined with their ability to “score” or engage in sexual activity with a woman. This mindset reflects a broader cultural expectation that equates masculinity with sexual conquests and validates men based on their ability to attract and seduce women.

In their intimate relationships, the male cast members often exhibit possessive and controlling behaviors towards their female counterparts. Instances of jealousy, manipulation, and emotional abuse are normalized within the context of the show, reflecting a broader societal acceptance of controlling behaviors as a natural extension of masculinity. Normalizing violent and controlling behaviors in intimate relationships perpetuates harmful cycles of abuse and undermines the safety and well-being of individuals involved. When violence becomes normalized, it minimizes the severity of abusive behaviors and may lead victims to believe that such treatment is acceptable or expected within relationships (Anderson & Bushman, 2018). This normalization can also create barriers to seeking help or support, as victims may feel ashamed or believe that they are to blame for the abuse.

Activity: Exploring Toxic Masculinity in *Jersey Shore*

To help students explore and critically examine the concept of toxic masculinity using *Jersey Shore*, this activity will prompt them to apply sociological theories and concepts to specific scenes from the show. By analyzing the behaviors and interactions of the male cast members, students can better understand how toxic masculinity is both perpetuated and normalized in media and broader society.

Instructions:

Watch Clips from *Jersey Shore*: Select key scenes that highlight examples of toxic masculinity. These might include:

- Scenes where male cast members boast about their sexual conquests or engage in objectifying language (e.g., using terms like “grenade” or “DTF”).
- Episodes that depict physical altercations or aggressive behaviors between male cast members.
- Moments in which male cast members exhibit controlling or possessive behaviors toward their romantic partners.

Group Discussion: After watching the clips, divide the class into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions:

- How do the behaviors displayed in these scenes reflect traits associated with toxic masculinity (e.g., dominance, aggression, emotional repression)?

- In what ways do the male cast members equate their masculinity with sexual conquest, aggression, or control over others?
- How does the portrayal of women in these scenes reinforce or challenge the objectification and dehumanization of women?
- How does the social environment of *Jersey Shore* (e.g., the party culture, competitive atmosphere) foster and reinforce these behaviors?

Critical Thinking Writing Prompt: Have each student write a short essay in response to the following prompt:

- Using examples from *Jersey Shore*, analyze how the show perpetuates toxic masculinity. How do the behaviors and attitudes of the male cast members reinforce harmful cultural norms about masculinity? Consider the role of aggression, sexual conquest, and possessiveness in shaping their identities. In your analysis, discuss the broader societal implications of normalizing these behaviors in media.

Class Reflection: After completing the group discussions and essays, hold a class-wide reflection where students share their insights. Encourage students to consider the following:

- How does media, like *Jersey Shore*, shape viewers' perceptions of masculinity and relationships?
- What are the potential consequences of normalizing toxic masculinity in popular culture?
- How can sociological theories help explain the persistence of toxic masculinity in reality TV?

This activity not only engages students in applying sociological theories to real-world media examples but also encourages them to think critically about the impact of toxic masculinity on both individual relationships and society as a whole. By analyzing the behaviors on *Jersey Shore*, students will better understand the role of media in shaping and perpetuating cultural norms related to gender and power (Anderson & Ferris, 2016).

Table 2. Characteristics of Toxic Masculinity Applied to “Jersey Shore”

Characteristic	Definition	Application
Aggression and Violence	The belief that physical strength and dominance are central to masculinity can lead to aggressive behavior, including violence towards others, as a means of asserting power and control.	Throughout the series, some of the male cast members’ actions reflect a desire to assert power and control over women, which sometimes manifests in aggressive and violent behavior.
Emotional Suppression	Toxic masculinity discourages men from expressing vulnerability or seeking help for emotional struggles, reinforcing the stereotype that “real men” don’t show emotion.	Whenever a male cast member expresses sadness or sensitivity, they are often met with derision or dismissed as being weak or overly emotional by their peers.
Objectification of Women	Toxic masculinity often involves the objectification of women, viewing them as objects for sexual conquest rather than as equals deserving of respect and autonomy.	Male cast members are shown objectifying and sexualizing women, frequently making remarks about women’s appearances, openly rating their attractiveness, and boasting about their sexual conquests.
Homophobia and Transphobia	Toxic masculinity stigmatizes any deviation from traditional notions of masculinity, including expressions of gender nonconformity or sexual orientation outside of heterosexual norms.	The cast members make homophobic and transphobic remarks. These comments reinforce stereotypes and stigmas surrounding non-heteronormative identities, contributing to a culture of intolerance and discrimination.
Pressure to Conform to Hegemonic Masculinity	Men who do not adhere to traditional norms of masculinity may face social stigma or ridicule, leading to feelings of inadequacy or isolation if they do not conform to societal expectations.	Male cast members who deviate from traditional notions of masculinity, such as displaying sensitivity may face ridicule or ostracism from their peers.

Conclusion

Reality TV is a dynamic subject for sociological inquiry, offering a nuanced glimpse into the intricacies of contemporary society. It serves as a multifaceted mirror reflecting societal norms, power dynamics, and cultural trends. Through the sociological lens, students can uncover the underlying complexities of human behavior and the structures that shape our social world. Additionally, the global reach and influence of reality TV underscore its significance as a tool for understanding cross-cultural dynamics and global interconnectedness. In the realm of higher education, reality TV proves to be a valuable resource for teaching key sociological concepts and theories, offering concrete examples and case studies that bring sociological perspectives to life.

While reality TV offers a unique and engaging way to teach sociological concepts, there are potential limitations to its use in the classroom that must be acknowledged. One common criticism of reality TV is the degree to which these shows are “scripted” or heavily edited to create drama and entertainment value (Strauss, 2018). Although marketed as unscripted, many reality TV shows are often carefully produced to highlight conflict, exaggerated personalities, and sensationalized narratives. This raises questions about the authenticity of the behaviors and interactions portrayed, which could potentially distort students’ understanding of real-world social dynamics (Aslama & Pantti, 2006).

Despite these concerns, the strengths of using reality TV as a teaching tool outweigh these limitations. The very aspects of reality TV that are critiqued—its dramatization and focus on conflict—are, in fact, valuable teaching points. These elements can be used to illustrate the construction of social identities, the role of media in shaping public perceptions, and how individuals perform their roles within structured environments. Reality TV offers a rich case study for students to critically analyze the blurred line between reality and media production, enabling them to reflect on how media influences social norms and values.

Reality TV like *Jersey Shore* provides accessible and familiar examples of sociological concepts such as power dynamics, gender roles, social capital, and group cohesion. These shows engage students who are already invested in popular culture, making the learning process more relatable and compelling. When paired with critical analysis, the controlled settings and dramatized interactions in reality TV serve as a springboard for deeper discussions about authenticity, representation, and societal expectations, ultimately enriching students' understanding of key sociological theories.

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