

The Hidden Costs: Exploitation and Ethics in the Reality TV Economy

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Abstract

This paper examines the economic structure that defines American reality television and argues that participant exploitation is built into the genre's design. Through a review of production costs, legal practices, casting and on-set tactics, and post-show consequences, the research showed how networks have profited from a low-waged workforce while shifting physical, psychological, and reputational risk onto participants. Case studies across major franchises also revealed a consistent pattern in which vulnerability has become a source of value for producers without meaningful safeguards. The findings demonstrated that these harms are systemic rather than accidental and that the current model functions through the absence of regulation. The study ultimately contend that meaningful labor protections and industry oversight are necessary to address the conditions that make exploitation possible.

Keywords: reality television, labor exploitation, participant manipulation, unscripted programming, media ethics

The Hidden Costs: Exploitation and Ethics in the Reality TV Economy

Reality television, often described as “unscripted” entertainment, has grown into a dominant and highly profitable format in the American media industry (Greenberg, 2009). Its popularity with networks and streaming platforms stems from a financial model that delivers high viewership and engagement at a fraction of the cost of scripted television, with reality programming costing roughly half as much to produce (Duncan, 2003). Despite this impact, reality TV remains a difficult genre to define, blending documentary, factual entertainment, lifestyle, and competitive elements (Hill, 2005). It has been used to describe everything from the “docu-soap” format of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* to the hidden-camera tradition of *An American Family*, as well as structured makeover, dating, lifestyle-change shows like *The Biggest Loser*, and large-scale competition series such as *Survivor* (Kavka, 2012).

Despite the lack of a solid definition, the reality television genre is most accurately understood as a system of low-cost, non-union production built to exploit human vulnerability for profit (Mast, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016). This problem often goes unnoticed, as discussion focuses on the drama and content rather than the labor practices in the industry, and the low exchange value of “cheap” reality programming obscures the power relations between studio owners and the workers whose labor they employ (Mirrlees, 2016). This paper argues that while reality television is stylistically diverse, its economic model reveals the structure that shapes the genre and how it operates.

This research is significant because it examines the economic and labor structures that built the modern version of this genre and drive participant exploitation (Hill, 2005, Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). It then analyzes how those structures shape casting, production practices, and post-show treatment, as production routines and casting choices are shaped by cost-efficient production

needs. By categorizing participants as a “no-waged” or low-waged workforce, this study highlights the real-world harms produced by the industry’s model (Mirrlees, 2016). Finally, through case studies of formats, such as *Big Brother*, *Love Is Blind*, and *Jury Duty*, this analysis connects the genre’s economic design to the human costs experienced by its participants.

The historical origins of reality television are often debated, but the specific origin of modern reality TV can be traced back to two key programming styles from the 20th century: the “hidden camera” and the “live-in camera” (Kavka, 2012). The earliest occurrence of the “hidden camera” format began in the 1940s with Allen Funt’s *Candid Camera* (Kavka, 2012). To create entertainment, he learned he had to manufacture situations, creating crises to provoke a reaction from unknowing subjects (Nussbaum, 2024). A second, almost opposite, style was the “live-in camera,” a documentary style best seen in the 1973 PBS series *An American Family*, where the show’s purpose was observation (Kavka, 2012; Nussbaum, 2024). It used a “fly-on-the-wall” camera to passively record the daily lives of the Loud family and offered a raw, intimate look at real-world issues the family faced like divorce and homosexuality (Andrejevic, 2004; Beck et al., 2012).

The modern version of the genre evolved for purely economic reasons in the late 1980s and merged the “live-in camera” and “hidden camera” formats (Bignell, 2005; Raphael, 2009). Faced with new competition from cable and the rising union-driven costs of scripted programming, networks turned to reality television after the 1988 Writers’ Strike acted as the catalyst that pushed producers toward low-budget, non-union formats (Beckford Hoge, 2023; Raphael, 2009). According to *Reality TV: Low-Wage and No-Wage Work*, “reality TV’s classification as ‘nonscripted’ programming enables production companies to exploit a non-

unionized workforce,” since studios used “nonscripted programming” as part of a “wider industry move toward using non-union, freelance production crews” (Mirrlees, 2016, p. 192).

This economic system is now a dominant force in the modern media landscape, reinforced during the 2007-2008 Writers' Strike and again during the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes, which drove networks to lean even further into unscripted programming as scripted production came to a halt (Cort, 2024; Deller, 2019; Raphael, 2009; Wellen, 2023). The numbers make this clear: an hour-long reality show averages between \$350,000 to \$500,000 to produce, while a scripted drama costs anywhere from \$1 to \$2.5 million (Adalian, 2015; Eidelson, 2013; Gornstein, 2008).

The genre’s foundation relies on what one source calls “the no-waged labor of ‘contestant-participants,’” which is the core mechanism of exploitation (Mirrlees, 2016). By classifying participants as independent contractors rather than employees, producers avoid minimum wage laws, overtime requirements, and union protections (Cort, 2024).

This legal setup creates the conditions that have become standard across the genre. Without traditional labor protections, producers can impose isolation, sleep deprivation, and psychological pressure to manufacture conflict (Chapais, 2025; Pozner, 2010). Editing practices such as “frankenbiting” assemble unrelated moments into storylines that never occurred and thus further distorting events (Robins, 2005).

These tactics reveal the underlying production logic of many of the genre’s most successful programs. *Big Brother* isolated participants in a fully controlled house, where their 24/7 “work of being watched” becomes the raw material sold to audiences and advertisers (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 6; Kavka, 2012, p. 88). More recent streaming hits like *Love Is Blind* show how the model has intensified, with lawsuits alleging 20-hour workdays and sub-minimum-wage

pay, a direct outcome of the anti-labor approach established in the 1980s (Cort, 2024, p. 429; Raphael, 2009, pp. 129-136).

To investigate these issues, this paper examines four central questions: What economic incentives sustain reality television's low-cost, high-return model? How do participant contracts shield production companies from responsibility for workplace conditions or psychological harm? In what ways do casting, surveillance, and emotional destabilization shape on-screen behavior? And how does the post-show experience contribute to long-term consequences for participants?

The central argument of this paper is that reality television operates on a business model intentionally built to exploit its labor to maximize profitability. This exploitation is embedded in the nonscripted production structure, which uses legal classifications to deny participants protections while turning their vulnerability into profit (Kosciesza, 202; Mirrlees, 2016; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Because the model prioritizes inexpensive, high-impact drama, it often does so at the cost of participant wellbeing, leaving many to manage the psychological fallout on their own while networks continue to benefit from their distress (Chapais, 2025; Mast, 2016).

Literature Review

Factors Influencing the Production and Distribution of Reality Television

Cost-Driven Production

Reality television rose to prominence because it solved a financial crisis in the industry. During the late 1980s, rising union costs and the 1988 Writers Guild of America strike revealed how dependent networks were on expensive scripted labor, pushing them toward non-union, low-cost formats that could keep schedules full (Cort, 2024; Raphael, 2009). At the same time, cable fragmentation spread audiences across more channels, increasing demand for programming

that was inexpensive, fast to produce, and easily replayed (Kavka, 2012; Raphael, 2009). MTV's *The Real World* became an early proof of concept. Marketed as a low budget social experiment with a small crew and unpaid cast, it delivered reliable ratings and demonstrated that networks could succeed without scripted writers, professional actors, or large production teams (Hill, 2014; Kosciesza, 2021; Nussbaum, 2024).

Other shows reinforced this model in different ways. *America's Funniest Home Videos* relied entirely on user-submitted clips, which removed the need for hired talent and created one of the most cost-efficient formats in television (Nussbaum, 2024). *Fear Factor* offered another version of efficiency by centering the show on stunts that generated conflict and tension without additional production manipulation, while its episodic structure allowed networks to air episodes in any order to fill time at minimal (Butler, 2002; Wilson, 2010). Collectively, these early formats showed that reality television could lower labor expenses, increase output, and keep networks competitive during a period of widespread financial pressure (Hill, 2005; Raphael, 2009; Serpe, 2013).

Cost Comparison with Scripted Programming

The industry increasingly relies on reality TV because it is cheaper and faster to make than scripted programming. At the low-end of scripted production, network comedies cost about two million dollars per episode, driven by the expenses of WGA writers, SAG-AFTRA actors, multi-day shooting schedules, and recurring set costs (Murray & Ouellette, 2009; Robins, 2005; Ryan & Littleton, 2017). Mid-tier scripted dramas show a steep increase in cost. A streaming hit such as *Stranger Things* averaged between six million and eight million dollars per episode in its early seasons, a figure shaped by cinematic production design, extensive visual effects, and larger ensemble casts (Ryan & Littleton, 2017). At the highest tier of scripted content, prestige

series such as *Game of Thrones* reached ten to fifteen million dollars per episode in later seasons because of international locations, stunt teams, and heavy effects work (Ryan & Littleton, 2017).

Unscripted programming operates on a very different cost structure from scripted television. Lower-cost formats rely on minimal crews, volunteer or real-life participants, and non-union labor, which keeps budgets significantly lower than scripted production (Bignell, 2005; Hill, 2005; Mirrlees, 2016). Many entry-level or docu-style series are produced for under \$100,000 per episode, reflecting a model built on repeatable formats and limited creative or technical demands (Beckford Hoge, 2023). Even more polished reality programs typically fall between \$300,000 and \$500,000 per hour, remaining far below scripted television costs (Mirrlees, 2016; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Higher-profile franchises and competition shows still operate at a fraction of scripted budgets, often costing well under \$1,000,000 per episode despite travel requirements or large crews (Essany, 2013; Kavka, 2012). Across this range, the bottom line is the same: reality programming costs less to produce and more reliably turns a profit (Mirrlees, 2016; Kavka, 2012).

High-Profit Margins

Reality television's profitability comes from the way the genre is structured. Unscripted shows avoid the major cost drivers that inflate scripted budgets, including unionized writers, SAG-AFTRA actors, large crews, and lengthy development and post-production processes. Studies consistently show that reality formats rely on smaller, often non-union teams and cast members who are not represented by major guilds, which keeps labor expenses markedly lower (Beckford Hoge, 2023; Hill, 2005; Mirrlees, 2016; Raphael, 2009). Because these shows bypass script development and talent negotiations, they also move through production cycles more quickly, reducing both time and overhead (AFCI & Olsberg.SPI, 2024; Raphael, 2009).

These structural efficiencies produce a clear cost advantage. Many reality shows fall within the \$100,000 to \$500,000-per-episode range, and even larger franchises frequently remain below \$1–1.5 million (Friedman, 2024; Mirrlees, 2016; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Some competition series exceed this, but programs such as *The Biggest Loser* have historically stayed under \$1 million per hour (Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Network reporting places typical one-hour reality formats between \$700,000 and 1.25 million depending on scale (Murray & Ouellette, 2009).

Scripted television operates at a significantly higher tier. One-hour dramas commonly range between \$2 and 3 million per episode (Wyatt & Bunton, 2012), and many streaming dramas now average \$9–15 million per hour. Prestige productions regularly exceed \$10 million, with shows like *Game of Thrones* reaching about \$15 million and recent titles such as *3 Body Problem* costing roughly \$20 million per episode (RTL Group, 2024; Ryan & Littleton, 2017). These comparisons underscore the pronounced cost-per-hour advantage of unscripted programming.

Financial analyses across the industry reinforce this pattern. Reality formats consistently deliver lower production costs while still generating competitive advertising revenue when ratings are strong (Dyer, 2010; Serpe, 2013). Networks increasingly rely on unscripted programming as a cost-management tool, especially as scripted budgets rise and audience fragmentation intensifies. Unscripted series allow broadcasters to reduce the average cost of primetime schedules, maintain steady output, and avoid the significant upfront investments required for scripted commissions (Kavka, 2012; Mirrlees, 2016; Roberts, 2019). RTL Group confirms this shift, noting that commissioning has moved increasingly toward unscripted titles

because they are less expensive, faster to produce, and more reliable during economic volatility (RTL Group, 2024).

Revenue Expansion

Once a reality format is up and running, the same cost advantages that make it cheap to produce also make it unusually good at generating profit. The formats and characters that emerge function as intellectual property, which can be licensed, merchandised, and resold across markets with far lower incremental spending than scripted series (Mirrlees, 2016; Serpe, 2013). Media scholars describe this format-extension strategy as an economy of scope, where a single successful format can be extended into spin-offs, reunion specials, and new local versions that all reuse essentially the same creative template (Beckford Hoge, 2023; Kavka, 2012; RTL Group S.A., 2024).

International franchising is one of the clearest ways this model plays out. Global format tracking shows that unscripted entertainment dominates the international format trade, with properties such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *MasterChef* generating long-running local editions in dozens of territories (Beckford Hoge, 2023; Kavka, 2012; RTL Group S.A., 2024). *Big Brother* alone has had more than fifty national versions and spin-offs based on a single core format (Beckford Hoge, 2023). Once a format has been codified and licensed, the owner largely avoids day to day production costs; each additional sale brings new fees for rights use, consulting, and, in some deals, a share of local advertising or sponsorship revenue (Bachman, 2025; RTL Group S.A., 2024). Taken together, these repeatable revenues turn what begins as a relatively inexpensive experiment into a durable cash flow engine for the companies that control the underlying intellectual property (Dyer, 2010; Mirrlees, 2016; Serpe, 2013).

Sponsorship and product placement significantly widen profit margins for reality programming because the format naturally accommodates branded environments and on-screen integrations. Scholars noted that, unlike scripted shows, reality series do not need to weave products into fictional narratives, which makes brand exposure feel organic within real-world settings such as villas, glam rooms, or shared living spaces (Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). The *Love Island* franchise shows how extensive these integrations can become, partnering with multiple commercial collaborators whose products appear throughout the set and in coordinated campaigns that run during new episodes (Farberman, 2025; L'Hoiry, 2019).

Industry reporting also finds that producers frequently pre-sell substantial portions of a season's revenue by securing sponsorship deals in advance, which reduces financial exposure well before an episode airs (Beckford Hoge, 2023). With typical U.S. reality programs averaging about \$250,000 per episode, these multilayered integrations create a strong return on investment and establish sponsorship as a central economic driver for the genre (Eser, 2024).

Viewer participation functions as both an engagement driver and a revenue tool. *American Idol* helped establish this model by expanding audience voting through phone, SMS, and online systems, with AT&T reporting more than 178 million text messages during Season 8 (Roberts, 2019). Scholars note that *American Idol's* voting system was deliberately designed to deepen investment and generate value for producers and advertisers because interactive formats keep viewers attentive, committed, and more responsive to sponsor messaging (Dyer, 2010; Hill, 2014; Kavka, 2012). *Dancing With the Stars* takes the viewer participation model even further by transforming entire episodes into branded promotional events. Its 2025 *Wicked Night* tied directly to the release of the *Wicked* film musical and delivered two hours of coordinated performances, music, and IP-driven storytelling, boosting ratings and providing Universal

Pictures with a high-visibility marketing platform (Campione, 2025; Rice, 2025). Recurring themes like Disney Night and TikTok Night dedicate full episodes to performances built around a single brand or platform, effectively turning the broadcast into a promotional vehicle for corporate partners while still operating as entertainment (Edwards, 2013; Rubenstein, 2025).

Legal and Contractual Framework

Participant Classification as Independent Contractors

Producers classify reality TV participants as independent contractors rather than employees, allowing them to avoid obligations such as minimum wage, overtime, breaks, health insurance, and union access (Beckford Hoge, 2023; Cort, 2024; OnLabor, 2025). Unlike scripted performers covered by SAG-AFTRA, reality participants fall outside union jurisdiction because they are labeled as “contestants,” despite performing on-camera labor that directly generates commercial value (Essany, 2013; Greenberg, 2009).

This contractor framework is economically appealing. Networks realized they could produce large amounts of content without union writers or actors by relying on ordinary people whose participation required few legal protections (Mirrlees, 2016; Raphael, 2009). Clip-driven formats similarly use amateur footage from individuals who sign away rights with no expectation of compensation (Andrejevic, 2004; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Competition shows such as *Survivor* or *The Biggest Loser* demand substantial physical and emotional labor but frame that work as voluntary participation in a “game,” allowing producers to bypass regulations that apply to comparable forms of televised performance (Bignell, 2005; Brenton & Cohen, 2003; Kavka, 2012). This framing solidified the legal basis for classifying cast members as contractors and enforcing workplace expectations without standard employee safeguards (Beckford Hoge, 2023; Cort, 2024; OnLabor, 2025).

Contemporary franchises operate the same way. On *Love Is Blind*, former contestant Jeremy Hartwell reported twenty-hour filming days and a one-thousand-dollar weekly stipend, conditions resembling full-time labor but treated as contractor work (Cort, 2024; OnLabor, 2025; Wiessner, 2024). Other reports describe restricted sleep, food, and water, which contribute to exhaustion and stress (Chapais, 2025; Mirrlees, 2016; Rice, 2022). *America's Next Top Model* contestants similarly reported earning only thirty-eight dollars per day while producers retained sweeping control over their image and portrayal (Raphael, 2009; Syed, 2021). Across formats, cast members supply the emotional and physical labor that drives ratings and profit yet do so without union protection or basic workplace rights. Scholars argue treating participants as expendable labor is not accidental but a defining feature of the contractor model, which allows producers to treat participants as expendable labor rather than employees (Andrejevic, 2004; Beckford Hoge, 2023; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012).

Restrictive Contractual Agreements

Producers reinforce the independent-contractor structure through restrictive participation agreements that heavily favor the production company and limit participants' rights. These contracts commonly include restrictions on future employment, broad confidentiality provisions, binding arbitration clauses, and expansive image-release terms that grant producers sweeping legal protection and creative control (Cort, 2024; Greenberg, 2009; Karakas, 2022; Mast, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016). Former contestants across multiple productions report being rushed or pressured to sign these agreements with little opportunity for negotiation, a pattern shaped by the high demand for casting that leaves participants at a significant disadvantage (Chapais, 2025; Cort, 2024; Greenberg, 2009). Non-disclosure agreements further limit participants' ability to speak about their experiences by prohibiting disclosure of working conditions, production practices,

and editorial decisions, which in turn restricts public accountability and silences complaints about mistreatment (Chapais, 2025; Greenberg, 2009; Karakas, 2022; Mirrlees, 2016). Mandatory arbitration clauses then move most disputes into private arbitration proceedings that tend to favor studios, preventing cases from reaching public courts and reducing the visibility of harmful practices within the industry (Cort, 2024; Jacobs, 2024). Image-release provisions intensify this imbalance by granting producers the authority to edit, reorder, fictionalize, or “frankenbite” footage, creating portrayals that may not accurately reflect events or participants’ behavior (Chapais, 2025; Mast, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016; Robins, 2005). Taken together, these clauses create an environment in which production companies retain near-total control while participants are left with limited recourse and few avenues to challenge coercive or harmful conditions.

The impact of restrictive clauses becomes especially clear in the case of *Love Is Blind* contestant Renee Poche. Multiple reports describe how Poche alleged that producers pressured her to continue an engagement even after she told them her on-screen partner was violent, erratic, and struggling with drug and alcohol use, and that crew members were concerned enough to ask her to make sure he had no access to firearms (Bowman, 2024; Cort, 2024; Wiessner, 2024). Court filings show that Poche’s storyline was largely removed from the final season, and despite filming for weeks, she earned only about eight thousand dollars for her participation (Bowman, 2024). When she later made limited public comments about her experiences, Delirium TV invoked her nondisclosure agreement and initiated private arbitration for four million dollars, a penalty made possible by broad confidentiality language and binding arbitration provisions embedded in standard reality-TV contracts (Cort, 2024, p. 456; Jacobs, 2024; Wiessner, 2024). A judge subsequently ruled the dispute must remain in private arbitration, blocking any public

court proceedings, and as of 2024 the case remained ongoing while the NLRB filed a separate complaint against the producers (Bowman, 2024; Jacobs, 2024). The severity of that response illustrates how these agreements can deter participants from speaking out about abuse, unsafe conditions, or coercive production practices, even when they believe their wellbeing was put at risk.

Because these clauses exist within an independent-contractor framework that already reduces legal protections, they reinforce a system designed to preserve production efficiency and protect producers rather than safeguard the individuals appearing on screen (Karakas, 2022; Mast, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016; OnLabor, 2025).

Editorial Rights and Narrative Control

Another dimension of these contracts is the broad editorial authority they grant producers, allowing them to shape how participants appear on screen with little to no oversight. Scholars noted that reality television agreements usually require cast members to waive any right to review or dispute their portrayal, which gives producers wide latitude to reconstruct footage into whatever storyline best serves the show (Beckford Hoge, 2023; Mast, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016). This practice, often described as “frankenbiting”, allows editors to splice together dialogue, reactions, and scenes in ways that heighten conflict or assign character roles like the villain or the hero, even when these narratives do not reflect actual events (Chapais, 2025; Pozner, 2010; Robins, 2005).

The fallout from *Bachelor in Paradise* in 2017 shows how severe the consequences of editorial framing can be. Production shut down after a sexual encounter between Corinne Olympios and DeMario Jackson became the center of the season’s early narrative, prompting an internal investigation and fueling speculation about potential misconduct (Fisher, 2017;

Nededog, 2017). Early coverage portrayed Corinne as too intoxicated to consent and DeMario as predatory, even though both later stated the encounter had been consensual and that the public narrative did not match what occurred (Drysdale, 2018; Fisher, 2017; Nededog, 2017). ABC's suspension of production intensified media attention and amplified assumptions about sexual assault (Nededog, 2017). Although Warner Bros. later found no misconduct, the damage had already taken hold. DeMario reported losing his job, experiencing harassment, and facing ongoing reputational harm tied to the implication of sexual wrongdoing (Fisher, 2017; Nededog, 2017). Corinne also described emotional distress, backlash over her sobriety, and what she called "the hardest year of my life," citing depression, isolation, and business losses resulting from the scandal (Drysdale, 2018; Nededog, 2017). Both said the broadcast version of events did not reflect what happened. Yet, contractual restrictions limited their ability to correct or contextualize the narrative while the show aired (Mirrlees, 2016; Wiessner, 2024).

On-Set Production Tactics

Casting Strategy

Casting is the first point where producers begin shaping the emotional dynamics of a reality TV season. Rather than selecting people who simply fit an archetype, casting teams look for personalities, histories, or vulnerabilities that are likely to spark tension once filming starts (Bignell, 2005; Kavka, 2012; Pozner, 2010). Producers draw on multi-stage application processes that can include detailed forms, interviews, psychological assessments, and social-media review, which gives them emotionally charged material before cameras even roll (Chapais, 2025; Deller, 2019; Nussbaum, 2024). The aim of producers is to build a cast predisposed to conflict and high-stakes drama, essentially 'casting for conflict,' which shapes

what kinds of storylines are even possible once production is underway (Kavka, 2012; Kosciesza, 2021; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012).

Once those contestants are selected, the production environment amplifies pressure through confinement, competition, limited privacy, and constant surveillance (Bignell, 2005; Chapais, 2025; Kavka, 2012; Mirlees, 2016). These conditions keep participants in a heightened emotional state and turn engineered reactions into entertainment for viewers (L'Hoiry, 2019; Pozner, 2010).

High-risk casting decisions are not hypothetical; one of the clearest examples is *Big Brother* Season 2, where Justin Sebik was cast despite a documented history of arrests and violent behavior that later became public (Carter, 2001; Nussbaum, 2024, p. 215; Pozner, 2010). His behavior escalated quickly on the show, and he was removed after holding a kitchen knife to another contestant's throat, following earlier warnings about threatening conduct (Carter, 2001; Nussbaum, 2024). Cases like this incident show how producers sometimes accept substantial behavioral risk if it increases the likelihood of conflict, a practice long acknowledged in reporting on casting strategies that intentionally select volatile or unstable personalities to fuel drama (Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2016; Pozner, 2010).

Producers also cast individuals whose real-world lives already contain tension or scandal that can be leveraged on screen. Jen Shah, a cast member on *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City*, is a clear example. Shah was under federal investigation while filming, and her arrest, prosecution, and eventual conviction became central to the show's narrative and the surrounding publicity (Gajewski, 2023; U.S. Department of Justice, 2023; Yilek, 2021). Selecting cast members whose personal circumstances already guarantee controversy ensures built-in storylines

and public attention, making them valuable assets within the reality TV economy (Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2016).

Psychological Conditioning Techniques

Emotional breakdowns on reality shows usually grow out of production environments that are built to wear people down. Scholars and former contestants describe a recurring set of tactics: long and unpredictable workdays, sleep deprivation, restricted access to food and water, isolation from normal support systems, and heavy alcohol use, all of which leave participants exhausted and highly reactive (Chapais, 2025; Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2016; Mirlees, 2016; Pozner, 2010). *Love Is Blind* makes this pattern especially clear. Cast members such as Nick Thompson and Danielle Ruhl have spoken about filming up to twenty hours a day with limited access to basic needs, conditions that Jeremy Hartwell's lawsuit and later labor complaints describe as systematic deprivation meant to heighten on-camera drama (Bowman, 2024; Cort, 2024; Jacobs, 2024; Wiessner, 2024). When viewers see tears, outbursts, or sudden fights, they are often watching people who are hungry, exhausted, and cut off from ordinary life, so only a small push is needed for conflict to explode on screen (Bignell, 2005; Chapais, 2025; Essany, 2013).

America's Next Top Model relied on pressure around appearance and identity rather than pure physical strain. Makeover episodes frequently imposed drastic changes such as painful weaves, chemical treatments, or shaved heads, and contestants who hesitated were framed as unprofessional or "not committed." Photo shoots pushed boundaries even further, including race swap styling, crime scene reenactments, and physically risky stunts that several women later described as dangerous or humiliating (Lindemann, 2022; McDowell, 2022; Nast, 2022; Rae, 2025; Willen, 2020; Wilson, 2010). Former participants recall distress and embarrassment, yet

visible discomfort was often read as a lack of drive rather than a signal that conditions had become unsafe (Pozner, 2010; Rae, 2025).

Across competition and lifestyle formats, the production strategy is consistent. Shows are built around conditions that chip away at emotional stability through deprivation, exhaustion, humiliation, physical strain, or identity manipulation (Chapais, 2025; Mast, 2016; Nussbaum, 2024; Pozner, 2010). These systems intentionally foster stress and vulnerability, creating environments where heightened emotional reactions are likely (Bignell, 2005; Chapais, 2025; Mast, 2016). A cast that is tired, overwhelmed, or embarrassed becomes easier to provoke and easier to shape into dramatic narrative arcs on screen (Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2016; Essany, 2013; Nussbaum, 2024). The emotional moments that audiences read as “real” often trace back to pressures deliberately built into the production environment (Bignell, 2005; Chapais, 2025; Hill, 2014).

The Panopticon Effect

Surveillance in reality television is not just a filming practice. It becomes part of the psychological environment that participants must navigate once production begins (Bignell, 2005; Chapais, 2025; Karakas, 2022). Scholars often describe this dynamic through the lens of the Panopticon, the model Michel Foucault used to explain how people internalize monitoring and begin to regulate themselves under constant observation (Foucault, 1977). Media researchers such as Mark Andrejevic have applied this idea directly to reality TV, arguing that continuous visibility reshapes behavior and creates a form of “participatory surveillance” where cast members perform for cameras they can never escape (Andrejevic, 2004; Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2016; Hill, 2014). In this context, the cameras are not passive observers. They structure how participants act, how relationships form, and how conflict escalates, long before

editing or producer intervention shapes the final narrative (Bignell, 2005; Chapais, 2025; Kavka, 2012; Nussbaum, 2024).

Big Brother is defined by this very dynamic. Contestants live with no access to the outside world in a house designed for surveillance, with dozens of cameras and microphones capturing every moment (Kavka, 2012; Bignell, 2005). Live feeds broadcast their day-to-day behavior to paying audiences, which turns normal interactions into potential storylines (Andrejevic, 2004; Bignell, 2005). Over time, the continuous monitoring creates a sense of hyper-awareness and paranoia. Cast members often describe feeling on edge, reactive, and less grounded as the season goes on. Former contestant Laura Carter recalled that producers used “paranoia” as a theme, explaining that isolation and public judgment left her anxious and convinced she was being targeted (Carter, as cited in Warner, 2022). Psychologists and media scholars similarly note that constant visibility and confined social environments heighten anxiety and amplify emotional responses in participants (Chapais, 2025; Kavka, 2012).

Jury Duty represents a different form of surveillance-driven manipulation. Ronald Gladden spent three weeks inside what he believed was a real courtroom process, unaware that every juror, attorney, and judge around him was an actor and that hidden cameras were recording him the entire time (Surette, 2023; Wynne & Huver, 2023). Because the environment was built entirely around his reactions, he had no reason to suspect the strange conflicts and personalities he encountered were scripted (Surette, 2023). After filming, Ronald described feeling disoriented and unsure of what was real, comparing the experience to a real-life *Truman Show* as he struggled with paranoia and a lingering fear that he was still being followed or filmed (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015; Surette, 2023). He later explained that it took months to trust situations again and that therapy helped him process how deeply manipulated he felt (Wynne & Huver, 2023).

Since the show required keeping him unaware of its design, he was unable to give meaningful consent to the environment he was placed in, leaving him psychologically vulnerable by design (Mast, 2016; Nussbaum, 2024). The psychological impact of surveillance does not end when filming stops.

Post-Production Consequences and Media Harassment

Lasting Physical and Emotional Consequences

For many participants, the most serious harms of reality television emerge after filming ends. Studies of former cast members describe ongoing anxiety, depression, PTSD-like symptoms, and a sense of being discarded once the show is over, especially when mental health support is inconsistent or absent (Chapais, 2025; Eser, 2024; Mirlees, 2016). Legal and journalistic accounts of MTV franchises such as *The Real World* and *The Challenge* describe lawsuits over alleged abuse and former contestants who later said the experience left lasting emotional scars and should have come with counseling (Cort, 2024; Nussbaum, 2024). Taken together, this research shows a pattern in which tightly controlled, heavily surveilled production environments create intense psychological strain, then leave participants to manage the fallout alone when they return to everyday life (Chapais, 2025; Deller, 2019).

Even franchises built on wealth, like *The Real Housewives*, produce emotional strain. Cast members have reported depression, breakdowns, and in some cases suicidal ideation, reflecting broader patterns documented across reality TV (Chapais, 2025). These series rely on engineered conflict, alcohol use, and emotional escalation to generate drama, and cast members are often required to relive disputes in confessionals and reunions, prolonging distress long after the initial incident (Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Kavka, 2012). The resulting psychological harm is not limited to ordinary participants but embedded in the genre's design (Chapais, 2025).

Physical risks are just as pervasive in survival-based and competition formats.

Contestants on shows like *Naked and Afraid XL* have sustained serious injuries, including lacerations requiring immediate medical intervention and posing risks of infection or long-term damage (Tate, 2021). Participants on *Survivor* have reported significant weight loss and lethargy, while *Squid Game: The Challenge* contestants have alleged hyperthermia, nerve injuries, and unsafe working conditions (Bignell, 2003; Carey, 2023). Cast members from *The Challenge* have also spoken about major injuries and the lack of ongoing medical support once filming ends, revealing how networks profit while shifting the long-term physical and financial burden onto contestants (Cort, 2024; Couden, 2024).

Social Media and Parasocial Behavior

Once an episode airs, contestants are pulled into an online world they do not control. Viewers pick apart cast members based on edited portrayals and treat them as if they owe constant access or explanation, a reaction shaped by the emotional investment reality TV encourages (Hill, 2005; Lindemann, 2022). This digital scrutiny has become part of the genre's economic model, because networks benefit from the engagement, debate, and controversy that extend a show's visibility long after filming ends (Andrejevic, 2004; Mast, 2016). As audiences interact with contestants through social media, their responses fuel attention, trending cycles, and monetizable engagement, reinforcing how integral online discourse has become to reality television's financial ecosystem (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015).

Viewers respond not as distant observers but as individuals who believe they “know” contestants well enough to determine what they deserve. Edited archetypes like villains, heroes, and ingénues become treated as factual identities, guiding audience judgment in ways that blur entertainment with moral evaluation (Pozner, 2010; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Harassment is often

reframed as accountability, even when it is rooted in edited narratives rather than real behavior. These dynamics are intensified by the ways producers frame storylines and selectively present footage, shaping how audiences justify hostility toward participants (Arditi, 2020; Chapais, 2025).

The reaction to Cierra Ortega on *Love Island USA* Season 7 demonstrates the severity of this cycle. After old social media posts resurfaced that featured her using an anti-Asian racial slur, viewers launched mass-reporting campaigns, circulated her family's personal information, and even claimed to have contacted immigration authorities, all while her social media follower count dropped by nearly two hundred thousand in two days (Goldberg, 2025; Tinoco, 2025; Vora, 2025). A comparison within the same season shows how backlash is shaped not only by the offense itself but by how attached viewers already feel to a contestant. Both Cierra Ortega and Yulissa Escobar were removed from *Love Island USA*, Ortega for using an anti-Asian slur on social media and Escobar for using an anti-Black slur on a podcast, but Escobar left after only one or two episodes, with little time to build a storyline or parasocial bond with the audience (Bernabei, 2025; Goldberg, 2025; Vora, 2025). By contrast, Ortega had become a central figure in the villa before her posts re-emerged, and the ensuing backlash included mass online harassment, death threats, and attacks on her family, who reported feeling unsafe in their own home (Hayes, 2025; Tinoco, 2025). This pattern aligns with research on parasocial relationships, which found that viewers could feel a stronger sense of investment and even betrayal toward characters they like and "know," and are more likely to scrutinize or punish them when they violate perceived norms (Chapais, 2025; Goldberg, 2025). These reactions show how easily the line between entertainment and real-life collapses when audiences treat edited narratives as sufficient evidence for moral judgment (Bignell, 2005; Chapais, 2025).

Because online debates drive engagement, networks benefit from the circulation of clips, hashtags, and press coverage even when commentary turns destructive (Andrejevic, 2004; L'Hoiry, 2019; Nussbaum, 2024). Meanwhile, contracts provide little protection, and after-care is minimal, often limited to only a few follow-up sessions (Chapais, 2025; Cort, 2024; Mast, 2016). What remains is a system that prioritizes engagement and ratings over the well-being of the people it features (Chapais, 2025).

Conclusion

Across the cases and analysis presented in this paper, the evidence shows that reality television operates on an economic structure that reduces costs by classifying participants as independent contractors, bypassing wage requirements and avoiding protections that govern most forms of on-camera labor (Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016). This structure shapes every stage of production. The economic incentives sustaining reality television's low-cost model depend on classifying participants as independent contractors, bypassing wage requirements and avoiding protections that govern most forms of on-camera labor (Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2016; Mirrlees, 2016). Participant contracts reinforce this structure by shielding production companies from responsibility for workplace conditions or psychological harm through broad NDAs, mandatory arbitration clauses, and expansive editorial rights (Cort, 2024; Mast, 2016). Casting favors individuals whose personalities or vulnerabilities can generate strong on-screen reactions, while surveillance and emotional destabilization further shape behavior during filming through restricted access to basic needs, sleep disruption, and constant monitoring (Chapais, 2025; Kavka, 2012; Kosciesza, 2021; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). Editing practices then solidify these outcomes by constructing narratives that serve dramatic and financial goals, including through techniques that significantly reshape reality (Lindemann,

2022; Robins, 2005). These harms do not end when filming stops. Participants frequently report emotional distress, PTSD-like symptoms, physical injuries, and long-term reputational damage, yet post-show support is minimal (Chapais, 2025; Cort, 2024). Social media extends and amplifies these effects by keeping edited portrayals in circulation long after a season ends. Edited portrayals continue circulating long after a season ends, exposing cast members to harassment and ongoing moral judgment tied to narratives over which they had no control (Goldberg, 2025; Mast, 2016). The harms associated with reality television are not isolated incidents but predictable outcomes of a system that prioritizes inexpensive production and high engagement over participant well-being (Andrejevic, 2004; Chapais, 2025).

Regulatory and Industry Reform

Because participants are routinely labeled as independent contractors, they are excluded from basic protections such as minimum wage laws, overtime pay, and the right to unionize (Cort, 2024). Scholars argue that production companies exert enough control to warrant full employment classification, which would require fair wages, reasonable hours, and standardized safety measures that reflect the demands of reality-based filming (Mirrlees, 2016). Reclassifying cast members as employees would also align the United States with international precedents, such as France's 2009 ruling requiring contestants to receive contracts and pay equal to professional actors (Curran & Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

Standardized mental-health support is also necessary. Emotional distress often intensifies once episodes air and social-media commentary begins, yet follow-up care is inconsistent and limited (Cort, 2024). Contractual reform is equally important. Broad NDAs and expansive editing rights give producers near-total control over a participant's portrayal while preventing cast members from raising concerns or correcting misleading narratives (Arditi, 2020).

Narrowing these clauses would allow participants to speak more freely about unsafe conditions and protect them from significant financial penalties (Chapais, 2025). Because digital backlash is now built into the genre, the industry must also adopt protections against harassment, doxxing, and reputational harm linked to editorial framing (Marsh, 2020; Tinoco, 2025). Greater transparency around editing practices would reduce narrative distortions that fuel audience hostility. Limits on manipulative editing and clearer acknowledgement of constructed storylines are necessary to prevent cast members from being cast into archetypes that shape negative public response (Chapais, 2025).

Final Analysis

Reality television has always sold the promise of opportunity: ordinary people enter these shows expecting visibility, transformation, or a platform (Kosciesza, 2021; Mirrlees, 2016). The genre functions less as harmless entertainment and more as labor within the attention economy, where emotional and physical experiences are monetized (Andrejevic, 2004; Johanssen, 2018).

The industry profits from inexpensive production, high engagement, and global brand recognition (Bignell, 2005), while participants bear the emotional, physical, and financial costs of the narratives crafted around them. Exploitation is not a side effect but a core feature of the system (Chapais, 2025), and without reform, economic incentives will continue to prioritize dramatic content over safety and ethical care (Mirrlees, 2016; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012).

This research also connects reality TV's contractor model to broader trends in the gig economy and influencer culture, showing how flexible labor and limited protections extract value from personal vulnerability (Kosciesza, 2021; Mirrlees, 2016; Pozner, 2010). Recognizing these hidden costs is the first step toward imagining a genre that does not depend on harm. Protecting participants will require legal reform, industry accountability, and a cultural shift that

acknowledges the real labor behind the spectacle (Cort, 2024; Nussbaum, 2024; Wyatt & Bunton, 2012).

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