

Moral Educators of Today's Youth:
An Examination of Media through the Lens of Virtue Ethics

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DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PROBLEM & KEY QUESTIONS

It is Cicero who first states that every individual has an obligation to find their true self, an obligation that is arguably more significant and sensitive for young adults. Due to our mutual interest in applied ethics, both Dr. Manninen and I have designed a research project in which we are using the Greek ethical theory known as virtue ethics to assess two currently popular media trends: reality television and young adult supernatural literature. Specifically, the two examples of assessment are *Jersey Shore* and the *Twilight* book series. These products of media are advertised specifically to and for pre-teens and young adults and as Aristotle would describe it, these two outlets function as moral educators toward their intended audience. The focus of this research is to highlight how media can, and does, function as a moral educator, which consequently, implies that those who create these media have a moral obligation toward their audience. Such an obligation increases when dealing with an impressionable and youthful audience.

Aristotle argued that certain media outlets, in particular poetry and literature, functioned as moral educators that, in turn, served to instill either virtues or vices in its students. Applying this same logic to reality TV, we will first argue that *Jersey Shore* (and other reality TV shows similar to it) encourages unhealthy attitudes towards sexuality, materialism, and self-esteem that, in turn, serve to instill similar vices. We will further support this thesis by citing studies in psychology and sociology journals that illustrate the connection between early exposure to sex and violence on television and its negative behavioral effects on children.

Because of Aristotle's focus on the role literature plays in moral education, we will also focus on the young adult book series, *Twilight*. We will highlight the subservient and passive behavior of the

heroine Bella, in particular her deferential conduct towards the male characters in the series, and argue that this, also, potentially serves to instill questionable behavior and character traits in its young female readers. We wish to argue in favor for our claims by conducting surveys amongst middle school and high school aged children about the *Twilight* novels in order to test their respective reaction to Bella's character. Our hypothesis is that this will reveal how young girls are viewing her behavior as something worthy of emulation, or that they will romanticize the relationships in the book that have permeating abusive undertones.

In many ways, our project will be a prime example of the merits of interdisciplinary research, as we combine ethical theory, literature, visual media, and psychology in various ways throughout the project.

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGIES

Given that the project is mostly philosophical in nature, the research methodologies will primarily consist of researching books, journal articles, and studies in the library and online search forums. However, a considerable part of this NCUIRE project will be disseminating a survey to middle school and high school aged students in order to gauge the impact *Twilight* and reality TV has had on their attitudes towards sexuality, women's issues, and relationships. We will both go through the appropriate training necessary to work with human subjects. We believe that distributing these surveys is vital to illustrating the practical application of, and providing evidence for, our thesis that these kinds of media outlets have real effects on their intended audiences' beliefs, behaviors, and character traits.

PROFESSIONAL BENEFITS TO THE STUDENT

At this time, is important to note that I will be completing this NCUIRE Research in both a complimentary and supplementary manner to my Barrett Honors Thesis. The opportunity of participating in NCUIRE will allow me to compliment the research of my thesis with data collection and analysis. In addition, the opportunity allows me to work with Dr. Manninen on a separate written

project, a culmination of our work throughout the summer, to hopefully turn into a publishable work. Finally, I will become more experienced in research methodologies in philosophy, literature, and psychology, which is something that will be a benefit as I complete my undergraduate work, and continue onto future graduate studies.

FEASIBILITY OF THE PROJECT

While all projects have potential problems and deterrents, it is our firm belief that this project is entirely feasible. Due to the unique time period of my thesis, beginning in spring as opposed to fall, the summer NCUIRE program will take place between the semesters of my research. This will allow for the creation of the survey early on and increased focus on the cultural impacts and behavioral impacts of each media source, *Jersey Shore* and *Twilight*. This schedule provides a unique opportunity that will allow me to build on previous research, expand it considerably, and most assuredly conclude the project with two written samples of work; one of which will be for my thesis and the second will be a co-authored article for publication with Dr. Manninen.

The only concern that Dr. Manninen and I have had while working on this proposal is the possibility of conducting a survey with minors. It is our understanding that ASU requires any person(s) conducting human subject research to complete IRB CITI training. I have worked with Shana Clark, IRB Coordinator for the Office for Research Integrity & Assurance on this matter and she has provided assurance that the survey is quite possible and therefore, it has been built into the timeline of this project with confidence.

PROJECT TIMELINE

The timeline for this summer project for sessions A and B has been coordinated due to time sensitivity. The IRB CITI training will be fulfilled in week one (May 21st to 25th) and as human subjects research must be received and approved prior to data collection, as per University policy, the survey will be created and submitted by the conclusion of week two (June 1st). At this point the timeline is broken

into three checkpoints. The next four weeks will include textual research as well as an in-depth analysis of the cultural impacts of *Jersey Shore*. Therefore, at the conclusion of week six (June 29th) there will be two different products, a completed annotated bibliography and writing sample. The following four weeks will be dedicated to the distribution and analysis of the survey. A complete result analysis and review of the applied ethical impact will be completed by July 27th and the written work will continue to progress. The following three weeks will be the culmination of the entire research project and the two separate but correlating written projects (student thesis and co-authored article) will be completed with the conclusion of the program on August 16th.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The anticipated outcomes for the NCUIRE program are a publishable article co-authored with the instructor, Dr. Manninen, contribution of research material for student thesis, and significant progress in the actual writing of the student's thesis.

PROJECT BUDGET

\$10 will go toward compensation for individuals who partake in survey, for an estimated attendance of 50, and therefore a necessary allocation of \$500.

\$2,500 will go toward supplementing income during the duration of the project, which will allow me to reduce the time for extra-curricular work and concentrate more deeply on academic responsibilities.

*Due to the necessity of significant participation in the survey, any purchase of research supplies (such as pertinent books) will be taken from the student stipend. I find this is the best way to guarantee the success and integrity of the survey.

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