

Reality Television and its Effect on Relational Aggression Levels in Young People

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## Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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### Abstract

**AIM:** The aim of the current study is to examine and understand the impact of reality television on young peoples' levels of relational aggression. **METHOD:** Using online questionnaires, participants answered questions relating to relational aggression, after which the answers were analysed using correlations and an independent samples t-test. **RESULTS:** No significant relationship was found between age and scores on the Young Adult Social Behaviour Scale (YASB), which measures levels of relational aggression. Similarly, no significant difference was found between scores on the YASB given by males and females that watch reality television. The independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference between male ( $M = 29.0$ ,  $SD = 7.65$ ) and female ( $M = 29.98$ ,  $SD = 8.43$ ) levels of relational aggression;  $t(97) = -.63$ , ( $p = .530$ ). Similarly, correlational analyses revealed non-significant, weakly positive relationships between gender and relational aggression scores ( $r = .064$ ,  $n = 99$ ,  $p = .530$ ), and age and relational aggression scores ( $r_s = .115$ ,  $n = 99$ ,  $p = .259$ ). **CONCLUSION:** From the results, it can be concluded that neither gender nor age is associated with levels of relational aggression in individuals who consume reality television. Limitations and possible directions for future research are discussed.

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## Literature Review

### Introduction

Reality television is a specific genre of programming that claims to show unscripted, everyday lives of individuals, both celebrities and non-celebrities, by virtue of being continuously filmed (Allen M. , 2017). The US show *An American Family*, broadcast in 1973 is widely considered to be the first reality television show. The show documented the everyday life and ultimately the breakdown of an American family (Allen M. , 2017). Reality television in the modern sense, emerged on viewers' screens in the early 1990s with the MTV show *The Real World*, and networks realised that drama of this sort attracts high audience figures (Sampson, 2020). Since then, 'unstructured reality' programmes, that involve story elements determined by the actions of the characters, while also lacking a defined structure, have grown in popularity, garnering huge audiences. The genre gained traction in the early 2000s with shows such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and *Jersey Shore*, the latter drawing 8.45 million viewers for its 2011 season premiere on MTV (Ward & Carlson, 2013).

Reality programmes have become a staple of television programming. It is an attractive form of media for programme makers as the cost of production is relatively low. Television programmes that are written and scripted cost almost twice as much to produce due to the need for set building, writers, and casting of unionised actors (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2018). The premise of reality television programmes varies. Some are centred on dating (*Love Island*, *First Dates*, *The Bachelor*), some are competition based (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, *X-Factor*), others focus on home improvements (*Property Brothers*, *Grand Designs*) and some simply follow socialites and celebrities during their daily lives (*The Real Housewives*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*). Much of the literature surrounding reality

television viewing and young people refers to the topic of aggression (both physical and social) and the perceived importance of body image.

### **Perceived Importance of Body Image**

The research focusing on the importance of body image encompasses the likes of cosmetic surgery, clothing choices, weight, and disordered eating. The presentation of these ideals to young teens can greatly impact their perception of themselves and how they believe others perceive them (Behm-Morawitz, Lewallen, & Miller, 2016). The increase in reality television programming has been paralleled to a rise in cosmetic procedures taking place (Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer, & Cash, 2009). Ashikali, Dittmar and Ayers (2014) found that young girls who were exposed to reality television, specifically cosmetic surgery shows, demonstrated discontent with their appearance and their body image. Similarly, a 2010 study found that those who were shown reality programming about cosmetic surgery voiced a higher desire to surgically alter their appearance than those who were shown a neutral television program (Markey & Markey, 2010). These results indicate that young women who are exposed to programming that normalises significant cosmetic surgery are more likely to suffer from high body dissatisfaction. This could have a severe impact on their mental health and well-being leading to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (Peek & Beresin, 2016) and mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and body dysmorphic disorder, which refers to an inability to stop seeing flaws and defects in one's appearance, flaws which are usually unnoticeable to other people (Higgins & Wysong, 2018).

### **Attitudes Towards Gender Roles and Career Aspirations**

Other less researched areas that have been shown to be affected by television viewing are gender role attitudes and career aspirations. In 2008, a study revealed that watching "romantic" television programmes resulted in adolescents having more "traditional" dating role attitudes. It was suggested that gender roles in dating may be learned from television

programmes, influencing girls' views on dating, and potentially putting them at greater sexual risk in real life situations (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008). In a similar fashion, Van den Bulck and Beullens (2007) observed that docu-soaps depicting a particular profession were significant predictors of positive views towards that profession. These results are in line with literature surrounding the effect of media on its viewers and support the belief that reality television impacts its audiences' opinions and consequently, their behaviour. However, when discussing the effects of media on audiences, one must also consider the viewer's perceived realism of that media.

### **Perceived Realism, Cultivation Theory, and Mere-Exposure Effect**

A person's level of belief in a form of media, i.e., how 'real' they perceive it to be, will influence the subsequent effect of that media on the individual's attitudes and behaviours (Ward & Carlson, 2013). The findings of previously discussed literature support the ideas of cultivation theory, which refers to the impact of media on its audience (Peek & Beresin, 2016); the more exposed an individual is to a form of media, the greater influence it will have on them. The effects of cultivation theory have found that heavy, prolonged exposure to media can manipulate viewers' concept of reality, subsequently distorting their views and actions to be congruent with that of the media they consume (Russell, Russell, Boland, & Grube, 2014). Similarly, the mere-exposure effect dictates that individuals tend to gravitate towards stimuli that are familiar, influencing their choice of media for consumption (Inoue, Yagi, & Sato, 2018). As such, an individual's media preferences can increase their levels of exposure and accordingly the effects of that media upon them.

### **Relational Aggression**

Aggression is used as a term that includes all behaviours that aim to bring either physical or emotional harm to an individual. Physical aggression among humans is defined as inflicting harm on individuals through hitting, kicking, or using otherwise specified weapons



(Kaye & Erdley, 2011). Social and relational aggression differ from physical aggression in that there is no tangible harm brought upon the individual by the aggressor. The topic of relational aggression was first introduced by Crick and Grotpeter in 1995. It was described as the harming of individuals through damaging peer relationships and decisive manipulation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Social and relational aggression involve acts that aim to cause harm by emotional and psychological means (Archer & Coyne, 2005). For the purposes of this study, the umbrella term of relational aggression will be used to mean both social and relational aggression.

The most common forms of relational aggression are gossiping, exclusion, ignoring, and the act of spreading rumours (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Physical aggression and relational aggression are both behaviours that are directly affected by cultivation theory and are consistently demonstrated in certain genres of reality television programming (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2017). The UK reality programme *Geordie Shore* (the Anglicised version of the US reality programme *Jersey Shore*) has shown both physical altercations and relationally aggressive behaviours such as gossiping and exclusion.

A 2016 study observed that reality television programmes that broadcast incidences of verbal and relational aggression, increase levels of physical aggression to a larger degree than violent crime dramas (Gibson, Thompson, Hou, & Bushman, 2016). Exposing young girls to relationally aggressive reality television can normalise this type of interaction and lead them to expect it in their friendships, as they believe it to be simply how young girls, especially those aged between 18 and 25, relate to each other. In 2019, Coyne and colleagues found that viewing relationally aggressive media predicted high levels of relationally aggressive behaviours via electronic communication, specifically texting, in girls (Coyne, Ehrenreich, Holmgren, & Underwood, 2019). Consequently, it can be inferred that the consumption of

such media can be damaging to young girls, their perception of the world and the behaviours that they value (Behm-Morawitz, Lewallen, & Miller, 2016).

A study carried out in 2008 observed that 60 females, with a mean age of 23, who watched either a relationally or physically aggressive media clip were found to behave in a similar fashion to the clip they were shown (Coyne, et al., 2008). This study looked only at the effects of relationally aggressive media on females with a mean age of 23, which does not allow for generalisability to other demographics such as males, or older females.

The study revealed that viewing relationally aggressive content, comparable to that exhibited in certain reality television programming, can have detrimental effects on subsequent behaviours and consequently conforms to the assumptions of the General Aggression Model (GAM). The current study will address cultivation theory and the General Aggression Model (GAM) to expand on its theoretical assumptions. The GAM is a developmental model that provides a framework for understanding aggression. It proposes that those who are exposed to relationally aggressive media, such as reality television, may adopt and display relationally aggressive behaviours, both in short- and long-term conditions (Coyne, Ehrenreich, Holmgren, & Underwood, 2019). It considers the effect of various factors such as biological, cognitive, social, and situational variables on aggression and provides insights into the causes of aggression (DeWall & Anderson, 2011; Allen, Anderson, & Bushman, 2018).

A three-year longitudinal study published in 2016 reinforced the results of previous research, determining that the portrayal of relational aggression on television was directly associated with future displays of relationally aggressive behaviour (Coyne, 2016). Furthermore, results from a 2017 study concluded that individuals exposed to relationally

aggressive reality television displayed more aggressive traits than those who were exposed to reality television demonstrating low levels of aggression (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2017).

These findings add to the body of knowledge on reality television and its impact on viewers' levels of aggression, conforming to the assumptions of cultivation theory and the mere-exposure effect (Peek & Beresin, 2016; Inoue, Yagi, & Sato, 2018). The literature surrounding the impact of viewing physically and relationally aggressive media and how it may affect behaviour has been well researched, however the majority of studies focus solely on levels of aggression in females (Coyne, et al., 2008; Coyne, Ehrenreich, Holmgren, & Underwood, 2019). This research aims to build upon these earlier studies.

### **The Current Study**

The aim of this project is to understand the impact of westernised, contemporary reality television on young peoples' levels of relational aggression, through the following research questions.

RQ1: Within a young population that watches reality television, are relational aggression levels higher among males or females?

In line with the General Aggression Model, this study aims to expand on the current research and explore the effects of reality television programming on relational aggression in young adults. In doing so, this study intends to further test cultivation theory, and identify whether or not reality television affects a young adult population. It will further explore if reality television has a greater influence on relational aggression levels in males or in females aged 18-35. To a large extent, the existing literature has examined the influence of reality television on relational aggression among adolescent females, and few studies have explored if there are differences between male and female levels of relational aggression. For this

reason, this study has included males as a cohort to determine if gender has an impact on levels of relational aggression in young adults who consume reality television.

RQ2: Within a sample of 18–35-year-olds, is there a relationship between age and levels of relational aggression?

The current literature surrounding the topic of relational aggression has focused on adolescents and has found that this cohort display high levels of relational aggression (Coyne, 2016). This research study will examine levels of relational aggression in a sample of young adults aged 18-35.

From the research questions and focus of this study, the following hypotheses have been drawn up:

H1: Males and females will differ in levels of relational aggression.

H2: Younger participants will differ in relational aggression levels to older participants.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The research sample collected for this project included 101 participants aged between 18 and 35, however, 2 participants were excluded from the inferential analysis as they chose not to disclose their gender, leaving the sample at 99 participants (Males;  $n = 50$ , 50.5%, Females;  $n = 49$ , 49.5%). To attain this sample size, an open link to a Google Form with the demographics questionnaire and the Young Adult Social Behaviour Scale (YASB) was posted on the researcher's social media account (Instagram). The data was collected using convenience sampling, which refers to a method of accumulating participants that are easily accessible to the researcher, as this enables as many participants to take part as possible,

allowing for an accurate sample size. The sample of 18–35-year-olds was chosen as a demographic as a young population may be more inclined to participate in relationally aggressive behaviours than an older population. No pilot study was used as levels of relational aggression were measured through the Young Adult Social Behaviour Scale (YASB), which can be found in Appendix III. This scale has been created and validated by Crothers and colleagues (Crothers, Schreiber, Field, & Kolbert, 2009). The use of this scale in the current study is beneficial as it dispenses with the need to create and validate a scale for the purposes of this study alone, which ultimately saved the researcher time.

### **Design**

This study uses quantitative research, employing a between participants cross-sectional research design. A between participants design focuses on the difference between groups, in this case, males and females and a cross-sectional design refers to a study design in which participants are compared at a single point in time. A questionnaire was provided to participants pertaining to demographic information (age, sex, education level, if they watch reality television, if so, how many hours per week do they consume, and an example of the reality television programme they watch the most). The independent variables of this study are exposure to reality television, gender, and age. The dependent variable of this study is the participants' levels of relational aggression.

### **Measures**

#### ***Demographics Questionnaire***

Once the participant had read and understood the information given to them, informed consent was given. Participants were then brought to a questionnaire asking them to input their age, gender, education level, if they watch any form of reality television, and if so, for

how many hours per week (Appendix IV). Participants were also asked to provide an example of the reality television programme they watched the most.

### ***Young Adult Social Behaviour Scale (YASB)***

Participants were given a definition and a description of relational aggression and asked whether or not they partake in certain relationally aggressive behaviours (Appendix III). Participants levels of relational aggression were calculated using the Young Adult Social Behaviour Scale (YASB). Created by Crothers and colleagues, the YASB is a 14 item self-report tool, measuring relational aggression levels, with questions such as “I intentionally exclude friends from activities to make a point with them”. Each item was measured using a 5-point Likert scale with answers ranging from “never” to “always” (Crothers, Schreiber, Field, & Kolbert, 2009). The items on the scale were scored so that a higher score reflects higher levels of relational aggression. The highest possible score for this scale is 70 ( $14 \times 5 = 70$ ; 14 items with 5 indicating the participant “always” participates in this act of relational aggression stated) (Crothers, Schreiber, Field, & Kolbert, 2009). The Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was .75 indicating its reliability.

### **Data Analysis**

This study aimed to answer the research questions through quantitative means, using the statistical software SPSS. A Pearson product moment correlation was conducted to answer the first research question (RQ<sub>1</sub>: Within a young population that watches reality television, are relational aggression levels higher among males or females?). This allowed the researcher to explore whether there was a relationship between the variables of gender and relational aggression levels. Following this, an independent samples t-test was performed to compare levels of relational aggression between males and females and find out if there was a difference between them. Finally, in order to answer the second research question (RQ<sub>2</sub>: Is

there a relationship between age and levels of relational aggression?), a Spearman's Rank Order correlation (Spearman's Rho) was carried out. These tests were chosen as they were the most suitable statistical analyses available to answer the research questions posed.

### **Procedure**

To take part, participants were required to be in possession of a mobile device or laptop capable of hosting the questionnaires. As this was an online study, data was collected through online, anonymous self-report questionnaires. A link to the questionnaires was shared on the researcher's social media account (Instagram) with a brief description of eligibility criteria. Participants who clicked on the link were brought to a Google Form which displayed the information sheet (Appendix I) outlining exactly what each participant would be asked, what the study aimed to achieve, what their data would be used for, any risks and benefits of participation, and the researcher and supervisor's information should they have any questions. Participants were informed that they could withdraw without penalty at any point up until they submitted their answers, after which their data would be anonymised making it impossible to retrieve. A consent form (Appendix II) asked them to provide informed consent by ticking a box before continuing to the subsequent questionnaires. Once informed consent was given, participants were brought to a survey asking them their age, gender, education level, if they watch any form of reality television, if so, for how many hours per week, and which reality television programme they watched the most (Appendix IV). Participants were then given a definition by Archer and Coyne (2005) of what relational aggression is and asked 14 questions of how often (from "never" to "always") they partake in different relationally aggressive behaviours, such as "I intentionally exclude friends from activities to make a point with them" (YASB; Appendix III). Participants were then brought to a debriefing form (Appendix V) which once again detailed the aim of the study, thanked them for their participation, and outlined that they may share the link with anyone who fits

the criteria and was interested in taking part. Altogether, participation took between five and ten minutes. Participants were not offered breaks as this study was relatively short and there was a risk that breaks might have changed the mindset of participants and consequently, influenced their answers and altered the results. There was no remuneration for participants who took part in this study. The duration of the project was approximately five months, beginning with data collection to the subsequent write up. Broken down, this included eight weeks of data collection through various questionnaires, allowing enough time to recruit an appropriate number of participants ( $n = 101$ ), four weeks to analyse data, allocating time to check for clerical errors, and a further eight weeks to comprehensively write up the results.

This project is in line with The Psychological Society of Ireland Code of Professional Ethics and the NCI Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research involving Human Participants and was approved by the National College of Ireland's Ethics Committee. There was no obvious harm that could be encountered by participants from the questions asked in this study, however, the debriefing form (Appendix V) included relevant helpline numbers in the event that any participant felt upset by the material presented.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The data shown has been taken from a sample of 101 participants, ( $n = 101$ ), which included both male and female participants (50 males, 49 females, and 2 participants preferred not to disclose their gender). For the purposes of this study, only participants who chose either male or female were included in the inferential statistical analyses ( $n = 99$ ), as this study focused on investigating if there was a difference between relational aggression in males and females. Frequencies for gender, level of education, whether participants watched



reality television, and how many hours per week they consumed reality television are presented below in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Table of frequencies for the following categorical variables: Gender, Level of Education, Do you watch reality television? How many hours of reality television do you watch per week?*

*(N = 101)*

Variable	Frequency	Valid %
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	50	49.5%
Female	49	48.5%
Prefer not to say	2	2%
<b>Level of Education</b>		
Junior Certificate	1	1%
Leaving Certificate	21	20.8%
Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC)	3	3%
Undergraduate	60	59.4%
Postgraduate	8	7.9%
Masters	7	6.9%
PhD	1	1%
None of the above	0	0%
<b>Do you watch reality TV?</b>		
Yes	83	82.2%
No	18	17.8%
<b>How many hours of reality TV do you watch per week?</b>		

0-3 hours per week	71	70.3%
4-6 hours per week	18	17.8%
7-9 hours per week	6	5.9%
10+ hours per week	6	5.9%

Descriptive statistics including the mean (with 95% confidence interval) (M), median (MD) standard deviation (SD), and range, skewness (S), and kurtosis (K) for age and the total scores for YASB, which indicates levels of relational aggression, are presented below in Table 2. A scatterplot illustrating the variables Age and Total YASB score for relational aggression levels is presented as Figure 1 (see Appendix VI).

**Table 2**

*Table of descriptive statistics for the following continuous variables: Age, Total YASB Score.*

*(N = 99)*

Variable	<i>M</i> [95% CI]	<i>MD</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>K</i>
Age	22.2 [21.52 – 22.88]	21	3.43	17 [18 – 35]	2.11	4.08
Total YASB Score	29.44 [27.87 – 31]	28	7.94	41 [18 – 59]	1.66	3.18

### **Inferential Statistics**

The relationship between gender and levels of relational aggression was investigated using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were conducted in order to ensure that the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity and normality were abided by, however, these assumptions were found to be violated. The analysis revealed that there is an extremely weak correlation between the two variables ( $r = .064$ ,  $n = 99$ ,  $p = .530$ ). This indicates that the two variables shared approximately 0.41% of

the variance in common. These results suggest a weak, small relationship between these variables and that levels of relational aggression are not directly associated with gender (See Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Pearson Product Moment Correlations between Gender and Levels of Relational Aggression (YASB Score)*

Variable	1.	2.
1. YASB Score	1	.064
2. Gender	.064	1

*N* = 99

Following this, an independent samples t-test was carried out to determine if there is a difference in levels of relational aggression between males and females. Preliminary analyses were conducted which show a violation of the assumption of normality, however, Levene's test indicated that there was no violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variance, therefore the results for equal variances were used. There was no significant difference found in scores, with males ( $M = 29.0$ ,  $SD = 7.65$ ) and females ( $M = 29.98$ ,  $SD = 8.43$ ) showing similar scoring;  $t(97) = -.63$ , ( $p = .530$ ). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .97, 95% CI = -4.23 – 2.19) was found to be small (Cohen's  $d = .13$ ).

The relationship between age and levels of relational aggression was initially to be investigated using a Pearson product moment correlation coefficient, however preliminary analyses conducted to ensure that the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity and normality were followed were shown to be violated. Due to this, a Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient was conducted instead. The scatterplot revealed almost no relationship (Appendix VI). There was a small, positive correlation found between the two variables ( $r_s =$

.115,  $n = 99$ ,  $p = .259$ ). It can be extrapolated from the results of this analysis that levels of relational aggression are not directly associated with age (Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Spearman's Rho correlation between Age and Levels of Relational Aggression (YASB Score)*

Variable	1.	2.
1. YASB Score	1	.115
2. Age	.115	1

*N = 99*

To summarise, there was no significant difference found between males and females that watch reality television and their subsequent levels of relational aggression, nor was there a significant relationship between age of participants and their corresponding levels of relational aggression.

### Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the impact of westernised contemporary reality television on levels of relational aggression in males and females aged between 18-35. Previous research found that reality television impacted young peoples' perception of the importance of body image (Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer, & Cash, 2009; Ashikali, Dittmar, & Ayers, 2014), their attitudes towards gender roles (Rivadeneira & Lebo, 2008) and career aspirations (Van den Bulck & Beullens, 2007), and the levels of relational aggression in young females specifically (Coyne, et al., 2008; Coyne, 2016; Coyne, Ehrenreich, Holmgren, & Underwood, 2019). The results of the study found no differences in levels of relational aggression between males and females, nor were any significant correlations found regarding age and levels of relational aggression. After formulating two research questions, the existing

literature was reviewed, and two hypotheses were proposed to address the aim of the research study.

As much of the previous research focused on relational aggression levels in females only, the first research question, (RQ<sub>1</sub>: Within a young population that watches reality television, are relational aggression levels higher among males or females?) hypothesised that (H<sub>1</sub>) males and females would differ in levels of relational aggression. This hypothesis was explored using a Pearson product moment correlation coefficient. Results revealed no significant difference between males and females' mean scores on the Young Adult Social Behaviour Scale (YASB), indicating that males and females who watch reality television do not differ in levels of relational aggression. The first hypothesis was not supported by the data and therefore was not upheld and subsequently rejected.

Earlier literature on the topic of measuring relational aggression has been longitudinal. This may explain why the results of the current study's hypotheses were not upheld. Similarly, as this analysis was correlational, further research may benefit from being experimental, longitudinal, or qualitative. As the majority of previous research has been quantitative, it could be beneficial to carry out a qualitative analysis of relational aggression levels among young people in order to probe the reasons behind relational aggression in that cohort and how it is perceived. This could be carried out by showing participants clips of reality television programming and conducting interviews with exploratory questions on the topic of relational aggression after watching various scenarios.

Prior research surrounding the topic of gender and aggression has focused on the difference between adolescent males and females in terms of physical, rather than relational aggression. While the current study focused on relational aggression only, a longitudinal study may benefit future research by examining how both physical and relational aggression

affect males and females, and if the behaviours displayed by young children and adolescents are carried on into later life.

From the second research question (RQ2: Is there a relationship between age and levels of relational aggression?) the following hypothesis was drawn up. Previous research surrounding relational aggression has focused on adolescents and as such, it was assumed that (H<sub>2</sub>) younger participants would differ in relational aggression levels to older participants. This was analysed using a Spearman's Rank Order correlation coefficient (Spearman's Rho) due to tests of normality being violated. As there was a very small, positive relationship found between variables, it was observed that age is not associated with levels of relational aggression. As well as a non-parametric correlation analysis, a scatterplot was created to investigate if a trend was visible between age and relational aggression levels, however, none was found (see Appendix VI). From these results it can be asserted that the second hypothesis was not supported by the data and was therefore rejected. Based on the results of this study, both hypotheses have been rejected.

Prior research on the topic of relational aggression has primarily focused on younger, school-aged populations (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Coyne, et al., 2008; Coyne, 2016). In order to investigate this hypothesis further, researchers may decide to widen the current study's age bracket from 18-35 to incorporate all age groups, including young children, adolescents, and adults of all ages. This may offer further insight into whether age and relational aggression are noticeably correlated.

From the data of the current study ( $n = 99$ ), participants told which reality television show they watch the most. Of these answers, five reality television programmes were identified to be the most popular. They were *Love Island* (24% of participants answers), *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (13% of participants answers), *Gogglebox* (8% of

participants answers), *RuPaul's Drag Race* (7% of participants answers), and *The Real Housewives* (6% of participants answers). Of these programmes, four out of five may be considered to present relationally aggressive content as they are “surveillance” or competition-based programmes.

The measurement of time spent watching reality television to determine relational aggression levels may be considered a strength of the current study as it allows for certain contexts that have not yet been explored to be studied. As the context of reality television is widely varied, it is difficult to operationally define something that is ever-changing. This can impact studies such as the current one as participants' understanding of what constitutes reality television is open to interpretation. Accordingly, this can influence results and as such, may be considered a limitation.

To some extent, reality television content has evolved since its inception, with the introduction of programmes such as *Just Tattoo of Us*. This is a reality television show that involves couples, friends, or family members who hope to mend their relationship issues by creating tattoos for the other person. However, the tattoo is not revealed to the individual who is being tattooed until after it is completed. Although this concept is rather new, it includes many of the patterns and characteristics that define reality television, such as lack of privacy, a voyeuristic view into individuals' daily lives, and the involvement of features such as conflict, competition, love, or the aspect of storytelling (Penzhorn & Pitout, 2007). This genre of reality television may be referred to as antagonistic reality television, as one of its primary intentions is to create aggression between those who are present on the show.

As reality television has evolved over several years, a question can be posited about its influences on trends of aggression, both physical and relational. In the early 2000s, certain reality television programmes displayed far more physically aggressive content (*Jersey*

*Shore, The Real Housewives*) whereas, nowadays, the most popular shows tend to exhibit more relationally aggressive behaviours (*Love Island, Keeping up with the Kardashians*). At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are currently hugely popular reality programmes such as *The Great British Bake Off* and *Gogglebox* that do not display aggression of any kind.

While relationally aggressive reality television programmes have never gone away, the rise in popularity of non-aggressive programmes may be a welcome sight.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study expanded on previous research to understand if relational aggression levels were affected by reality television watching habits, which can be considered a strength. An additional strength of the study is that of the data collected ( $n = 99$ ), 50 are males and 49 are females. As this gender split is almost exactly 50/50, it allowed for results to be considered balanced. However, this research study also had limitations, one of which was the time constraint placed upon it. Due to this time constraint, only a certain number of participants could be recruited. Without this constraint, it would have been possible to collect more data, increasing the sample size, and allowing for more robust results.

Another limitation was the age range of participants that responded. Of the 99 participants, 45% were aged 21. This may have skewed the data and not allowed for robust results regarding age differences in relational aggression levels. The inclusion of older adults and younger adolescents in future research could increase the chances of more significant results. This research study was completed as part of a BA (Hons) in Psychology degree. As such, participants under the age of 18 could not take part as this would have made ethical approval far more difficult to achieve. Much of the prior research surrounding reality television or relational aggression includes adolescents, as it is thought that relational aggression is synonymous with “mean-girl behaviour” and that it is a “part of growing up”



(Doyle & Mcloughlin, 2010). In the case of future research, adolescents could be included as a cohort to establish if they are affected in the same way as individuals aged 18 and older.

Another observation is that the most frequent level of education in the current data sample was undergraduate, accounting for 60%. This may be a limitation of the current study as the scope of the reality television watching audience is much wider. Broadening the age range of the survey could have generated more varied responses and allowed for more in-depth analysis based on educational levels.

This study may also have been limited by the employment of two-tailed hypotheses and cross-sectional research. In order to increase statistical power, the use of directional, or one-tailed, analyses and hypotheses should be applied. Cross-sectional research is a weak research design where no causality can be inferred, therefore this may have contributed to the limitations of this study. To address these limitations, a longitudinal research design would allow for more robust results. Similarly, correlational analyses such as the ones employed in this study do not allow for causality, which can be considered a possible limitation.

As the YASB is a self-report measure, it may have contributed to the limitations of this study. Participants may have been biased when answering the questions and given answers that they felt lent the most desirable human traits to themselves. They may not have been completely truthful if their instinctive answers seemed to correlate with relationally aggressive behaviours. This self-selection bias may have led to unreliable data in the survey and skewed the results (Bethlehem, 2010). The histogram depicting total YASB scores for participants (see Appendix VII) was shown to be negatively skewed, indicating that the majority of participants did not score higher than 40 points on the YASB scale. This demonstrates that participants did not agree with the relationally aggressive items on the YASB, however, this may have been due to self-selection bias. Similarly, as there are no

peer-reviewed studies using the YASB, this was a limitation of the current project, however, it allowed the researcher to ask the questions required without the need to create and pilot a new scale.

The mere-exposure effect was briefly mentioned in this project. Reality television programme schedules have changed somewhat over the years. While some programmes are only shown once a week, others are broadcast five days a week for six to eight weeks. This frequency of viewings is not only appealing to certain audiences, but also to networks as it provides opportunities for increased revenue. Reality programmes shown five days per week for six weeks, (i.e., *Love Island*) could impact some viewers' preferences for shows like this, which in turn can trigger the mere-exposure effect. This could be a topic for future research to investigate if watching reality television in concentrated bursts leads to a preference over traditional television, and whether that indirectly affects relational aggression levels.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study reveal that males and females that watch reality television do not differ in relational aggression levels. The implications of these results may influence future research in this topic as previously relational aggression was largely considered a female behaviour that occurs during adolescence, also known as “mean-girl behaviour” (Doyle & Mcloughlin, 2010), yet as there was no difference found between males and females, it can now be deemed a universal behaviour.

Certain theories mentioned in this study may be needed for future research, such as cultivation theory and the mere-exposure effect. Cultivation theory may be helpful to future researchers as it gives them the ability to establish if individuals watching relationally aggressive media are more influenced by it than those who only watch relationally aggressive media from time to time. The mere-exposure effect may also be explored in further research

to understand if those who grew up watching relationally aggressive reality television programmes, develop a preference for those programmes over other forms of media.

### **Conclusions**

To conclude, this research study aimed to investigate the impact of westernised contemporary reality television on levels of relational aggression in males and females aged between 18-35 through a series of statistical analyses.

However, the findings indicated that males and females do not differ in levels of relational aggression, nor do younger participants differ from older participants. Although the results were non-significant, the study attempted to contribute to the existing literature by employing methods that had not yet been considered, such as the inclusion of males as a cohort for the investigation into gender and relational aggression levels.

The non-significant findings of the current study may have been caused by the use of a cross-sectional research design. In order to avoid the disadvantages surrounding cross-sectional research, future examination of the topic may include a longitudinal research design. This design could allow potential researchers to focus on specific aspects of the research questions presented in this study, such as the inclusion of all genders and an extension on the age bracket, to conduct well-rounded research into the different types of aggression; physical, relational, social, and indirect.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I

#### *Participation Information sheet*

**Title:**

Reality television and its effect on relational aggression levels in young people

Before agreeing to take part in this research study, here is an outline of the study itself, why the research is being done and what this means for you if you agree to be a participant. Please take time to read and understand the following information. If anything is unclear, please feel free to ask any questions using the contact details at the end of this sheet.

**What this study is about:**

My name is Gemma Cummins and as per the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Psychology at National College of Ireland, I am required to carry out an independent research study for my final year project. For the following study, I aim to investigate whether reality television is associated with social and relational aggression levels of young people.

Reality TV refers to television programmes that are based on real people (not actors), showing unscripted, real situations, that is presented as entertainment. Relational aggression is an indirect form of aggression used to control, influence, and cause harm through psychological means. The most widespread forms of relational aggression are ignoring, gossiping, rejection, exclusion, and the act of spreading rumours to destroy or manipulate an individual's social status (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

This project is supervised by Brendan Cullen.



**What this study involves:**

The study will involve answering a number of questions regarding demographics such as age, gender, and education level, concluding with a questionnaire about relational aggression, which is an indirect form of aggression that includes acts such as gossiping, spreading rumours, exclusion and ignoring. These questionnaires are expected to take between 10 and 15 minutes to complete altogether.

**Who can take part?**

You can take part in this study if you are between the ages of 18 and 35 and consume any form of reality television. You cannot take part in this study if you are under the age of 18.

**Do you have to take part?**

No, participation is entirely voluntary, and each individual has the right to refuse any question, or to refuse participation entirely. Participants may withdraw from the study at any point up until their information is submitted. At this point the data is anonymised and cannot be identified, and consequently, it will be impossible to remove participants' data. Should participants decide during the research study that they wish to withdraw contribution, they need only exit the browser they are using to host the questionnaires. All participation is anonymous and no clues to identity will be appear in the write up of this study.

**Possible disadvantages of participation:**

Some questions in this study are of a personal nature and it is possible they may cause some distress. Should this occur, participants may exit or withdraw from the questionnaire at any point up until the submission of answers. Relevant contact information is available at the end of the questionnaire, including my own, should any problems arise.

**Will taking part be confidential and what will happen to my data?**

The questionnaires in this study are anonymous, therefore making it impossible to identify participants from their answers. All data collected for this study will be treated in the strictest confidence. Responses to the questionnaires will be securely stored by the researcher in a password protected file. Only the researcher and academic supervisor will have access to this data. In accordance with National College of Ireland's data retention policy, the data will be retained for 5 years.

**What will happen to the results of this study?**

The results of this study will be presented in my final year project, which will be submitted to the National College of Ireland.

**For further information and queries:** If any information is needed, please do not hesitate to contact me,

Gemma Cummins (researcher), email: [gcumminsfyp@gmail.com](mailto:gcumminsfyp@gmail.com)

Brendan Cullen (supervisor), email: [brendan.cullen@ncirl.ie](mailto:brendan.cullen@ncirl.ie)

**Contact details for support services:**

**Samaritans:** <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/>

- Call: 116 123
- email: [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie)

**Turn2me:** <https://turn2me.ie>

turn2me is a high-quality, safe, anonymous, and confidential space for you to gain support for your mental health online.

[THANK YOU]

Signed: Gemma Cummins

## **Appendix II**

### ***Consent Form***

In agreeing to participate in this research I understand the following:

This research is being conducted by Gemma Cummins, an undergraduate student at the School of Business, National College of Ireland.

The method proposed for this research project has been approved in principle by the Departmental Ethics Committee, which means that the Committee does not have concerns about the procedure itself as detailed by the student. It is, however, the above-named student's responsibility to adhere to ethical guidelines in their dealings with participants and the collection and handling of data.

If I have any concerns about participation, I understand that I may refuse to participate or withdraw contribution at any stage up until my data has been submitted. After this point my data will be anonymised and data retrieval will be impossible.

I have been informed as to the general nature of the study and agree voluntarily to participate.

All data from the study will be treated confidentially. The data from all participants will be compiled, analysed, and submitted in a report to the Psychology Department in the School of Business. No participant's data will be identified by name at any stage of the data analysis or in the final report.

At the conclusion of my participation, any questions or concerns I have will be fully addressed.

Signed: Gemma Cummins

## **Appendix III**

***Young Adult Social Behaviour Scale (YASB)***

Relational aggression is an indirect form of aggression used to control and cause harm through psychological means. The most widespread forms of relational aggression are ignoring, gossiping, rejection, exclusion, and the act of spreading rumours to destroy or manipulate an individual's social status (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

1. When I am angry with someone, that person is often the last person to know. I will talk to others first.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
2. When I am frustrated with my partner/colleague/friend, I give that person the silent treatment.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
3. I deal with interpersonal conflict in an honest, straightforward manner.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always

4. When I do not like someone's personality, I derive a certain degree of pleasure when a friend listens to and agrees to my assessment of the person's personality.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  
5. I contribute to the rumour mill at school/work or with my friends and family.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  
6. I honour my friends' need for secrets of confidentiality.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  
7. I break a friend's confidentiality to have a good story to tell.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always

8. I confront people in public to achieve maximum damage.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  
9. I criticize people who are close to me.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  
10. I respect my friend's opinions, even when they are quite different from my own.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  
11. I intentionally exclude friends from activities to make a point with them.
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Always
  
12. I have attempted to steal a rival's friend.

- a. Never
- b. Rarely
- c. Sometimes
- d. Often
- e. Always

13. When I am angry with a friend, I have threatened to sever the relationship in hopes that the person will comply with my wishes.

- a. Never
- b. Rarely
- c. Sometimes
- d. Often
- e. Always

14. Working through conflicts with friends makes our friendship stronger

- a. Never
- b. Rarely
- c. Sometimes
- d. Often
- e. Always

#### **Appendix IV**

##### ***Demographics Questionnaire***

1. Age:
  - a. 18
  - b. 19
  - c. 20
  - d. 21

- e. 22
- f. 23
- g. 24
- h. 25
- i. 26
- j. 27
- k. 28
- l. 29
- m. 30
- n. 31
- o. 32
- p. 33
- q. 34
- r. 35

2. Gender:

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Other
- d. Rather not say

3. Level of education:

- a. Junior Certificate
- b. Leaving Certificate
- c. Post Leaving Certificate
- d. Undergraduate
- e. Postgraduate



- f. Masters
  - g. PhD
  - h. None of the above
4. Do you watch Reality TV?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
5. How many hours per week do you watch reality TV programmes?
- a. 0-3
  - b. 4-6
  - c. 7-9
  - d. 10+
6. Please give an example of the reality TV show you watch the most:

## **Appendix V**

### ***Debriefing Form***

Project Title: Reality television and its effect on relational aggression levels in young people.

Thank you for participating in this study and for being involved in the furthering of this research topic.

This study aims to find out if reality TV has an effect on the levels of relational aggression in young males and females, and whether there is a significant difference in these levels between males and females.

The data will be stored by the researcher and the National College of Ireland, and due to immediate anonymisation, retrieval or withdrawal of this data once submitted is not possible.

Should you have any questions or queries, please contact me:

Gemma Cummins (researcher), email: [gcumminsfyp@gmail.com](mailto:gcumminsfyp@gmail.com)

Brendan Cullen (supervisor), email: [brendan.cullen@ncirl.ie](mailto:brendan.cullen@ncirl.ie)

Contact details for support services:

Samaritans: 116 123, email: [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie)

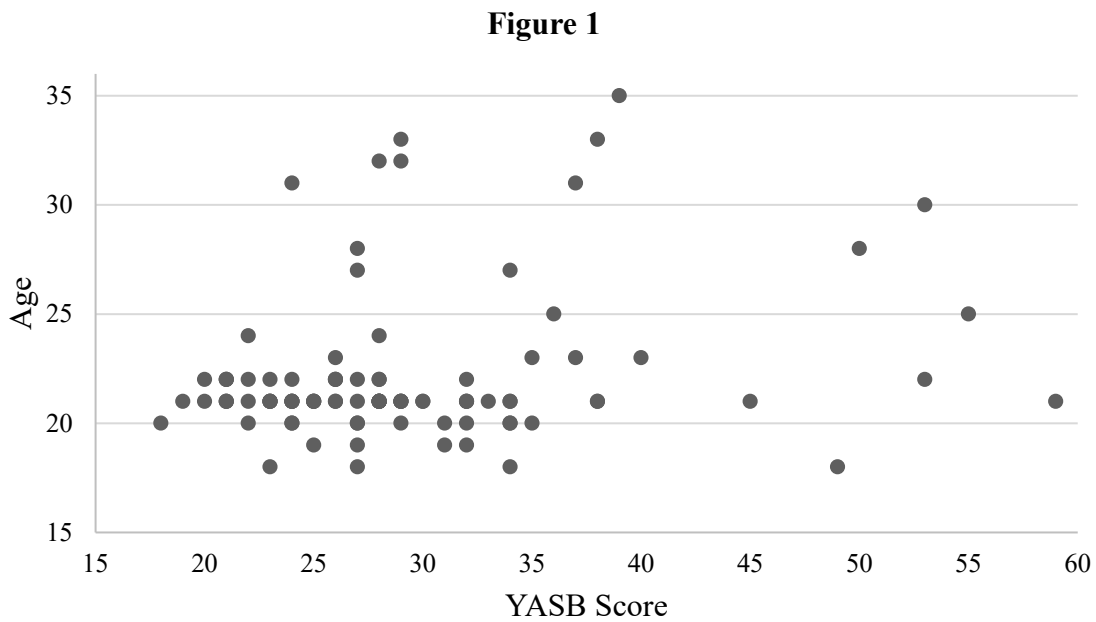
Turn2me: [turn2me.ie](http://turn2me.ie)

[THANK YOU]

Signed: Gemma Cummins

**Appendix VI**

Scatterplot depicting the age and YASB scores of each participant ( $n = 99$ ).



**Appendix VII**

Histogram depicting the frequency of total relational aggression scores for participant ( $n = 99$ ).

**Figure 2**

