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by Martina M. Cartwright, Ph.D., R.D.

Tantalized by Train Wreck Reality Television

Why are we spellbound by tot pageants and Honey Boo Boo?

Published on January 31, 2013 by Martina M. Cartwright, Ph.D., R.D. in Food For Thought

Glitz, snits, and ditsy-ness make for high drama and even higher ratings, but are these the real reasons people tune into reality shows like *Toddlers & Tiaras* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*? These programs regularly attract millions of viewers but the oft-asked question is why. Query any viewer and most will tell you they are both repulsed and fascinated at the same time; they simply can't turn away. Just like a freeway car accident or train wreck, we rubberneck toward disaster. But why are we so attracted to television shows that seem to exploit and reward outrageous behavior?

Images of toddlers dressed as a glammed up adults startles the senses. It just doesn't seem "right." Couple these over-the-top appearances with offbeat family dynamics, hair-raising competition and diva-like behaviors and you've got a visual "train wreck." So different are the *Toddlers & Tiaras* images from conventional ideas of normality or "reality" that many gawkers are simultaneously shocked and captivated. Ditto with shows like *Honey Boo Boo*. Named as one of Barbara Walter's most fascinating people, *Honey Boo Boo* and her family continue to charm the public and repel them at the same time. The lives of Alana Thompson and her kin are so alien to most viewers that many can't help but to tune in every week to see what antics will arise.

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The reasons people watch are complex but research points to "schadenfreude." Schadenfreude is a German word for "taking delight in the problems and misfortune of others." In a study investigating why people watched a reality show called "Farmer Wants a Wife" most of the 487 viewers cited schadenfreude as the main reason they tuned in. Other reasons included empathy or feeling sorry for the show's participants; this was true especially from females and rural-area viewers who declared sensitivity toward the show's stars. In contrast, men and city dwellers were amused by the embarrassing situations portrayed in the show.

No one knows the reasons behind the spellbinding appeal of tot beauty shows. Schadenfreude is probably part of the equation, but if you "view the 'Boo' or T & T, and you'd like to sound off, please consider taking this short, confidential, non-scientific survey.

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Why do reality participants allow themselves to be the butt of jokes and objects of amusement? In this everybody-is-a-celebrity culture, fame seems to trump shame. The fact that reality programming doesn't require true talent or skill is often appealing to the couch potato wanna-be, so many are willing to behave like fools or expose their most embarrassing problems in exchange for high ratings or hefty paycheck.

Fame is fleeting and ends when ratings tank, the show is cancelled...or



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the child grows up. Honey Boo Boo debuted as a breakout star from T & T, she is now a 7 year old with her own show. What will happen to Alana when her on screen persona is no longer cute or bankable? Will she grow up to be an Anna Nicole Smith or a successful child advocate? She's already getting grief for her weight and concerns about her and other child pageant stars' futures. When the child no longer fits the mold of what's popular can we expect a generation of former reality stars doomed to a life of self-destruction that will be filmed for all to see?

It's human nature to gawk at train wrecks; we can't help ourselves, schadenfreude again. But if we really want these shows to go away, we have to stop watching them. Until that happens, Honey Boo Boo and her ilk are here to stay. Please tell us, confidentially, why you watch or why you think others view tot pageant shows.

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


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