

What Killed the Video Star?

This book's title, *Millennials Killed the Video Star: MTV's Transition to Reality Programming*, is a play on two significant moments in the cultural representation of American youth, albeit from two different moments in time. One alludes to the first music video to air on MTV on August 21, 1981, the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star." The song was most likely selected as the inaugural video for the channel due less to its popularity and more to its timely lyrics, which are ambivalent about advances in technology and culture. The chorus includes the refrain "Video killed the radio star / Video killed the radio star / In my mind and in my car / We can't rewind we've gone too far." These lyrics imply that contemporary technology is committing violence against the technology of the past. But whether these developments are positive or negative, it doesn't really matter: we can't rewind, we've gone too far.¹ The video features a young girl, part of MTV's target youth demographic eventually labeled Generation X (American children born between roughly 1965 and 1982).² Over the course of the video, the girl literally and symbolically turns away from her radio and toward her television, which is playing MTV's videos. "Video Killed the Radio Star" proved prescient; by 1983, just two years after the launch of the world's

1.1 The Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" was the first music video to air when MTV launched on August 21, 1981.



first twenty-four-hour video-music channel, music videos, rather than radio programming, became the standard way for record companies to promote artists and their new singles (Ed Levine 1983).

Video might have killed the radio star in 1981, but between 1995 and 2000, the number of music videos airing on MTV dropped by 36 percent. By the early 2000s, it was difficult to locate *any* music videos on the cable channel (Hay 2001). So who killed the video star? This question leads me to the second important cultural moment referenced in this book's title: Millennials, their presumed consumer tastes, and their (assumed) economic power.³ Throughout the 2010s a series of articles was published across the media spectrum, blaming the demographic known as Millennials, American children born between 1981 and 1996, for the financial woes of several once-thriving industries, including fast food, paper napkins, and the entire film industry (Dimock 2019). For example, a 2013 *Wall Street Journal* article, entitled "McDonald's Faces 'Millennial' Challenge," found (based on data compiled from a "restaurant consultancy" firm) that the fast-food giant's economic slump at the time was based primarily on generational shifts, such as Millennials' desire for "fresher, healthier food" and "customizable menu options." The article includes an interview with McDonald's global chief brand officer, Steve Easterbrook, who describes picky Millennial consumers as "promiscuous in their brand loyalty" (Jargon 2014). This representation of Millennials, as obsessed with the concept of choice and, consequently, unable to commit, was published so frequently, in fact, that it became its own meme ("Millennials Killed X"). Most iconically, the May 20, 2013, issue of *Time*, with the headline "The Me Me Me Generation: Millennials Are Lazy, Entitled Narcissists Who Still Live with Their Parents. Why

They'll Save Us All," featured the image of a white, cisgendered teenage girl splayed on her tummy, her smartphone raised at an angle above her face (Stein 2013). This image of Millennials—as narcissistic, addicted to screens, and white—did not originate in 2013 but can be traced to the early 2000s, when Millennials were old enough to become a demographic with purchasing power. Publications from *Time* magazine to *Business Insider* painted a fairly homogeneous, and mostly unflattering, image of Millennials at this time. This was also the moment that Millennials first entered the workforce. Older coworkers had to contend with this generation as adults, rather than as children, further highlighting the gaps between generations. Consequently, Millennials also took the hit for the decline of major industries and cultural norms because, historically, young people are often seen as the locus of social change, whether or not that change is seen as positive. They are the cause of contemporary social ills but are also repeatedly invoked as the only possible cure.⁴

These narratives—of the ratings-starved MTV and the industry-destroying Millennials—converge in the late 1990s, when the channel's target audience of Gen Xers slowly aged out of the way, allowing Millennials to become MTV's youth audience du jour. In the late 1990s, MTV's overall ratings were also dropping. This was precipitated by a number of cultural, economic, and industrial factors, including a loss of interest in the "faddishness" of music videos and the escalating costs of producing music videos. MTV knew it needed to change the content it produced for this new youth audience, the Millennials, and so the channel invested in extensive audience research to figure out what this demographic might desire. A key finding was that Millennials wanted to be a part of the media they consumed. As Jonathon I. Oake writes, "Thus, the deviance of Xer subcultural subjectivity lies in its perverse privileging of 'watching' over 'doing.' While baby boomers are mythologized as those who made history, Xer identity is presided over by the trope of the 'slacker': the indolent, apathetic, couch-dwelling TV addict" (2004, 86–87). In contrast to the stereotypes of passivity, voyeurism, and cynicism that were ascribed to Generation X, Millennials were imagined as being quite the opposite; they were described as "earnest" and engaged, with a belief that their actions and words matter and make a difference (Arango 2009). Popular culture represented Millennials as active "makers" who exude optimism about the possibilities generated by the rise and prevalence of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In response to these findings, MTV created a live countdown show hosted by Carson Daly, *Total Request Live (TRL)*, in 1998. *TRL* offered one possible stopgap to MTV's plum-

meting viewership and was one of the channel's highest-rated programs. But in the years that followed, with the rise and prevalence of digital music platforms like Vevo, YouTube, and others, which allowed youth consumers to watch a video at any time of day, even *TRL* could not convince Millennials to watch music videos on their televisions. The series was canceled in 2008.

But MTV did not die with the video star. Commensurate with the final years of *TRL*, MTV created an original cycle of scripted, identity-focused reality shows that began with *Laguna Beach* and continued with series like *Catfish* and *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*. This programming engaged, either implicitly or explicitly, in debates about what identity means; what it entitles the individual to say, do, and have; who has the right to claim an identity for themselves; and who has the right to be labeled with a particular identity by someone else. These series made evident multiple identity norms (like the Guido, the Redneck, or the Teen Mom) as well as presuppositions that MTV had about its own target youth audiences in the 2000s (that they were primarily white and primarily interested in establishing an identity *other* than “white” for themselves). Therefore, MTV's reality programming from approximately 2004 until the present served as an identity workbook for its primarily white audience and is partially responsible for producing Millennials' sense of whiteness and white identity. Laura Grindstaff describes this approach to production as “self-serve” reality television (2011a, 206). As I discuss in chapters 2, 4, and 5, MTV also created reality series featuring nonwhite cast members, like *Washington Heights* and *The Real World*. These series also served as identity workbooks for MTV audiences, but the representation of identities in these series were received and deployed differently. This cycle of reality programming is a prime case study for understanding the ways in which Millennials, the target twelve- to thirty-four-year-old audience in the early 2000s, were instructed to govern the self and to self-brand. Alice Marwick defines self-branding in the age of social media as “a series of marketing strategies applied to the individual. It is a set of practices and a mindset, a way of thinking about the self as a salable commodity that can tempt a potential employer” (2013, 15). There are many reasons why American Millennials were so identity-focused at this moment in history: the rise and spread of social media; the election of America's first nonwhite president, Barack Obama, in 2008; and the oft-discussed, unprecedented “diversity” of this new generation. But this book is invested in delineating and analyzing a single discourse: MTV's reality identity television programming in the 2000s.

Millennials Killed the Video Star examines the major historical, cultural, and industrial factors that led to MTV's historic shift in programming away from music videos and into the realm of reality television. I outline the launch of MTV in 1981 and the trajectory of its programming decisions toward the channel's original cycle of scripted, identity-focused reality shows in the early 2000s and 2010s. *Millennials Killed the Video Star* offers a major intervention into discussions of MTV's prolific output of reality programming created for Millennial youth audiences in that it is the first book to examine this successful group of reality TV series as a coherent production cycle. Cycles are series of texts (in film, television, and other media platforms) associated with each other due to shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes (see Klein 2011a). While genres are conventionally defined by the repetition of key images (or semantics) as they relate to a set of repeated themes (or their syntax), cycles are primarily defined by how they are used (their pragmatics) (Klein 2018, 200). Studying these MTV series together, as a production cycle, makes plain some of the discourses surrounding reality TV, celebrity, and identity in the 2000s, as well as the way this programming was used by Millennial audiences.⁵ These series have only ever been examined in isolation, but, as I will argue over the next five chapters, discussing them as a production cycle, with a shared producer, audience, aesthetic approaches, subjects, and ideological underpinnings, illuminates how MTV's reality programming generates a coherent discourse on youth and identity, offering a macro view of the channel's approach to studying, and then creating content for, youth audiences in the first two decades of the new millennium.⁶

Since the early 2000s, with the release of reality TV series like *Extreme Makeover* and *The Biggest Loser*, media scholars have been studying the role that reality TV plays in discourses of self-governance.⁷ At this time, reality TV shifted from simply documenting people to actively regulating their behaviors (Kavka 2012, ch. 4). In an increasingly privatized government, reality TV shows like *The Swan* and *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* demonstrated how entertainment can double as self-management and betterment. However, this is true even of series that do not advertise themselves as self-improvement programs as self-consciously as do series like *The Biggest Loser*. A series like MTV's *The Hills*, to name one example, tells young women how to manage their social lives and dress for a big date (Taylor 2011, 120). In this way, the series making up MTV's reality identity cycle are a prominent example of what Aniko Imre and Annabel Tremlett have called a "technology of citizenship in a neoliberal moral economy" (2011, 89) be-

cause they instruct youth audiences on “how to be” in the twenty-first century’s iteration of free-market capitalism. It is also important to remember that the cast members on these series are not simply participants in a reality show—they are also its progeny. Years of watching reality TV, particularly on MTV, has taught viewers how to think and act in order to clearly portray an identity, to produce what Allison Hearn (2014) has called the “branded self,” a self that audiences can select and develop for themselves based on the identities presented in each series. “The labour of watching television is intensified as audiences watch in order *to learn how to be seen by television cameras*” (2010, 66; emphasis mine).⁸

The specific, highly circumscribed stereotypes, like the Guido of *Jersey Shore*, the Redneck of *Buckwild*, and the Teen Mom in *16 and Pregnant*, can be made intelligible by analyzing a variety of texts: MTV’s casting calls and promotional materials, the performances of cast members on the reality series themselves, and how these identities are referenced and discussed in public discourses (reviews, think pieces, social media, fan sites, etc.). MTV’s reality identity series from the early 2000s highlighted some of America’s key vulnerabilities in terms of racial equity, gender parity, and class divisions. These series underscore what American audiences had the ability to discuss, as well as their desires to efface race and class through proper consumption (*The Hills*, *The City*), concerns over the role and place of whiteness and white bodies (*Jersey Shore*, *Buckwild*), and the impossibility of truly knowing who someone is online (*Catfish*). This book argues that MTV’s reality programming is part of the dominant discourse on the subject of identity and youth in the twenty-first century, and this programming has contributed to the contemporary, sometimes liberating, sometimes contentious, conversations that Americans, and American youth in particular, are having about who and what they are. So, no, Millennials did not, in fact, “kill” the video star, or the music video for that matter. As is so often the case in coverage of Millennials, the answer is far muddier and more complicated. This book is an attempt to answer one part of this question.

What Is Identity on MTV?

In order to understand how MTV presented itself as an identity workbook for Millennials throughout the first decades of the 2000s, it is necessary to define how the term “identity” is deployed in this specific context and the way MTV reality programming represented different youth identities and identity norms. First, although “identity” is incredibly slippery and difficult to

define in real life, MTV's reality series constitute one of the few places where it is relatively clear-cut. As Grace Wang has argued, in reality TV, "individuals are chosen to represent certain types and then slotted (self-consciously or not) into a limited array of available characters: the angry black woman, the conservative Christian, the fabulous gay (usually white) man, the non-white immigrant grateful for the opportunities afforded to him or her in the United States, and so forth" (2010, 405–406). These types on MTV might be manifested as a set of behaviors, languages and dialects, body adornment, or expressed belief systems. A *Jersey Shore* Guido, for example, is more defined by physique, clothing, and grooming (aka his "GTL"), while a Redneck who is cast for *Buckwild* is defined more by where they live ("the holler") and what they do for fun ("muddin'" in a 4 × 4 truck).⁹ Here it is useful to call on the work of Stuart Hall and the nuanced way he defines the concept of identity as well as the process of identification. He writes, "I use identity to refer to the meeting point . . . between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate,' speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'" (1996, 5–6). In the case of the TV series analyzed in this book, MTV hails youth audiences into place as particular identities that can be articulated via the reality TV text. This meeting point of identity on MTV is never a single location, since it can stem from both internal and external forces, and can change depending on the context of the series. For example, as I argue in chapter 5, in *Washington Heights*, which focuses on the lives of Dominican American youth, the sole white cast member, Taylor, is considered to be more a part of her Dominican peer group than Eliza, who is Dominican but was born in New Jersey. Tyler's identity as part of this community is tied to her geographic location, rather than her ethnicity or race.

Concepts like identity, subjectivity, and the self/selfhood are notoriously difficult to define, and they have long, complicated histories of debate in the fields of sociology, philosophy, psychology, and education, to name just a few. In the simplest of terms, and for the purposes of this book, the word "identity" is a placeholder word, a way to refer to a collection of gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and regional identities that are represented in MTV's reality programming. I use identity to reference the representation that is negotiated between the audience, MTV's framing of the series, and the performances of identity, or self-branding (as the Guido, the Redneck, the Virgin, etc.), in the series themselves. MTV reality series hopefuls self-brand themselves as a salable commodity according to a particular, codified iden-

tity, expressed through clothing or grammar or perhaps a moment of *identity confession*, the moment when a reality-show cast member declares allegiance with a particular identity in front of MTV's cameras (Marwick 2013, 193–194). In the context of a reality series like *The Real World*, a roommate might announce, “I am gay,” “I am Mormon,” or “I am Southern” in front of fellow cast members (or sometimes just the cameras). This moment of identity confession produces what Herbert Gans has called a “symbolic ethnicity,” specifically, “a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior” (1979, 9). Moments of identity confession demonstrate how the identities represented and performed on MTV function as a “pull” rather than as a “push” because audiences and series participants can adopt them or remove them as needed.

Even in this imaginary context of MTV's reality programming, however, where identity appears fluid and “up for grabs,” the opportunity to choose just any identity is not available to all who seek it, and it is not distributed evenly among those who can. As Mary C. Waters points out, “Black and Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians do not have the option of a symbolic ethnicity at present in the United States” because the material existence of members of racial minorities is always already influenced by their race or national origin (1996, 449). For many racial, sexual, and ethnic groups, no amount of self-narrative about one's symbolic identity will ever change the material realities of the individuals' lived experiences. Furthermore, Catherine Squires argues that in the context of reality television, “‘being ethnic’ is framed as an option that is equally open to all but that some [women of color] must be vigilant to control” (2014, 275). This is why MTV's successful cycle of identity programming focused almost exclusively on white, straight, cisgendered youth (*Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, *The City*, *Teen Mom*) or on marginalized youth who can “choose” to be white (the Guidos of *Jersey Shore* or the Rednecks of *Buckwild*). These programs provided viewers, particularly white viewers *without* a clear sense of self, with convenient ways to self-identify. Cast members who might otherwise be labeled as “white” are able to self-script more specific micro slices of that white identity for themselves (Hirschorn 2007). For example, *Buckwild* cast members are not simply “white”: they are Rednecks or West Virginians, identities that provide a sense of community, history, and specificity. Similarly, the cast members of *Jersey Shore* are not simply assimilated Italian Americans; they are Guidos with their own rituals of dress and grooming.

Whereas the seeking out, understanding, and embracing of one's race or gender or sexual orientation was once a project mostly for those with minority identities, MTV extended this project of identity formation and acceptance to everyone, even those whose identities *have not* been systematically marginalized and/or oppressed.

When I interviewed Jonathan Murray, a cocreator of *The Real World*, for this book, he explained that casting a “diversity” of identities was central to the series. I asked him to define what a diversity of identities might look like and he told me, “Diversity for me is people from different backgrounds, it can be socioeconomic, it can be regional, it can be racial, it can be gender orientation, it can be disability, it can be outlook on the world—whether you're a pessimist or an optimist—it is the full rainbow of types of people.” As I will discuss at length in chapter 2, by arguing that identity could also extend beyond race and ethnicity to something like whether someone lives in the country or the city, *The Real World* opened up a range of possible identities for MTV's largely white, suburban youth audience, who may not have thought of themselves as even *having* an identity. Indeed, while Generation X was encouraged to be colorblind and ignore race (an ultimately harmful construct), Millennials are more defined by their interest and investment in the *differentiation of identity*. It is important for Millennials to know who they are and where they came from, but just as important is the desire to make those identities clear and visible to those around them in a moment of identity confession, whether through social media or perhaps by appearing on an MTV reality series.

Beginning with *The Real World* in 1992, but not picking up steam until the 2000s, MTV generated a possible worldview in which even white, suburban, primarily heterosexual and cisgendered youth were able to “find themselves.” Laura Grindstaff argues that reality programming is a kind of “self-service television” because it “affords the opportunity for acquiring celebrity cafeteria-style; it enables ordinary people to walk in and serve themselves to celebrity status without the bother of extensive training, scripts, rehearsals or even talent” (2011b, 46). *Millennials Killed the Video Star* analyzes how and why only a few of these series—*The Real World*, *Virgin Territory*, *Catfish*—regularly cast nonwhite, gay, or transgendered youth; the absence of such youth in other series highlights an important aspect of the way identity was deployed in American discourse throughout the 2000s (namely, which of them matter on MTV). Ultimately, MTV programming offers Millennials the *fantasy* of identity construction by creating pathways for understanding what it means to self-define or be defined, and what this process looks

like on TV. These MTV series highlight the ways in which identities are commodities to be built, distributed, sold, copyrighted, and plagiarized. MTV is wisely tapping into the conditions of modern life, and the way the living labor of its audience fuels the industry (Horning 2012a).

The identities featured in MTV's series are already determined before a single frame is shot because it is always already constructed in relation to the particular needs of the reality TV production. When individuals audition for an MTV series, they audition for a particular identity (a Virgin, a Teen Mom, a Redneck) and whether they can fit into the larger narrative for the series, which is determined by the series' producers. For example, a casting call for *Teen Mom 4* is phrased this way: "MTV is looking for mothers from varying backgrounds who had children in their late teens and those children are now between the ages of 4 and 7; who would like to share their dramatic personal stories about their complicated journeys" (qtd. in Lynne 2016). The ad assumes that any teenaged mother who answers this casting call will have had "drama" and "complications" stemming from their status as teenaged mothers. Self-selecting *Teen Mom 4* hopefuls will still further have to fit the criteria that the series producers already have in mind. For example, when I asked *Teen Mom*'s executive producer and co-creator Dia Sokol Savage to explain how cast members were selected for the first season of her landmark series, she listed a series of traits, which I will summarize here. Sokol Savage told me they were looking for young women who were open and willing to speak frankly on camera; women who have enough intrigue in their lives to provide an interesting story arc that viewers want to follow; and women who were "TV friendly."¹⁰ To be on *Teen Mom*, a cast member must be more than simply a teenage mother: she must be an extrovert who is comfortable speaking on camera, is surrounded by family and friends who are willing to speak on camera as well, and who has an appearance that is pleasing to MTV's producers.

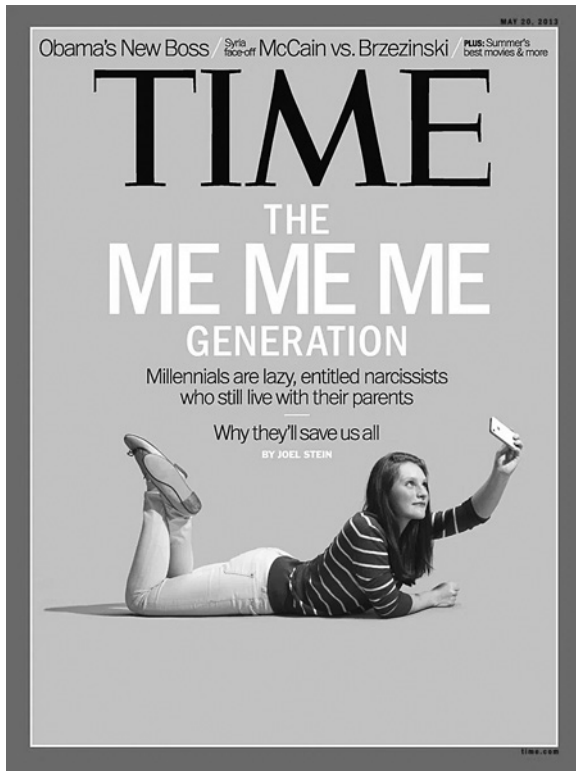
As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, creating and maintaining an identity is central to the postcapitalist neoliberal economy. Thus, the success of MTV's reality programming in the 2000s is tied to its ability to instruct youth audiences in the important work of finding an identity. The structures of reality TV make it easy for MTV to deploy the class, race, ethnic, and gender identities of the subjects profiled in their reality series as a kind of shorthand. Indeed, reality television demands a public performance of the private, of making what appears on the inside visible on the outside (see Grindstaff 2014, 330). I am less interested in either defining how cast members perform on camera, or the authenticity of these performances, topics

well covered by Misha Kavka's (2014) notion of flaunting, Therí A. Pickens's (2015) term "ratchet imaginary," and Jon Kraszewski's (2017) concept of "amplifying."¹¹ Instead, this book examines the factors that shape the ways in which these identity performances are framed and understood by MTV. This book analyzes the visibility of these identities that shaped discourses about youth and selfhood at this time. How, and what, did this programming contribute to prevalent discourses about youth and identity in the new millennium?

Defining Millennials

The Millennial generation, like all generations, is a concept rooted both in the real and in the imaginary, in physical bodies as well as in the data collected by marketers *about* those physical bodies.¹² When invoking the concept of the Millennial generation in this book, I am referencing the way a generation of viewers is imagined both by public discourses (film, TV, music, the media, and scholarly work) and, most centrally, by MTV. Public discourses centering on Millennials throughout the 2000s portrayed the entire swath of youth culture as relatively homogeneous, as promiscuous and inscrutable consumers who feel entitled to all the world has to offer. This representation of Millennials was created by marketing executives, film and television studio heads, magazine publishers, anxious parents, and well-meaning sociologists. This book examines closely these representations, these collective imaginings of youth, tracked through the products created for them, including MTV's programming. The latter, the focus of this book, can usefully be subjected to generational thinking. This book rests on the understanding that identity factors like class position, gender, and race, among other factors, impact an individual's experience of the world, and *also* that generational factors play a role in constructing the self. I rely on Karl Mannheim's belief that being born at roughly the same time in history means sharing a "common location in the historical dimension of the social process" (1972, 290). Mannheim sees "generational thinking" as a "negative delimitation," in that it *restricts* the range of possible experiences. All members of the same generation share a similar "restriction of possible experience," regardless of the other identities impacting the lives of individual members of the generation (which create their own restrictions differentially as well). Mannheim points to "a tendency 'inherent in' every social location," arguing that individuals who experience the same social, historical, and cultural events have a shared social location, even if their experiences

1.2 The May 20, 2013, cover of *Time* is representative of the popular discourses surrounding Millennial youth.



of and reactions to these major events are very different (291). It is this “tendency,” however imprecise, that I am tracking in this book.

For the purposes of my study of MTV, I adopted the Pew Research Center’s definition of Millennials (“Generation Y,” the “Net Generation,” and the “Look at Me Generation” were also circulated as possible names for this group) as American children born between 1981 and 1996. Of course, these parameters shift depending on the text being consulted. In their 2000 book *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Neil Howe and William Strauss argue that Millennials include anyone born in or after 1982, as does a March 2008 *Newsweek* article, entitled “Here’s Looking at You, Kids,” by Jennie Yabroff. However, an article in the *Journal of Business and Psychology* (Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons 2010) claimed that Millennials included anyone born after 1980. In her 2006 book *Generation Me*, Jean Twenge described Millennials as anyone “under 35” (i.e., anyone born after 1970). The Pew Research Center decided on the parameters of 1981–1996 for a few key reasons. Americans born in this window of time were old enough to remember the

terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; were the youngest generation to vote for Barack Obama; were the first generation to grow up with smartphones and social media; and were the youngest group to enter the workforce just as the Great Recession was starting (Ciampaglia 2018).

As mentioned above, throughout the early 2000s, MTV conducted hundreds of focus groups (nearly two hundred per year) with youth audiences. MTV executives also turned to the research of William Strauss, a “generational expert,” in order to figure out what the new youth generation—the Millennials—wanted to watch. Todd Cunningham (who was then senior vice president of strategy and planning for MTV) explained the process to *Frontline* back in 2001 for their special *Merchants of Cool*: “We go out and we rifle through their closets. We go through their music collections. We go to nightclubs with them. We shut the door in their bedrooms and talk to them about issues that they feel are really important to them.” MTV researchers filmed these fact-finding missions from the homes of American teens and then edited them into slick video packages that were later screened for MTV’s executives to examine. The executives, in turn, used this intel to create new programming. In 2009, Stephen Friedman, then MTV’s general manager, reflected on this moment in MTV’s history: “It was very clear we were at one of those transformational moments, when this new generation of Millennials were demanding a new MTV” (qtd. in Arango 2009). As these studies would make clear, in the late 1990s and early 2000s MTV needed to alter its approach to programming from studying and marketing what youth audiences like and consume (i.e., contemporary music and fashion) to studying and marketing youth audiences *themselves* (*Frontline* 2001).

So how were Millennials understood around the time that MTV began to make content tailored for them? In the mid- to late 2000s a variety of public discourses, both academic and mainstream, argued that Millennials were insulated from criticism and disappointment at an early age by anxious parents who wanted their children’s academic and extracurricular experiences to be collaborative rather than exclusionary, positive rather than ego-bruising. A 2008 issue of *Young Lawyer* in which Lauren Stiller Rikleen described the new generation in her workplace is typical of these discourses: “From their early days of shared rewards, constant media stimulation, and technology savvy, they have become a generation accustomed to quick answers, a constant flow of information and new ideas and immediate gratification.” These discourses implied that Millennials were raised in the so-called culture of praise, in which every milestone was documented on video and every accomplishment, big or small, was commemorated with

an award. An article in *Business Week* argued that a prevailing belief among employers who worked with Millennials is that they had been imbued with a “false self-confidence” (Erickson 2008; see also Yeaton 2008). And, according to a 2007 CNN article, 87 percent of hiring managers and human resources professionals said that Millennials, who were just beginning to enter the workforce, exhibited a sense of entitlement that older generations did not have (Balderrama 2007). These beliefs about this generation are also found in academic studies. For example, in her aforementioned book-length study of generational differences based on data culled from 1.3 million Americans over the course of fourteen years, psychologist Jean Twenge found that the gap between expectation and reality was far greater for Millennials than it had been for previous generations.

While these discourses were exaggerations, and standard examples of “kids these days” op-eds, at their heart they come at the precise moment when expectations and reality were at odds. Between 2007 and 2009, just as Millennials were increasingly the subject of studies on “today’s youth,” the US economy experienced the Great Recession. In this two-year period the American unemployment rate rose from 5 percent in December 2007 to 10 percent in October 2009. Businesses closed, the value of homes across the country dropped, and families lost their savings in a volatile stock market (Rich 2013). Millennials, who were just graduating from college as the Recession hit America, faced reduced salaries and benefits, degree inflation, and rising unemployment and underemployment (Conlin 2008). The American Dream—the idea that hard work and a college degree will lead to a lucrative and satisfying job—ceased to be a structuring myth for this youth generation, as it had been for previous generations. Most of the reporting on Millennials in its early days of definition (2008) was critical and dismissive.¹³ As I argue in chapter 3, there is a link between the success of reality series like *The Hills* and its reliance on narratives that appear to imply that an exciting, lucrative career in the field of one’s choice is attained not so much through hard work and perseverance but because one is wealthy and white. At this moment, living a documented, commodified life, whether as a brand or a reality TV star, is palatable for Millennials in a material way because the odds of becoming a successful reality star appear just as likely as getting a job that will pay off their college loans, which are higher than for any other generation in history. The success of MTV’s reality series among its target audience of twelve- to thirty-four-year-olds is tied to viewers’ ability to imagine themselves as future workers in the reality TV economy.

While professional actors are, in general, unionized and paid living wages in exchange for the labor of being watched, reality TV labor is labor that is given freely (Andrejevic 2004, 24). Anita Harris notes that this is a feature of contemporary society and that “the devolution of economic and personal security onto the individual is a way of articulating a new conception of the citizen as self-actualizing and responsible in a world that appears unpredictable” (2004a, 66). Self-promotion through the establishment and commodification of a specific and clearly defined identity is one way for (some) Millennials to achieve the economic security no longer guaranteed by state, local, and federal governments in the aftermath of the Great Recession.¹⁴ This recession marks a moment when, according to Alice Marwick, “personal branding transcended white-collar consulting and technology, and became a popular career strategy for people in all industries” (2002, 15). The transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, when more and more internet users became content creators, nurtured this sense of self as product (18). Furthermore, successful and long-running reality TV series like *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *American Idol* set a precedent for self-disclosure, self-definition, and self-branding, teaching viewers how to turn themselves into monetizable commodities (Andrejevic 2014, 46).

In his study of the relationship between Millennials and the internet, Louis Leung (2003) describes the generation as “bombarded with information and [more] media savvy” than older individuals. They have “grown up understanding the electronic economy” (see also Neuborne and Kerwin 1999). And as a result, “Net-geners find it easier to expose their inner thoughts online and the anonymity of the Internet allows them to reveal their feelings as much as they like” (Leung 2003, 108). It is beyond the scope of this book to offer a history of the internet in general, or social media in particular, but it is necessary to explain how the relationship between Millennials and social media was understood at the time that MTV was producing its reality identity cycle. One reason why this reality identity cycle was so appealing to Millennial audiences is because of the way that social media, a central part of their adolescent experience, has shaped their approach to intimacy and public performance. Social media encourages the drive to locate, define, and embody a specific image. As Rob Horning argues, social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram demand that users construct a coherent, defined identity, and that they broadcast it to an audience of observers, turning subjectivity into a form of capital (2012b). Participation in social media demands the revelation of personal details. *Buzzfeed*’s now iconic personality tests—endlessly replicated across the internet—

offer a crystallization of this process, the way the internet can offer us a chance not simply to pretend to be someone else, but to truly *become* ourselves by discovering ourselves. Horning calls this phenomenon the “productivity of subjectivity,” explaining that “social media compel labor not through wages but through the promise of apparent self-actualization” (2012a). This focus on the role of ICTs in the lives of Millennials has led to dozens of studies about the impact of these developments on a generation of Americans; conceptually there is a strong link in contemporary thought between the rise of ICTs and the implied personalities of Millennial youth.¹⁵

The self-surveillance engendered by the structures of social media has become a fundamental characteristic of contemporary life. MTV’s reality identity programs similarly allow cast members to live their lives as guided by the “Facebook eye,” constantly aware of how actions and words and dress and demeanors fit or don’t fit with the image each cast member is tasked with curating onscreen (Jurgenson 2012). Social media enables those with shared racial, ethnic, and/or sexual identities to come together for friendship, support, resource sharing, and, as the recent high visibility of the Black Lives Matter coalition demonstrates, activism and collective organizing. But social media also leads to divisions among identities, as can be witnessed by the rise of the alt-right, and even violence, as I will discuss in chapter 4. Knowing which identities to claim, reclaim, or reject has become increasingly fraught, and so the imbricated spaces of reality television and social media highlight both the potential opening of expressions of identity as well as a simultaneous, rigorous policing of what sorts of identities matter in public life.

One final way that media discourses frame the Millennial generation is through the lens of their presumed diversity. This belief is partially rooted in fact, since Millennials were, at the time, “the most [racially and ethnically] diverse generation in U.S. history” as well as the largest generation since the Baby Boomers (Rikleen 2008). As Reniqua Allen (2019) argues, “Obama looms large over this generation, a symbol less of progress than of the fundamental ambivalence of being a black millennial,” and, indeed, the 2008 election of Barack Obama seemed to cement this vision of the future’s racial harmony. However, a 2014 Applied Research Center survey of Millennials revealed that white participants were more likely to see the world as “postracial,” or beyond race, than nonwhite participants. Even when white participants did mention racial injustice, they “tended to focus their comments on racial profiling and speak about things that they’d heard about,

[while] people of color, particularly African Americans, often spoke in starkly personal terms” (Apollon 2011). A *Washington Post* study based on five measures of racial prejudice from the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center concluded that “when it comes to explicit prejudice against blacks, non-Hispanic white millennials [born after 1980] are not much different than whites belonging to Generation X (born 1965–1980) or Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964)” (Clement 2015). In other words, being more diverse does not necessarily lead to a tolerance of diversity.

Millennials are one of the most analyzed and documented generations of all time, but race, specifically Blackness, is frequently absent from these discourses (Allen 2019). According to 2016 numbers, African Americans make up 14 percent of all US children born between 1982 and 2000, or about 11.5 million (Nielsen 2016). The incorrect assumption that an increase in youth diversity correlates with more racial acceptance and harmony may explain why so much research on and representations of Millennials aim to erase the specificity of nonwhite experiences. In her study of “colorblind casting” in contemporary television, Kristen Warner calls it “a utopian social construct” that “aims to create a model of fairness by which all individuals can be judged fairly and without bias or regard to skin color” (2015, 8). Colorblindness as a policy continually fails in its aim to generate “fairness” because “the non-recognition of difference ensures many systemic inequalities go unchallenged and enables the maintenance of white supremacy as the status quo” (8). It has led to the unrealistic and therefore unfulfilled expectations that are placed on this generation.

Consequently, Millennials were faced with a difficult position vis-à-vis racial identity; they grew up in an America structured according to the ideologies of colorblind liberalism, and yet they cannot help but see how strongly racial difference (and other markers of difference) have profound, differential, material impacts on American bodies (Apollon 2011). MTV’s colorblind approach to its youth audiences, a myopia that has plagued the channel since its 1981 inception, also haunts its reality programming, which is populated by, and seemingly made for, a white, middle-class viewership. MTV extended the project of identify formation and acceptance to everyone, even those whose identities *have not* been systematically marginalized and/or oppressed. MTV’s lasting impact on discourses about identity and youth is that it made whiteness visible to white people, and then provided them with ways to differentiate and specify their own whiteness.

Methodology

The aim of this book is to demonstrate the value, scope, and stakes of studying MTV's wholesale shift away from music videos and into identity-focused reality programming, circa 2004. These programming shifts on MTV mark a moment when the channel rebranded its content to appeal to an audience that was defined for them by marketing companies and public discourses and, to a lesser extent, by ethnographic research conducted with samples of its youth audience. Because this book is not intended as a comprehensive history of MTV, its launch in 1981, or the production models the channel followed when it was still a twenty-four-hour video-music jukebox, I allot just a single chapter to the history of MTV prior to this crucial historical shift (1981–2003). There are many detailed histories devoted to this period in MTV's history, and I do not wish to replicate the achievements of these works.¹⁶ These texts will inform the history I recount in chapter 1, but their focus on MTV during its video-centered days (1981–1992) will become less illuminating as this book shifts into its main focus: MTV's reality identity cycle (2004–2018).

The work that follows is indebted to the scholars who first began analyzing the presence and success of reality television, including Mark Andrejevic (2004), Susan Murray (2009), and Anna McCarthy (2009), and also to those who first began linking reality TV to cultures of confession and self-disclosure, particularly the work of Jon Dovey, who argues that reality TV programming impacts the way we understand the very concept of truth or authenticity, by demanding “a grounding in the personal, the subjective and the particular” (2000, 22). I also rely heavily on Misha Kavka's *Reality TV*, and the book's clear delineation of modern reality TV's history into distinct periods, including the “camcorder era” of the first generation (1989–1999), the “surveillance and competition” formats of the second generation (1999–2005), and the “economies of celebrity” found in the third generation (2002–). Finally, Laurie Ouellette's recent scholarship (2018) on the “prosocial” function of MTV programming and its related campaigns, like their 2009 partnership with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and 2014's Be Different campaign, has helped me to better articulate my own observations about the relationship between MTV's reality series and contemporary understandings of youth identity formations. Much of the work in chapter 3 is also built on the fine scholarship of feminist theorists Rosalind Gill, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and, of course,

Anita Harris, whose concepts of the At-Risk Girl and the Can-Do Girl structure that chapter's claims. Although Harris's book (2004a) is broadly about young women in the Western world, the conclusions she draws about the relationship between girls, capitalism, consumption, and neoliberalism offer a way to understand MTV's representation of white girlhood in the 2000s. *Millennials Killed the Video Star* is also rooted in contemporary scholarship, like the work of Rob Horning and Nathan Jurgenson, that links up reality TV, social media, and identity.

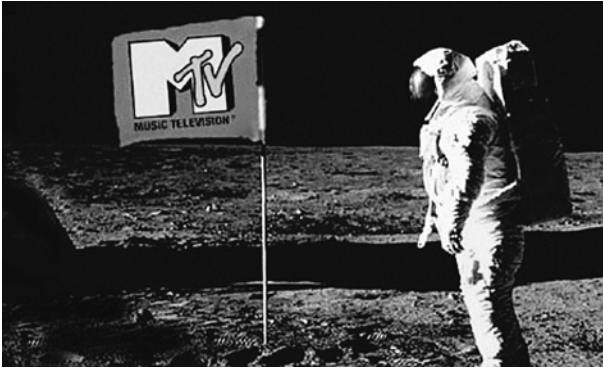
This project relies on textual and discursive analyses of MTV reality series released between 1992 and 2016. I perform close readings of the series themselves, understanding them to be pragmatic objects used by youth audiences as models of behavior, as instructional texts, and, of course, as entertainment. I argue that these series appealed to youth audiences at this moment in time due to the rise of confessional reality television and the centrality of social media in the lives of American Millennial youth. If history is, as Michel Foucault argues in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the study of discursive practices, then an important component of understanding the image of Millennials in popular culture is to read the discourses that circulate in and around MTV. Therefore, I also analyze the contemporary reviews, print and video advertising, tabloid coverage (specifically in the early 2000s), spin-off series, the side projects of cast members who appear in these series (including clothing lines and speaking tours), as well as other paratexts and markers of public discourse.

This book also relies on a series of first-person interviews I conducted over the last few years with the producers and stars of some of the most prominent reality series airing on MTV, including Jonathan Murray, producer and cocreator of *The Real World*; Max Joseph, cohost of *Catfish*; and Dia Sokol Savage, executive producer of *16 and Pregnant* as well as the *Teen Mom* franchise. I was also fortunate enough to speak with Irene McGee a former *Real World* cast member, and Paula Maronek Beckert, an alum of *The Real World: Key West*. These interviews offer detailed and candid insights into casting, filming, and editing MTV reality series over the last twenty-five years, as well as the changes to format and content that have occurred in long-running series like *The Real World* and *Teen Mom*. My experiences speaking with reality TV participants and creators both confirm and complicate the arguments of this manuscript, and, whenever possible, I include corrections and feedback from my interview subjects on my interpretation and use of their words.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1, “It’s Videos, Fool: A Targeted History of MTV (1981–2004),” opens with a brief history of youth-targeted television in America, from *Bandstand* in the 1950s to the *Afterschool Specials* that aired on ABC in the 1980s. Although TV networks did not begin to explicitly target youth audiences until the late 1970s, teenagers were still watching TV and finding programming that resonated with them *as* teenagers. I then discuss the industrial context for the launch of MTV in 1981, as well as MTV’s decision to target suburban, white youth audiences. I outline how MTV’s shift from music videos to reality programming was precipitated by a number of cultural, economic, and industrial factors, including a loss of interest in the “fadishness” of music videos; the escalating costs of producing music videos; the rise of digital music platforms like Vevo, YouTube, and others, which allowed youth consumers to watch a video at any time of day; and, perhaps most importantly, the application of data gathered from years of careful focus group studies that revealed that MTV’s target audience was interested in and shaped by ICTs. This research led MTV network executives to produce reality TV focusing on “ordinary” teenagers and young adults in series like *Made*, *Rich Girls*, and *Sorority Life*, to name just a few precursors to MTV’s reality identity cycle.

In chapter 2, “‘This Is the True Story . . .’: *The Real World* and MTV’s Turn to Identity (1992–),” I argue that the very concept of identifying documentary subjects as specific identities that can then be inserted into a narrative framework that looks like “the real world,” but is highly controlled behind the scenes, begins with the landmark series *The Real World* in 1992. This chapter is therefore devoted exclusively to the history, origins, and influences of *The Real World* on MTV’s later reality programming. This chapter also charts how the series changed and adapted as other networks began to focus on reality TV, and how MTV perfected the art of learning about identity through a form of social experimentation. Unlike early social and televisual experiments, such as *Candid Camera* (1948) or Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments from 1962, the subjects who volunteer to be cast on MTV’s series do so with the hopes that they will emerge from the experience transformed. They are not just there to be studied; they are there to “grow,” leading to other MTV series like *From Gs to Gents* and *The Girls of Hedsors Hall*. I argue that *The Real World* has been successful because it uses identity and the conflicts generated by bringing together diverse individuals as a



1.3 MTV's first commercial featured archival footage of Neil Armstrong planting a CGI-ed MTV flag into the moon's surface.

pedagogical moment for the audience. This chapter is supplemented by interviews I conducted with Jonathan Murray, producer and cocreator of *The Real World*; Irene McGee, a former *Real World: Seattle* cast member; and Paula Beckert, who was in *Real World: Key West*.

In chapter 3, “‘She’s Gonna Always Be Known as the Girl Who Didn’t Go to Paris’: Can-Do and At-Risk White Girls on MTV (2004–2013),” I situate the beginning of MTV’s reality production cycle in 2004 with the premiere of *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*. Released during the peak of reality TV production, experimentation, and prestige in America, *Laguna Beach* provided MTV with the impetus to create more and more reality series showcasing youth identities. The series’ success led to *The Hills*, *The City, 16 and Pregnant*, and *Teen Mom*. These series share the same structure: featuring the same characters all season, and across multiple seasons, creating a serialized narrative, which builds bonds between the audience and characters (Mittell 2015). Upper-class white women, like *The Hills*’ Lauren Conrad and *The City*’s Whitney Port, are characterized by the control they have over the stories told about them. As a result, their stories are aspirational—audiences are encouraged to dress, consume, and behave like them. They are, by Harris’s definition, high-achieving Can-Do Girls, who can use their celebrity status to build successful careers. By contrast, working-class white women, like *Teen Mom*’s Amber Portwood and Farrah Abraham, or Harris’s At-Risk Girls, are unable to build careers based on their celebrity since they are associated with negative representations of delinquent motherhood and their overall failure to live up to gendered expectations. These series were successful because they were aspirational, but they also showed what

behaviors and choices to avoid. This chapter is supplemented by interviews I conducted with Dia Sokol Savage, creator and producer of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*.

In chapter 4, “‘If You Don’t Tan, You’re Pale’: The Regional and Ethnic Other on MTV (2009–2013),” I chronicle a different set of popular reality identity series on MTV—*Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild*—which make the Otherness of its cast central to the series’ appeal. I argue that these programs were successful because they entertained audiences through the spectacularization of certain identities, turning them into broad stereotypes about both Italian Americans and the working-class residents of Sissonville, West Virginia. In doing so, these cast members open themselves up to ridicule, the primary affect generated by their series. In these MTV series, whiteness seeks out fractures and corners, places of not-whiteness, that can offer some unique vision of the self that is not-white. Thus, both series enabled audiences who generally categorized as being “white” to locate a different identity for themselves.

Chapter 5, “‘That Moment Is Here, Whether I Like It or Not’: When MTV’s Programming Fails (2013–2014),” looks at two failed series, which offers an interesting counterpoint to the success, longevity, and franchise potential of other identity series like *The Hills*, *Jersey Shore*, and *Teen Mom* and reveals some of the ways in which certain MTV-codified identities can fail to translate into reality TV success. Like *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild*, MTV’s *Washington Heights* featured racial or ethnic groups living in a clearly defined region of the United States who take pride in their identity. However, the Dominican American identities at the heart of *Washington Heights* were unsustainable as a serialized narrative because the identities presented on the series were too far afield from audience expectations and stereotypes about urban, Latinx youth. I also analyze another failed series, *Virgin Territory*, which aired for just one season. I argue that this series likewise failed because it did not conform to previously successful models of reality identity programming on MTV; the series featured nonwhite, nonheterosexual identities who were not aspirational or comical.

In the conclusion to this book, “*Catfish* and the Future of MTV’s Reality Programming (2012–),” I focus on *Catfish*, which brings together two people who have never met in real life but who nevertheless have intense, romantic, virtual relationships. This self-reflexive series highlights the ways in which youth audiences are aware of and actively engaged in the apparatus of the social media platforms they use to construct their identities. I argue that *Catfish* offered concrete language for something so many inter-

net users were experiencing, as well as an interlinked pair of new identities for its youth audiences: the Catfish (the deceiver) and the Hopeful (the deceived). MTV intervened in larger discourses about Millennials and identity throughout the 2000s by presenting identity as something that becomes possible only when (primarily white) people interact with those who are different from them, as something that can be achieved through making good (consumer) choices and avoiding risky behaviors (like unprotected sex), or as something that can be chosen (the Guido, the Redneck). *Catfish*'s focus on the fluidity and instability of identity contradicts earlier incarnations of MTV's reality identity cycle (discussed in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5), which presented identity as fixed and easily defined. This chapter is supplemented by interviews I conducted with Max Joseph, cohost of *Catfish*, who offered his own theories about this series' appeal and the nature of online intimacy.

MTV's programming is an ideal artifact to study in relation to youth identity because the channel's target demographic remains stable throughout time; they are always chasing the same young audience, no matter how old they get. Analyzing the various (and often intersecting) tracks made by these youth cultures across the terrain of popular culture—mentioned in an admonishing editorial here and then glorified in a flashy movie there—can reveal how a particular identity is understood. As Sarah Thornton explains, the media is “crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge. . . . The difference between being in or out of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure” (1997, 203). The insights about identity and youth culture of the twenty-first century found in this production cycle will make sense only if we return to MTV's origins and the need it claimed to fill in the lives of youth audiences. In the next chapter, I discuss the early years of MTV, as well as the various programming shifts it has made in its nearly forty years on the air in order to keep pace with its forever-young audience.