

**Reality TV: A Contemporary Medium for Participating
in the “New” American Dream**

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In the midst of the Great Depression, one of the bleakest epochs in U.S. history, some form of escape, be it physical or psychological, became an ephemeral method of coping with reality. In 1931, the historian James Truslow Adams formally introduced the catchphrase “American Dream” to describe “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” (214-215). Early waves of U.S. immigrants had high hopes of achieving this dream long before the concept was lexically encoded. Throughout the decades, the notion of what the so-called “American Dream” actually implies has evolved into an open-ended, debatable cultural phenomenon.

This essay will contextualize the transformation of the American Dream into a self-defined, relatively small-scale goal, rooted in post-materialistic, mainstream American cultural preferences. Although collective preferences for such notions as size, space and convenience still undeniably shape the icons and symbols representing the United States of America, having the largest house in the neighborhood, the best-paying job, or all the things that money can buy in a more general sense can no longer be unanimously regarded as representing fulfillment of the American Dream. Ironically, in this era of super-sizing, *downsizing* has become more applicable in discussions concerning the American Dream end results. Mainstream popular television viewing preferences, or, more precisely, those pertaining to reality television, can be applied as a parameter for assessing potential American Dreams from a wide variety of perspectives at multiple levels. The MTV hit reality show *MADE* will be analyzed in this essay as a platform for contextualizing the new American Dream phenomenon, still connected to Adams’ definition, but simultaneously transcending beyond traditional status and materialism-based connotations. Opportunities for self-projection cater to the show’s viewers, creating a unique situation in which reality television, as a cultural medium, both shapes and is shaped by a plethora of wide-ranging new American Dreams.

1) Paradigmatic Shift: From Rags to Riches to the “New American Dream” Phenomenon

As early waves of immigrants arrived in the United States, the American Dream was largely rooted in opportunities for survival, and then, once basic survival needs were fulfilled, opportunities for upward mobility. It was, in large part, the norm to arrive with nothing and then gradually accumulate ‘wealth’, both personal and financial, through extremely hard work, dedication, and, most importantly, perseverance. Early success stories were often described as a progressive transition from ‘rags to riches’, a term still widely used in conjunction with the American Dream, as represented via material acquisition and status. Yet immigrant-derived notions of the American Dream were not centered around financial status or material wealth. Freedom of expression, establishing and maintaining health and seeking opportunities for self-advancement were much more important, in line with ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’, outlined in the Declaration of Independence as so-called ‘unalienable rights’. Survival and stability were the paramount building blocks- anything above and beyond these basic accomplishments was regarded as a bonus.

A major paradigmatic shift concerning the American Dream paralleled the post-World War II economic revival. ‘Bigger’ became synonymous with ‘better’: terms such as ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ became commonplace in symbolizing a new sense of striving to reach the American Dream, and participating in society as a consumer became a primary means for articulating and representing it. As Richard Florida states, Americans acquired a new house, a new car and a steady job relatively quickly, yet, over time, became bored with what had become standard material possessions (Florida). Material wealth no longer assured happiness, and, as a result, started to fail as a valid ‘measuring stick’ of the American Dream. Recent surveys have revealed that since 1957, the number of Americans who claim to be ‘very happy’ declined from 35% to 32%, the divorce rate has doubled, the suicide rate among teenagers has nearly tripled and the rate of violent crimes has nearly quadrupled (Myers 5). Further studies have shown that the stronger a person’s goal for financial success, the lower the satisfaction with family life, regardless of household income (Nickerson et al 531), and that the aspiration to obtain financial success is a predictor of low self-actualization (Carver and Baird 292).

The materialism-based, more traditional notion of the American Dream, though still evident and prized in contemporary mainstream American society, started to lose its appeal as Americans began to realize that the end result of striving for materialistic gain was in fact no dream at all, but rather

oftentimes a state of frequent frustration, stemming from a plethora of sacrifices that needed to be made along the way. Working longer hours, having less quality time to spend with family or friends and other personal sacrifices have slowly been rejected as pre-requisites for living the American Dream. Interestingly, it is these same parameters which played such a paramount role and were so strongly in place when the term was coined. To a large extent, the parameters and the term paralleled each other so strongly to the point where they more or less became synonymous.

At some point in time however, Americans began to question this relationship, and, as a result, a ‘less is more’ approach to the American Dream started to take hold, followed by downsizing and personalization of goals as deliberate attempts to shift away from a deeply- rooted materialistic perception. As Florida mentions, once a society has transcended maintaining a subsistence level, its members start looking for work rewards above and beyond the material level, and, as a result, come to value intrinsic opportunities more than financial opportunities (Florida). This shift of focus should not be misunderstood as a unanimous claim that American society fully embraces and flourishes in a post-materialistic society, but rather that Americans are no longer collectively striving for the same pre-defined American Dream ‘cultural commodity’. A plethora of new generation American Dreams, based on goals, desires and accomplishments at the individual, as opposed to the societal level, have triggered a cultural reexamination of the American Dream, defining its parameters as people started to make a concerted effort to focus more on making a life rather than making a living, a distinction Myers emphasizes as critical for happiness in life (Myers 5).

Ryan and Deci propose that the new American Dream is associated with striving to obtain three primary psychological needs - competency, autonomy and relatedness, all core components of a relatively new theory called Self-Determination theory (68). This theory foregrounds intrinsic goals over materialistic ones, derived from individual as opposed to collectively-defined parameters. The central driving force impacting individual determination is creativity. This could be taken a step further in serving as the central catalyzing force in determining and realizing the new American Dream, potentially reversing the boredom setting in, once the novelty of material gains wears off and becomes monotonous. The economist Scott Stern contextualizes the appealing force of creativity in academia, where academic scientists, in essence, ‘pay to engage in their work’, earning significantly less money than they would if working in the private sector, choosing freedom to pursue personally relevant research over money

(Florida). Work in the field of academia seems to parallel a more wide-scale trend to downsize what is and what is not obtainable in terms of an individualized American Dream. Today's notion of the American Dream seems to no longer be a collectively-defined goal strived for by the masses in that the individual now has greater pull over the group in determining what the term implies at an independent, meaningful level. In conjunction with the self-determination theory, if obtaining the American Dream is regarded as a goal-driven phenomenon, the reasons for having the goal become more important than the goal itself (Baird and Carver 292). The concept of 'riches', as associated with 'rags to riches', has become extremely multifaceted as external, collective perceptions of success at the societal level have given way to internal, personalized ones.

2) Reality Television and Restructuring Mainstream Access to the American Dream

Historically, the media has played a pivotal role in conveying American Dream success stories to the masses. A slew of reality television shows have directly addressed this topic, including *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *The Apprentice* and *All-American Girl*, to name just a few. The mainstream music television channels also have made a deliberate effort to reflect American Dreams. MTV's long-running *The Real World*, now in its 15th season, triggered a re-birth of mass interest in reality television. According to the show's MTV website, viewers are encouraged to follow the "true story of seven strangers picked to live in a house and have their lives taped" ("MTV Made"). What started out as an outlet for quasi-voyeuristic curiosity, since taken to the extreme in such 24-hour reality broadcasts as *Big Brother*, quickly blossomed into a must-see expression of American culture. The success of *The Real World* as a reality television forerunner can be traced back in large part to a deliberate emphasis placed on promoting multiculturalism, oftentimes based on stereotypes, resurfacing season after season. Whether the cosmopolitan socialite, the small-town boy/girl 'does good', the misunderstood homosexual, the partying jock, the aspiring model, or the minority outsider, the cast portrayed in the show offers the viewer opportunities for self-projection from almost any imaginable perspective. Viewer self-projection helped to enhance the 'reality' of reality television in that, as a cultural medium, it now shaped society, just as it simultaneously was shaped by society.

The Real World didn't directly focus on the American Dream to the extent that other music television reality shows do, such as VH1's *The Fabulous Life* or MTV's *MADE*, to be analyzed later in greater depth. However, it set the stage for a new form and manner of television audience

participation in ‘reality’, regardless of how one defines the term. Self-projection allows for direct and indirect interaction between the television viewer and the characters/content of the show. Herb Terry, associate professor of Telecommunications at the University of Indiana Bloomington, offers an innovative course entitled “The (Sur)Real World of Reality TV”. In discussing reality television viewing habits, he stresses that “instead of people sitting passively and being entertained or sometimes informed, they interact in some way. That happens with reality television.” (Indiana University). Unlike fictional shows, often serving as an escape from everyday life, reality television has a tendency to serve as a microcosm of typical daily occurrences. Within the realm of reality television, some shows allow for a greater degree of widespread self-projection than others. A show such as MTV’s *Newlyweds*, centered around married life, as experienced by superstars Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey, presents a luxurious lifestyle out of reach for most average newlyweds, however, the day-to-day routines frequently foregrounded in the program are identifiable from the typical viewer’s perspective, whether a newlywed or not. The “average” reality show seems to focus on “average” reality as experienced by mainstream society in the form of daily routines. In this sense, reality television can be regarded as a counterpoint to the escape-oriented approach offered by fictitious sitcoms.

The interactive stance of reality television also closely adheres to mainstream American cultural preferences for directness. Shows such as *American Idol* and *Nashville Star* directly involve the audience by encouraging viewers to vote in determining contestants’ fates. This preference for directness can also be observed in the form of strong audience interaction in US game shows, such as *The Price is Right*, or talk shows, such as *Jerry Springer*. Even children’s television programs, such as *Dora the Explorer*, promote audience interaction. Reality television opens entirely new doors for potentially participating in the American Dream thanks to a combination of opportunities for self-projection and interactive participation. The MTV reality television show *MADE*, now in its fifth season, is centered around the new American Dream concept outlined above, representing downsized, self-determined goal-setting processes. The end result of *MADE* is not superstardom, but rather self-actualization and realization, setting the show apart from other reality shows and their materialistic American Dream connotations.

3) MTV's *MADE*: Participation in the American Dream via Self-Projection

The following description, taken from MTV's *Made* website, reveals the interrelationship between the new American Dream, reality television and opportunities for viewer participation via self-projection:

On every new episode of *MADE*, one willing candidate embarks on a mission to transform his or her life. Whether it's to become a varsity football player, a BMX biker, or a surfer, each teenager has a dream to break out of their shell and find out who they really are. Sometimes they make it, sometimes not, and sometimes they realize they had what they wanted all along. It's a brand new season of subjects, so tune in to see if their dreams get *MADE*.

The people being 'made', usually high school students, for the most part do not fit the 'rags to riches' mold, so closely intertwined with traditional notions of the American Dream. They are neither starting with nothing (rags), nor ending with immense materialistic gains (riches). Instead, participants are looking to set realistic, individualized goals, obtain outside assistance and uncover hidden talents and creativities in learning more about themselves, reflected in personal growth, regardless of success or failure as defined by collective societal notions. This, in essence, is what the new non-materialistic American Dream implies. Examples of American Dream-oriented topics appearing in the most recent season of *MADE* include a seventeen year-old improving his self-confidence and getting in shape in trying to score a date to homecoming and ascend from the 'just friends' label (episode 502), a shy, studious eighteen year-old breaking free from her 'goody-goody' image in attempting to make the school hip-hop dance team (episode 503), and a 'nerd-boy' weakling trying out for the high school football team to escape from his bookworm stereotype (episode 504).

At a very basic level, the various goals being pursued, ranging from high school sports to homecoming, to talent shows, are strongly entwined with American culture and corresponding American Dream goals, but a very distinct line separates the goals as represented by the show from materialistic-oriented, traditional American Dream perceptions. Self-actualization, stemming from self-determination, is at the heart of each episode. Understanding how to establish a goal and why it is critical to do so is framed as more important than the goal itself. For example, the young man trying to make the school football team is not doing so with intentions of obtaining the fame and fortune associated with potentially becoming a professional athlete, but rather to define himself based on individualized accomplishments, resulting in personal growth. For the record, he did not make the football team because his parents sent him to a boarding school. He

did, however, join the cross-country team at his new school and remained ‘athletic’, thereby accomplishing his goal of breaking free from pre-cast stereotypes. In this sense, he was ‘made’. Many of the show’s participants do not achieve their ultimate goals, but *do* achieve the more important ‘goal’ of learning more about themselves. This end result is very much in line with the notion of the ‘the pursuit of happiness’ rendered in the Declaration of Independence, a document so frequently juxtaposed with the American Dream as a form of cultural expression.

The vast majority of airtime dedicated to the hour-long show does not focus on the end result, but rather the processes (both mental and physical) undertaken in setting and attempting to achieve the goal. Each participant is provided with a series of coaches for professional guidance. For example, the boy looking to score a homecoming date is assisted by a nutritionist to help him learn to overcome his ‘fast-food connoisseur’ lifestyle and a trained gymnast who serves as his personal trainer to help him get in shape. He also received dating tips and fashion advice from a trained expert. The notion of team-work is emphasized as critical for success in American society and, in that regard, can also be interpreted as a further attempt by *MADE* to foster the American Dream.

The downsized and personalized notion of the American Dream rendered in the show invites self-projection by the viewer at many different levels. For example, the homecoming date episode appeals to not only those viewers also seeking a date, but also those who are interested in losing weight or modifying their eating habits, those looking to improve their so-called dating skills and those attempting to find and bolster their self-confidence in a general sense. For that matter, every episode of *MADE* appeals to those viewers attempting to change their lives in some manner, not necessarily directly related to the manner rendered in the show. It is this relatively broad appeal, in conjunction with a wide variety of goals and participants from highly diverse backgrounds, that not only invites, but directly encourages self-projection, and, thereby, participation in the new American Dream. Unlike viewers of fame and glamor-based reality shows, such as *American Idol* or *Making the Band*, viewers of MTV *MADE* likely are less inclined to have the same strong desire to participate in an episode of the show themselves. However, participation enabled by watching and self-projection is no less direct than if the viewer were actually the central character to appear in the show.

Opponents of reality television feel the genre has been forced on the viewing public ad nauseam and eagerly anticipate its demise. The television industry is attacked and accused of cutting corners by incorporating reality

television as a way of saving money by not having to pay professional actors and actresses. Regardless if one hates or loves reality television, the fact that it has become a mainstream US cultural phenomenon and form of expression demands attention and recognition. In summary, it is important to discuss why the genre has proven to be so successful and how this success potentially ties in with re-defining traditional notions concerning the American Dream. A show such as MTV's *MADE* allows for 'down to earth', realistic participation in a new, downsized, personally-relevant notion of the American Dream via widespread opportunities for self-projection at multiple levels. Perhaps more so than ever before, the American Dream, based on this new notion, is regarded as obtainable by the masses, and in this sense, is no longer truly a 'dream'. The degree and nature of success is self-defined and relative. The available opportunities imply that the new American Dream is no longer regarded as limited or 'fictitious'. This reinterpretation closely parallels a gradual shift in American television viewing preferences from fiction-based sitcoms to reality television shows. The reality television boom in the United States, embodied and fostered by such shows as *MADE*, contextualizes not only modern, redefined parameters and definitions of the American Dream, but also changing perceptions, both internal and external, concerning what being American implies in a general sense.

4) Highlighting the Americanness of the "American Dream": Comparing the US and German Versions of *MTV MADE*

As a reality television program rendering this newly defined, downsized version of the American Dream, *MTV MADE* also deliberately incorporates and portrays mainstream US cultural tendencies and preferences. A cross-cultural comparison and textual analysis of the US and German versions of the program is conducive to examining how the US version reveals dimensions of American-ness, integral components of the new American Dream, stemming from cultural preferences. For purposes of analysis in this essay, the US version of *MADE* focuses on an episode where an overweight, self-proclaimed drama queen attempts to become a high school cheerleader, and the German version focuses on an episode where a confused teenager looks to overcome his troubled past and lack of self-discipline by training to become a boxer. Sports, or more precisely competition, in and of itself plays an important role in everyday American life and has historically served as a springboard for achieving traditional notions of the American Dream for prospective professional athletes. The manner in which sports and corresponding goal-setting and striving is exhibited in the two versions is markedly different, resulting from two different cultural frameworks and mentalities.

The US episode opens with the show participants saying “I want to be first” and “I want to be the best”. This parallels not only the emphasis placed on competition in American culture, but also the strong sense of self-confidence instilled in America’s youth and encouragement for its overt vocalization. In contrast, the German episode opens with a participant saying “I want to become really good”, de-emphasizing the importance of competition. The relationship between the coach and participant on the two versions of *MADE* further reveals cultural differences. The positive reinforcement provided by the coach in the US version is strikingly profound, yet would likely be interpreted by the average American as expected and commonplace. Examples of this reinforcement include “you can be anything you want to be”, “If it kills me, you are going to be a cheerleader”, and “Oh my god, you look so great!”. The participant’s fellow cheerleaders even create a “D-I-A-N-A” cheer as a way of directly and openly bolstering her self-confidence and sense of worth. The coach in the US episode expresses a strong sense of self-obligation in making sure the participant reaches her goal and directly expresses this to her. This sense of verbal directness can also be analyzed as typically American, especially when juxtaposed and compared with preferences for indirectness rendered in the German episode, in which the coach practically never openly makes a direct compliment or gives positive reinforcement to the participant, and, at the surface, seems more negative based on such comments as “that is really bad”, “people much older than you are much better”, and “you don’t have any true talent”. This negativism stands in direct contradiction to American Dream obtainment mentalities and American-ness in general. The German coach does occasionally make small praises, but does so indirectly via the camera when the participant is not present. German cultural preferences for indirectness seem to be in line with refraining from making open, excessive compliments.

Though *MTV MADE* is centered around *self*-actualization, the notion of team-work is prioritized in the US version as critical for successful goal-setting and striving. The team extends beyond the central nucleus of coach(es) and participant, as the show dedicates a considerable amount of time to documenting team-based relationships established between the participant and her family and her classmates. In the German version, only minimal time is dedicated to the participant’s family, to the point where it is not necessarily regarded as playing an important role in his success. In fact, his father even says “he (the participant) needs to go out now and accomplish something on his own”, highlighting a sense of isolation, regarded as potentially counterproductive in pursuing the new team-driven American Dream. Unlike the US episode, the German episode completely

refrains from incorporating the young man's school environment. In the US, high school is often regarded as an American Dream catalyst based on opportunities for self-realization offered by various extracurricular activities, in particular through sports.

Some of the American-ness that comes across in U.S. reality television programs such as *MTV MADE*, at least from the American's perspective, seems to appear in a less obvious manner. Particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, the American Dream, and American-ness in general, has become much more strongly intertwined with expressions of patriotism. In the context of the US episode of *MADE*, patriotism is expressed repeatedly, from the American flags found in the participant's high school and cheerleading club to persistent red, white and blue attire. Again, this noticeably strong sense of patriotism is only satisfactorily recognizable when analyzed in a cross-cultural context. The American-ness of the US episode of the program is also captured via a prolonged emotional rollercoaster, taking the viewer from tears of frustration to tears of joy, culminating in a proverbial Hollywood happy ending. The notion of blood, sweat and tears clearly comes across and has become synonymous with attempts to live the American Dream. Strong displays of emotion do not surface in the German episode, perhaps reinforcing German cultural preferences for indirectness. Though the participant in the US version of the show does in fact make the high school cheerleading team, this goal obtainment should not exclusively be interpreted as holistically synonymous with the proverbial happy end mentioned above. In many episodes of *MADE*, the participant does not achieve the set ultimate goal, nevertheless the ending is still happy in that a series of sub-goals are met. In the episode analyzed in this essay, these include successfully losing weight and getting in shape, establishing lasting friendships and breaking free from pre-cast stereotypes of being a non-athletic drama queen. In those episodes where the ultimate set goal is not achieved but a series of sub-goals are, finding success in seeming 'failure', to a large extent also a display of American-ness, is promoted, further paralleling American preferences for optimism and positive reinforcement in encouraging self-realization. Interestingly, while the notion of the American Dream has shifted and been re-defined over the decades of its existence, the notion of American-ness so closely intertwined with the American Dream, regardless of how one defines it, has consistently served as a stable, paramount framework.

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