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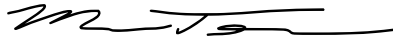
Gender Stereotypes in Survivor

By

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Abstract

Survivor is an American reality competition show where a group of castaways fight for the title of “Sole Survivor” through a variety of challenges and tribal councils where members are voted out by each other. It is often called a “microcosm of our real world,” but how accurate is it? This research compares gender and four behavioral traits—affection, emotionality, independence, and competitiveness—to determine if gender stereotypes associated with those traits are present in *Survivor*. Previous research indicates that women are portrayed as more affectionate and emotional, while men are portrayed as more independent and competitive in the media. Previous research also indicates that television is influential in people’s perception of stereotypes. Through a content analysis of randomly selected episodes, results indicate that gender has no effect on the portrayal of affection, emotionality, independence, and competitiveness.

Introduction

Television plays an essential role in learning. It teaches viewers cultural ideologies, appropriate behaviors, new trends, language, and social constructs, like stereotypes (England, 2018). Stereotypes are considered part of a difficult cycle to break. Once a stereotype is formed, it is then portrayed, which only reinforces it (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Its portrayal not only has consequences for viewers, but also for those who perpetrate it. Contestants on the reality television show *Big Brother 15* were fired from their jobs as a result of discriminatory comments they made on the show (England, 2018). Opening up “reality” to be publicized on television can have its range of consequences, which may be more severe than expected.

Background on the Problem

Reality shows have been a staple of broadcast television in the 21st Century. Nabi et al. (2003) outlined a few key elements that define a reality TV show. Their casts contain people portraying themselves, rather than actors portraying a character. They are also not filmed on a set or with a script. England (2018) defined these shows as “unscripted” since there’s often criticism regarding the “reality” label. This is due to the fact that critics don’t believe being filmed qualifies as a real life scenario. CBS’s *Survivor* is categorized as a competition-based reality show.

Since premiering in 2000, *Survivor* has produced 42 seasons. Each season consists of 16 to 20 contestants, labeled “castaways,” who are stranded in a remote location. They are then divided into tribes to compete in challenges, with the losers being forced to eliminate someone from within their tribe. After the tribes merge, they then compete individually until a final two or three (season dependent) remain. Castaways voted out after the merge act as a jury to decide which of the final contestants will be crowned Sole Survivor and win a million dollar prize. Each season varies, as new twists to the gameplay are introduced. All the while, contestants also have to survive the conditions of being deserted (*About Survivor*; 2022). Executive Producer and Host Jeff Probst often calls *Survivor* a “microcosm for our real world” (Wigler, 2019). This paper aims to test part of that theory.

Research Question and Hypotheses

This research sought to answer the question: Does *Survivor* portray contestants in-line with the gender stereotypes commonly associated with affection, emotionality, independence, and competitiveness? The following hypotheses were formed based on the literature review:

H₁: Women are portrayed as more affectionate than men.

H₂: Women are portrayed as more emotional than men.

H₃: Men are portrayed as more independent than women.

H₄: Men are portrayed as more competitive than women.

Literature Review

Stereotypes and Gender

Stereotypes, as defined by Eagly & Koenig, are “traits ascribed to entire categories of persons” (2021, p. 344). Thus, a gender stereotype is that of a trait assigned to a specific gender. Gender stereotypes, also referred to as gender roles or sex roles, create a “pre-determined” plan that people are assumed to follow. In the 1970s, Sandra L. Bem created the Bem Sex-Roles Inventory (BSRI) to measure people’s identification with gender stereotypical traits. The inventory contains 20 traits associated with men, 20 traits associated with women, and 20 androgynous traits (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). “Affectionate” is listed as a feminine trait, while “independent” and “competitive” are both listed as masculine traits (Hoffman & Borders, 2001). All of the behavioral traits were sorted by Stanford undergraduate students in the 1970s, and have been tested in various studies since then (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017).

Maznah & Choo found that the BSRI concepts are “culture bound,” and thus can only reflect American gender stereotypes (1986, p. 39). They also found that both the masculine and feminine traits have “high internal consistency,” which indicates a strong association of the traits with each gender (Maznah & Choo, 1986). Donnelly & Twenge (2017) found that the only significant change in trends between 1993 and 2012 was a decline in women’s association with feminine traits, however no significant change occurred between the start of the BSRI and 2012. Women’s association with masculine traits and men’s associations with both masculine and feminine traits did not show any significant change over any part of the time period. Without

much significant change in associations, the BSRI can still be used as a basis for gender stereotypes.

Reality Television and Behavioral Traits

Previous research indicates that reality television has portrayed general stereotypes, such as lifestyle behaviors and economic status, which have an effect on viewers. Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak (2016) studied reality television shows' portrayal of lifestyles. They found that reality shows that depict personal lifestyle changes, such as *Undercover Boss*, are considered more "moving" than reality shows focused on competition or game. The shows cause viewers to self-reflect on their lifestyle choices, which creates a positive association to the show. Shows like *Survivor* contain more strategy, competition, and manipulation, which cause viewers to be left in suspense.

Jahng focused on the portrayal and effects of economic statuses. Generally, "heavy viewers of reality" shows were found to indicate more materialistic views than "light viewers" (2019, p. 328). Heavy viewers also tended to believe that the wealth depicted on reality television shows, such as those that follow celebrities, is attainable. Viewers had skewed perceptions of wealth, due to their consumption of reality TV. Another stereotype studied in competition-based reality television was ageism. Denham & Jones (2008) found that *Survivor* elimination trends showed the elder castaways leaving first, due to negative perceptions of older generations, such as stereotypes that they're weak. These perceptions from reality television viewers carry into their assumptions on gender and create gender stereotypes.

Television and Gender

Television has a history of portraying gender stereotypes, especially those targeted towards women. Thompson & Zerbinos (1995) found that female characters in children's

cartoons were less emotional than those in 1980, but still followed the gender stereotype of being emotional. This also held true for female characters and affection; while it decreased since 1980, they were still more affectionate than their male counterparts. Glascock's (2001) study of prime time television characters supports this, with female characters being portrayed as significantly more affectionate than males. When it comes to male stereotypes, Downs (1981) found that prime time television male characters were more likely to "solve their own problems without assistance," an act of independence. Thompson & Zerbinos (1995) saw an increase in female characters being portrayed as independent. However, the overarching finding was still that male characters were more independent than female characters.

Women are portrayed as a multitude of different stereotypes and roles. Brancato (2007) found that reality television shows often hyper-symbolize the mother and wife roles. This perpetuates the female gender roles associated with caretaking, of both the house and kids. Swantek (2014) found that women were being portrayed as weak and shallow, as well as often being younger and more attractive than the male characters.

Multiple studies have also found a connection between gender (among other factors) and success in the game, specifically in *Survivor*. According to Brillman (2016) women comprise 57% of the first five eliminations in the seasons analyzed. When it's scaled back to the first four eliminations, women make up 65%. In fact, Adebowale (2020) found that women are more likely to be the first elimination over men. Women were 24 of the first eliminations in the first 40 seasons. Adebowale (2020) explains that women are often eliminated because they are viewed as a strong player or because the tribe wants to punish her male ally by eliminating her. While Brillman (2016) found that gender does not significantly affect a castaway's performance (with all groups statistically finishing within two places of the expected value) and Truscott (2017)

finding a similar non-affect, women are still at a disadvantage. Beyond the apparent elimination order connection, women only make up 14 of the first 39 winners (Adebowale, 2020).

Methodology

For this project, a content analysis of *Survivor* episodes was conducted to investigate the portrayal of typical gender roles in *Survivor*. The sample population for this project included 20 episodes of *Survivor* collected from the streaming service Paramount+. These included one randomly selected episode (using a random number generator online) from every other season, starting with the first. Live reunion episodes were not included in the random selection due to their significant difference from typical episodes.

A quantitative content analysis was conducted on the samples, including the following steps. Four behavioral traits were chosen, two (affection and emotionality) with a traditional female stereotype association and two (independence and competitiveness) with a traditional male stereotype association (Hoffman & Borders, 2001; Swantek, 2014). The traits were defined and given potential actions and/or phrases that showcase the trait. These were then put into a coding sheet, as seen in Appendix A. Episodes were randomly selected as coding was underway. Coding consisted of marking every time a trait was seen underneath the corresponding gender. Data was analyzed using Excel.

When coding episodes, recap footage at the start of an episode and preview footage at the end of an episode accompanied by exit interview audio was not coded. Only contestants were coded; the host Jeff Probst and any visitors were not coded.

Behavioral Traits

Affection was defined as “a feeling of liking and caring for someone,” and was coded for displays of affection (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Examples of coding traits included hugging,

cuddling, pats on the back, handshakes, kisses, and holding hands. Affectionate touches in a first-aid context were coded. Group hugs between both gender groups, with no shown initiator were coded as one male and one female. When an initiator was shown, only that gender was counted. Touches during challenges that forced contact, such as pairs holding hands, were not counted.

Emotionality was defined as the degree to which one is emotional, which was defined as being “dominated by or prone to emotion” particularly negative emotions (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Coding traits were based on Downs’ (1981), Klewin’s (2007), and Scharrer’s (2012) studies. Examples included talking about feelings, frowning, teary-eyed, crying, choked up with sniffles, lashing out in anger, and yelling in anger. Talking about feelings included phrases like “emotion-packed,” “the mood is heavy,” “you hurt my feelings,” and “I was a little hurt.”

Independence was defined as the behavior of living “your life without being helped or influenced by other people” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Coding traits included acting on their own for things such as making plans, making decisions, fishing, making fire, gathering food, and hunting idols. Coding also included defying others’ influence, such as avoiding deals by themselves or acting against one’s expressed interests. Any attempts towards these actions were also counted, even if unsuccessful. Independence sounded like “I’m not voting how they told me to” and “I have my own strategy,” and looked like someone being the first to step up to mutiny (season 13) and someone taking their idol back from a contestant they loaned it to, against the other’s wishes.

Competitiveness was defined as the trait of a person who has a strong desire to win and/or have greater success than others (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Coding traits included talking about winning and losing. Some example phrases included “secure a spot,” “I will win,”

“you will lose,” “I want immunity,” and some more nuisance competitiveness like “looking for a chance to make myself safe” and “I’m top competitor.” Simply winning a challenge did not qualify as competitiveness, a contestant needed to express their drive to want to win or put others down.

Gender

For this content analysis, only “male” and “female” were used as gender categories. This is due to the make-up of *Survivor* contestants. The American version of the show has only had one non-binary contestant (Evvie Jagoda from season 41), and they came out after their season aired (Evvie Jagoda, 2021). Thus, all contestants during the time of production fit under these two categories. Additionally, season 41 was not one of the seasons coded.

Special Episodes

One of the randomly selected episodes (Season 21, Episode 14) coded was a loved one’s episode. This is where each contestant is surprised with a visit from a loved one (parent, sibling, significant other, friend, etc.). They then compete in a challenge where winners get to enjoy a reward meal with their visitor. This episode contained some of the highest levels of affection and emotionality across all of the episodes coded, with the highest number of male occurrences of emotionality overall (see Appendix B). This was expected as contestants have been isolated for some time, having made it through a majority of the 39 days. The high-level of male emotionality may be due to the breakdown of contestants during this episode, with four male and two females remaining.

In addition to coding one loved one’s episode, two finale episodes were also randomly chosen (Season 9, Episode 14 and Season 31, Episode 13). These episodes are double the length of a typical episode, which allowed for more coding time on all traits. Typically, contestants tend

to be nostalgic, reflecting on their experience. They also are put in a situation where they need to persuade the jury to vote for them to win, which would cause an expected high level of competitiveness. This was seen in the Season 31 finale, with the highest number of male competitiveness, and the Season 9 finale, with the highest number of female competitiveness. The Season 31 finale also contained the highest number of male affection, female emotionality, and female independence. With the longer duration of coding and increased stakes, these numbers are not surprising.

Despite the episode of each season being randomly selected, there were an almost equal number of pre-merge and post-merge episodes coded. Prior to the merge, contestants are divided into separate groups (called “tribes”) that compete against each other. Post-merge, contestants compete in individual challenges as part of one tribe. Nine pre-merge episodes and ten post-merge episodes were coded, with the remaining episode being a recap of mainly pre-merge footage. Pre-merge and post-merge gameplay often varies, so the near equal coding of each allows for compensation of this variation. All four behavioral traits may be affected by the point of the game, but timing was not included in this research.

Results

Descriptive statistics show that across the 20 episodes, affection was coded a total of 174 times, with 90 male (51.7%) occurrences compared to 84 female (48.3%) occurrences (Table 1). Occurrences of emotionality were lower, with 36 male (37.5%) and 60 female (62.5%) situations coded. Independence was the trait with the lowest number of total occurrences, with only 24 male (51.1%) and 23 female (48.9%) situations counted. The number of occurrences for competitiveness were more consistent with the first two traits, with 67 male (60.1%) and 43 female (39.1%) instances.

Table 1: Number and percentages of behavioral trait occurrences

	Male	Male Percentages	Female	Female Percentages	Total
Affection	90	51.7%	84	48.3%	174
Emotionality	36	37.5%	60	62.5%	96
Independence	24	51.1%	23	48.9%	47
Competitiveness	67	60.1%	43	39.1%	110

H_1 expected women to be portrayed as more affectionate than men. A t-test was used to measure the portrayal of affection in male and female contestants (Table 2). There was no significant difference in the scores for male ($M=4.5$, $SD=3.24$) and female ($M=4.2$, $SD=3.25$); $t(38)=.29$, $p=0.386$. These results suggest that gender has no effect on affection. Thus, H_1 is not supported.

Table 2: t-Test Analysis of Affection

	Male	Female
Mean	4.5	4.2
Variance	10.4736842	10.5894737
Observations	20	20
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	38	
t Stat	0.29233076	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.38581198	
t Critical one-tail	1.68595446	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.77162396	
t Critical two-tail	2.02439416	

H₂ expected women to be portrayed as more emotional than men. A t-test was used to measure the portrayal of emotionality in male and female contestants (Table 3). There was no significant difference in the scores for male (M=1.8, SD=2.4) and female (M=3, SD=3.01); $t(36) = -1.39, p = 0.086$. These results suggest that gender has no effect on emotionality. Therefore, H₂ is not supported.

Table 3: *t-Test Analysis of Emotionality*

	Male	Female
Mean	1.8	3
Variance	5.74736842	9.05263158
Observations	20	20
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	36	
t Stat	-1.39497166	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.08578605	
t Critical one-tail	1.68829771	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.17157209	
t Critical two-tail	2.028094	

H₃ expected men to be portrayed as more independent than women. A t-test was used to measure the portrayal of independence in male and female contestants (Table 4). There was no significant difference in the scores for male (M=1.2, SD=1.11) and female (M=1.15, SD=1.27); $t(37) = .13, p = 0.447$. These results suggest that gender has no effect on independence. Thus, H₃ is not supported.

Table 4: *t-Test Analysis of Independence*

	Male	Female
Mean	1.2	1.15
Variance	1.22105263	1.60789474
Observations	20	20
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	37	
t Stat	0.13294517	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.44747858	
t Critical one-tail	1.68709362	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.89495716	
t Critical two-tail	2.02619246	

H_4 expected men to be portrayed as more competitive than women. A t-test was used to measure the portrayal of competitiveness in male and female contestants (Table 5). There was no significant difference in the scores for male ($M=3.35$, $SD=2.5$) and female ($M=2.15$, $SD=2.35$); $t(38)=1.57$, $p=0.063$. These results suggest that gender has no effect on independence. Therefore, H_4 is not supported.

Table 5: *t-Test Analysis for Competitiveness*

	Male	Female
Mean	3.35	2.15
Variance	6.23947368	5.50263158
Observations	20	20
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	38	
t Stat	1.56611359	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.06280636	
t Critical one-tail	1.68595446	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.12561272	
t Critical two-tail	2.02439416	

Discussion

With all four hypotheses rejected, this research does not support prior studies on gender stereotypes. Previous research indicated that these four behavioral traits are portrayed in television with a gender bias. However, this research did not find statistically significant proof of this. This implies that there aren't gender stereotypes (at least in regard to these four traits) being portrayed in reality TV, specifically *Survivor*.

This lack of gender stereotypes may be due to the changing nature of society, with people now having a better understanding of how harmful stereotypes are. However, this research studied episodes as far back as 2000, so the more recent research from the literature review, such as (Adebowale, 2020), would have indicated this change in social norms as well. The lack of support for the hypothesis may instead be a result of limitations.

Limitations and Future Research

While competitiveness was the closest to being significantly in-line with its hypothesis (H_3), it's important to note that competitiveness was coded solely on verbal cues. It's possible that this created a bias, if men are more likely to vocalize their competitiveness. In the future, more research would be needed to better code for competitiveness.

More research would also help solidify the findings of this research, since less than 3% of *Survivor* episodes were analyzed. With over 600 episodes, the amount of content to analyze served as a limitation to this research. Twenty randomly selected episodes were used due to time constraints. Time constraints also eliminated the ability to conduct intercoder reliability tests. This is where a possible coding bias could have been intercepted and fixed prior to coding all of the episodes.

Additionally, this research is based on the edited version of the events that occur. It's possible that there is an edit bias, unknown to viewers since there is no access to all of the footage. More occurrences may be happening that are never shown, which affects the data of how prevalent a stereotype is, but not in terms of how they're portrayed. Interviews with contestants and/or access to the unedited footage would be helpful in further research.

This research only focused on four behavioral traits associated with gender stereotypes. Not only are there more gender role traits, but there are also other ways that gender stereotypes may be portrayed, such as through the elimination order. Future research can expand not only on this gender stereotype analysis, but also on other aspects of the microcosm that is *Survivor*, such as racial, economic, or age stereotypes. Similar research on other reality television shows, such as *Big Brother*, should also be conducted to see if the same findings occur throughout the genre.

Further research, of gender portrayal in *Survivor* and in all of the previously listed areas, should be conducted because of the role television, especially reality television, plays in viewers' lives. England (2018) emphasized the importance of television in learning. Viewers of reality television assume that what is portrayed is what real life is. When they view a stereotype, they assume it's true, which is a dangerous cycle.

Appendix A - Coding Sheet Template

Season__ Episode__:		
Date aired:		
Affection:		
Includes: touches, hugging, cuddling		
	Male	Female
Shows affection		
Emotionality:		
Includes: appearing upset, crying, talking about feelings		
	Male	Female
Shows emotional behavior		
Independence:		
Includes: making decisions on their own, defying others' influence		
	Male	Female
Shows independence		
Competitiveness:		
Includes: "secure a spot," "I will win," "you will lose,"		
	Male	Female
Shows competitiveness		

Appendix B - Occurrences per Episode

Episode	Affection		Emotionality		Independence		Competitiveness	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
S1 E2	3	3	0	2	2	1	2	2
S3 E10	1	3	2	0	1	0	2	1
S5 E3	6	4	0	3	0	0	1	0
S7 E2	2	1	3	1	2	0	4	1
S9 E14	3	5	3	6	2	2	6	9
S11 E7	4	3	0	2	0	0	2	2
S13 E9	2	4	3	3	1	1	2	2
S15 E8	0	0	0	1	1	1	4	1
S17 E5	2	0	1	5	1	1	5	0
S19 E3	4	6	0	0	4	0	4	0
S21 E14	10	9	10	7	0	0	2	1
S23 E11	7	2	2	0	3	0	2	0
S25 E8	1	1	0	1	0	3	6	6
S27 E12	6	6	1	0	1	0	2	0
S29 E7	10	13	1	2	0	1	4	3
S31 E13	11	8	5	10	1	4	10	5
S33 E4	4	4	3	3	2	1	0	1
S35 E12	3	1	1	0	2	2	7	4
S37 E7	8	6	1	8	1	3	2	3
S39 E2	3	5	0	6	0	3	0	2
Totals:	90	84	36	60	24	23	67	43

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