

Vanderpump Rules: A LibGuide

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To Cite: Rogers, L. (2025). Vanderpump rules: A LibGuide. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 5(1), 193-201. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder99>

Abstract

This presentation examines a LibGuide created by Lia Rogers and Kat Lauro which approaches *Vanderpump Rules* from an academic standpoint. The Vanderpump Rules LibGuide is an example of how LibGuides can be dynamic, engaging, and interactive, furthering the use of LibGuides for creative endeavours such as reality TV shows. The LibGuide is targeted towards media, communications, and English undergraduate and graduate students who are taking a popular reality television class by using *Vanderpump Rules* as an example. We wanted to introduce *Vanderpump Rules* as a show and engage with it through two avenues. The first is viewing reality television as a genre of media through an academic lens. The other is through an understanding of how fan culture and cast engagement outside of episodes impacts how audiences consume and understand reality television. This part of our guide understands that fan engagement and voyeurism are an important aspect of consuming reality television which is desired by the producers. The LibGuide can be viewed here: <https://ualberta-lis.libguides.com/c.php?g=737489&p=5313620>.

Keywords: reality tv, parasocial, fandom, Vanderpump Rules, Scandoval

Are you a fan of reality television? Do you wonder how you can critically engage with reality media like *Vanderpump Rules* in your degree? Look no further! This is your guide to all things *Vanderpump Rules* and reality TV research. This LibGuide aims to answer questions such as, “Can you use *Vanderpump Rules* as text in academia? What are the genres of reality television? What scholarly resources are available to enhance an understanding of reality television as a medium? How does fandom fit into our understanding and consumption of *Vanderpump Rules*?”. This conference abstract

will describe the elements of the LibGuide, as well as the processes and methods in which readers of the guide can engage with it. This LibGuide aims to be a representation of the dynamic and creative nature that information and media can be presented in.

Reality Television

Reality television (TV) encompasses a genre of programming that shows unscripted real-life situations that focuses on real people (“Reality television”, 2023). However, reality TV is an ambiguous term defined by shared conventions of distinct subgenres, use of non-actors, and a mix of both fictional and factual elements (Ouellette, 2014). While the term reality TV is relatively new, unscripted entertainment featuring regular people has been a facet of television since the medium began (Ouellette, 2014). For example, Allan Funt’s post-WWII *Candid Camera* is from the first wave of nascent reality television (Holmes & Jermyn, 2003). Reality TV as a genre can include a variety of shows which can be categorized in a subgenre. The subgenre of a reality TV show is determined by the production practices employed by a show. Some shows can sit between multiple sub-genres, with some of the sub-genres containing further divisions based on the subject matter covered. Examples of sub-genres include social experiment programs, make over programs, and adventure competition programs (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2017).

Background about *Vanderpump Rules*

Vanderpump Rules is a reality-television show that follows the lives of the staff working at Lisa Vanderpump's restaurants, with a focus on SUR in Los Angeles (Selinger, 2023). *Vanderpump Rules* focuses on the drama, entanglements, and relationships of several staff members working as bartenders and servers while trying to build their own futures in show business or as entrepreneurs (Selinger, 2023). *Vanderpump Rules* falls into the documentary sub-genre and the docu-drama sub-sub-genre. These so-called docu-soaps are characterized by non-actors being filmed by production crews in unscripted everyday situations with no audience interaction. The docu-soap sub-genre took off when reality television producers hoped to mirror popular scripted dramas (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2017). It mimics the style and interpersonal

drama of scripted soap-operas in a non-scripted environment with non-actors (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2017).

Fan Culture

Fan culture, or fandom, describes the community that forms around shared enjoyment of pop culture (Holmes & Jermyn, 2003). Some fans may choose to not only consume the content, but also produce their own creative outputs. This participatory culture gives fans the opportunity to connect to a larger community, to have insider status, and to experience a kind of secular collective effervescence (Holmes & Jermyn, 2003). Parasocial connection, fandom, and the collective experience are three aspects of fan culture included in the LibGuide.

Fandom is one avenue that allows fan-to-fan connection and community building (NBCUniversal, n.d). Fans can feel connected to the show and the cast by summarizing their knowledge and creating parallel media (NBCUniversal, n.d). Example activities include attempting the cocktails or deducing recipes from the show, discussing episodes with other fans, mapping out the restaurant locations in the show, and recapping and breaking down episodes. Fans have also created podcasts to facilitate discussion about reality TV shows. Additionally, fan-to-fan resources such as forums and websites are another way to engage in a virtual environment. Fans can also connect with each other in-person at events such as Bravo's yearly convention, BravoCon (NBCUniversal, n.d)

Parasocial Connection

The idea of 'consumer tribes' originates from marketing and has been leveraged by reality TV to create demand (Rose & Wood, 2005). Reality TV stars carefully cultivate their brand to maintain and grow their audience. They seek to create parasocial relationships, where fans feel an intimate connection (Hartman et al., 2011). The key cast members build relationships on the show, but also use transmedia to build relationships with the audience.

The cast connects to the public through parasocial communication mediums like Twitter and Instagram as part of their duties to the show. Additionally, cast members may also choose to develop content pieces such as podcasts and autobiographies to

further fan engagement. These are not only vehicles for deeper fan connection and band building, but they also become key components to understanding the show and how it fits within the cultural zeitgeist. For example, Stassi Schroeder one of the stars of *Vanderpump Rules* wrote a book entitled, *Next level basic: The definitive basic bitch handbook*. The book serves as a part autobiography and part fan engagement piece (Peitzman, 2019). In the show Schroeder, like her fellow cast members, strives towards aspirational goals beyond serving and bartending (Peitzman, 2019). In several instances, Schroeder is featured writing blog pieces and speaks to her desire to become a writer (Peitzman, 2019).

The feeling of connection to the stars, as well as to other fans, is essential for the docu-soap sub-genre of reality shows (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2017). Fans feel connected to the cast through social media but may also seek a connection with other fans. The stars of docu-drama shows frequently encourage parasocial relationships with fans, with fandom activities occurring on a strong but, informal basis (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2017). Fans may generate discussions and new insights and theories which are at the heart of these experiences. This sense of community is important to maintain the show's popularity (NBCUniversal, n.d).

#Scandoval as a Collective Experience Case Study

In 2023, the show went viral outside of the fanbase. Dubbed #scandoval, one of the main cast members, Tom Sandoval, was caught having a long running affair with another star of the show, Raquel Leviss (Selinger, 2023). The infidelity has drastically raised the profile of the show, with several mainstream media outlets covering the story.

The emergence of the internet and streaming services has caused diversification and fracturing of modern media. As a result, this caused fewer occurrences of singular pop cultural experiences. The finale for M*A*S*H set ratings records that have stood for over 40 years (Lowry, 2023) and will likely continue to stand because there is no longer a single time-based channel. Audiences today can only approach this kind of secular version of Durkheim's 'collective effervescence' through fandom (Šesek & Pusnik, 2014).

Fan Culture in a LibGuide

When viewing the concept of fan culture in an academic context, researchers require a diverse range of resources to understand the parameters of fan culture to better situate their research. Part of our goal was to give enough scaffolding for information seekers to be able to have a starting place to search. To do so, we outlined some library specific resources like search strategies, subject terms, a list of databases, and additional internet resources.

For content pertaining to fan culture, the internet can have more up-to-date information that, which is mostly found outside of just academic settings. Although popular, TikTok content was not included as a resource through this academic lens. This LibGuide was heavily reliant on internet-based resources since it provides a vast platform to find news articles, fan content, memes or other media about the show. The guide avoids instructing how to evaluate any of these resources since evaluation would be up to the user, depending on their needs and context.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Reality-television might seem to be only light entertainment and thus not worthy of serious study, however, there is value in engaging these types of pop culture. Engaging these shows through an academic lens allows students to critically examine pop culture and society. *Vanderpump Rules*' #Scandoval encapsulates the parasocial, fandom connection and collective experience all in one example showing how this show can be treated as a key text for understanding reality TV.

Vanderpump Rules itself has been criticized for its lack of diversity. Many of the shows are predominantly white, cis-gendered and hetero. Bravo is making strides to address this with shows like *Summerhouse: Martha's Vineyard* which stars Black professionals. However, there is potential for further research on diversity in reality TV, which may look at how minorities are treated in reality TV shows, and the challenges they have navigated. We considered our own positionality in the process of creating the LibGuide and included it as an aspect in the guide. This lack of diversity is acknowledged in the "watch-alikes" section of the LibGuide.

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