

Metaconsumption, Convergence and Stylization in the “Real” Teens of *Laguna Beach*

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Abstract:

Despite its name, the shows making up the reality TV genre are well-known for being “real” in only the loosest sense. *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (2004-2006) followed teens through the end of their high school careers, as they attend prom, graduated and prepared to embark on college. The MTV series was constructed as a “real” foil to the popular scripted drama, *The O.C.* Unlike shows that set out a premise – from *The Real World*’s “seven strangers picked to live in a house” to the competition-focused *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *The Bachelor* – *Laguna Beach* portrayed itself as real and, in doing so, blurred the lines of real and fiction.

This article interrogates the role of stylized consumption within the “real” world of *Laguna Beach* to argue the show blurred reality through consumption of relatable cultural products, including *The O.C.* This article argues that consumption within the show was key to making the teens relatable and realistic. From there, the television practices take on a new dimension by allowing routine teen events to be stylized and dramatized yet still read, ultimately, as real.

Keywords: consumption, convergence, *Laguna Beach*, reality television, social construction

Academic inquiry into reality shows has been vast (Andrejevic, 2004; Carpentier & Van Bauwel, 2010; Hetsroni, 2010; Hill, 2005; Kavka, 2012; Kraszewski, 2017; Murray & Ouellette, 2009; Ouellette, 2016; Sender 2012; Slade, Narro & Buchanan, 2014), but inquiry into the shows' "realness" has been less theorized. Largely, researchers and critics have acknowledged that, in spite of the name, the genre is not exactly real (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 16). As such, researchers have turned to understand how these shows mediate personal identities (Turner, 2010, pp. 33-70), including aspects like race, urbanism and wealth (Dominguez, 2015; Kraszewski, 2009; Skeggs, 2009), gender (Gray, 2009), production and consumption (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Cox, 2014; Hearn, 2017), religion (Alsultany, 2016), as well as spaces and place (Lukinbeal & Fletchall, 2013; Kraszewski, 2017). Despite the acknowledgement of the format's mediation, the idea of authenticity of the show remains potent for viewers (Rose & Wood, 2005) and which may have to do with a desire for "authenticity" within consumption (Pine & Gilmore, 2007). However, it is the successful merging of the "real" (i.e. authentic) and "not real" that makes reality TV a powerful cultural form (Carpentier & Van Bauwel, 2010; Rose & Wood, 2005).

This article focuses on the first season of *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (DiSanto, 2004) to interrogate how the show used consumption to effectively blur reality and help to offer a stylized version of teen life. In doing so, the show turns the cultural products and brands consumed within the show into a form of intertexts – an element that can also be consumed by the audience. This can be seen as a form of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) that helps to blur the lines of fact and fiction. *Laguna Beach* is an important point for interrogation because it can be seen as a precursor to several more influential and interrogated series, including the *Real Housewives* franchise (2006-Present), *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012), *My Super Sweet 16* (2005-2008; 2017-Present), *16 and Pregnant* (2009-2014), the *Teen Mom* franchise (2009-present), in addition to having two spin-offs of its own in *The Hills* (2006-2010) and *The City* (2008-2010). Further, the blurring of reality in these series can be connected to larger themes within popular culture at the time that helped promote similar lifestyle elements for consumption.

Reality TV and *Laguna Beach* as docusoap

Genre debates around reality television have existed for some time (Hill, 2005, pp. 41–56), largely due to the fact that there are few characteristics that all reality shows contain (Kavka, 2012, p. 8). At its most broad, reality television "refers to unscripted shows with non-professional actors being observed by cameras in pre-configured environments" (Kavka, 2012, p. 5). This definition purposefully skirts more complex definitions that focus on the critical and cultural practices embedded within the programs (Kavka, 2012, p. 5). In a similar vein, Kraszewski defines "reality television as programs that show real people (not trained and/or unionized) in real locations (not a television studio) functioning in situations that resemble their real lives or in situations that were constructed by television producers" (2017, p. 15). These definitions work toward various ends: Kavka discusses reality television practices as part of a genealogy, while Kraszewski specifically focuses on the dynamics and portrayals of space.

Meanwhile, *Laguna Beach* largely fits into Corner's idea of a "documentary as diversion," specifically in the idea of a docusoap (2002, pp. 260-61). Bruzzi adds that while documentaries historically strived "to represent reality as faithfully as possible" the genre was predicated on the fact that "the production process must be disguised" (2000). Dovey has suggested that the docusoap largely changed how documentaries are presented as a reality TV genre. Instead of attempting to present the reality of "ordinary" people, docusoaps placed "popular

entertainment, first and foremost,” meaning that the characters and their stories are not “socially meaningful” and largely became famous for playing themselves (2000: p. 136). Researchers have explored several aspects of docusoaps including the creation of celebrity (Dhoest, 2004), portrayal of masculinity (Mazzarella, 2008) and race (Dominiguez, 2015).

In many ways, *Laguna Beach* fits as an archetypical teen docusoap, a stylized and edited version of events of ordinary people. The show follows Lauren Conrad and a cast of her friends through the final months of their high school careers. The storylines are hardly groundbreaking – the show largely revolves around the romantic rivalry between Lauren and Kristin for Stephen’s affection – nor can we truly say the characters or topics are socially meaningful. Perhaps the most important aspect of *Laguna Beach* is the show’s explicit emphasis on “reality” (Bindig and Bergstrom, 2013, pp. 174–81). Both the title – *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* – and the show’s opening title screen work to reinforce that the show is intended to be a truthful depiction of the teens’ lives. A simple black screen with white lettering before the start of *Laguna Beach* reads, “The following program was shot over a six month period in the city of Laguna Beach, California. The people, the location and the drama ... are real.”

Kavka’s (2012) genealogy study of the genre pinpoints several pivotal reality shows that helped define the genre, and these include *An American Family* (1973), *The Real World* (1992-Present), *Big Brother* (1999-Present) and *Survivor* (2000-present). In comparison, *Laguna Beach* has largely stayed under the academic radar; one exception is the ideological critique offered by Bindig and Bergstrom (2013) in relation to *The O.C.* However, *Laguna Beach* can be seen as a reinvigoration of the MTV reality show, and unique in that it followed a specific group of people within a specific place. Other popular reality shows at the time were of the *Survivor-Big Brother-Idol* variety, whereas *Laguna Beach* turned the lens completely toward “real” teens, as they went to the prom, applied for college and ultimately moved on from their hometown. The show was unique in that it didn’t have “such self-aware reality TV conventions as cast interviews and confessional-booth revelations” (Susman, 2004). In short, there was an earnestness in the setup and storytelling that helped make the show more realistic. MTV would follow this more realistic approach through other shows like *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* (Guglielmo, 2013) and this vein of storytelling would later be used toward camp ends in *The Real Housewives’* franchises (Dominguez, 2015).

“Real” as Metanarrative and Metaconsumption

While all shows have an overarching premise – *The Bachelor* follows contestants on a search for love and *Survivor* wants to see who can “outwit, outplay and outlast” – a set of shows Hearn (2009) points during the early to mid-2000s had self-contained metanarratives. Shows like *The Joe Schmo Show*, (2003-2004, 2012) a fake reality show for the purposes of fooling one “contestant” into thinking they were one of a reality show and *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé* (2004), a show set up to trick an entire family about upcoming nuptial can be seen as part of promotional culture and a response to consumers getting wise to production qualities within the genre (Hearn, 2009, pp. 166–71). In comparison, *Laguna Beach’s* metanarrative suggests the show is the “real” side of Orange County and juxtaposes itself to the constructed version shown in the popular drama, *The O.C.* (2003-2007). This reference to *The O.C.* helps to link the shows and, in doing so, places consumption of cultural products at the center of the *Laguna Beach’s* reality. Teens within the show reference *The O.C.* in conversation and can be seen watching the show. This intertextuality between *Laguna Beach* and *The O.C.* suggests that the teens of *Laguna Beach* consume the same products as the show’s audience.

Reality – as have been noted for decades – is largely a product of social construction. Following the vein of Berger and Luckmann’s seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), we can see everyday life as reality, even if we can intellectualize and question what is real (p. 23). Largely, this understanding of everyday life as reality comes down to discourses – whether written or visual (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson, 1992) – since we can largely only communicate and express ourselves by predetermined means. Institutions, including the media, are key in helping to construct an objective understanding of reality through the discourses presented and, therefore, help construct the way we label, express and communicate our experiences. Discourses can be changed and altered, but often once they are set in place, their meaning becomes sedimented (Berger & Luckman, 1966, pp. 67–72) and their constructedness forgotten (Del Gandio, 2008, pp. 22-23). Potter reminds us that language and all discourse practices are caught between reflecting and constructing reality since descriptions, including linguistic discourses and various modes of presentation, have previously been constructed (1996, pp. 97–99). Further, every representational act we take embeds an “objective” reality, even when discussing subjective experiences.

The mass media is just one institution that can help construct an objective reality. Again, while there is always a mediation of such presentations, Van Bauwel and Carpentier suggest that reality television helps to blur reality by relocating what and how we understand reality (2010, pp. 3–6). Meanwhile, Andacht (2010) takes a Peircean semiotic approach to argue that reality television programs simultaneously offer up the “real” with the artificial. In this sense, reality TV viewers are not suspending disbelief while watching, but rather all involved are playing with the border between fact and fiction (Andacht, 2010, p. 59). In the case of *Laguna Beach*, viewers are asked to accept that the show is real, even if edited for the camera.

Largely, *Laguna Beach* used consumption of better known cultural products as a means to support its realness and helped people see themselves reflected within the show’s characters. As such, the show led its audience to engage in metaconsumption, since they were watching others consume. This metaconsumption can be seen as a version of convergence culture where the audience is asked to “make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). This can take the place of commercially produced materials, but these connections can also be made by audience members – independent of commercial structures.

Andrejevic notes that reality shows like *The Real World* and *Big Brother* are predicated that viewers will see themselves reflected in the people on the show (2004, p. 122). However, unlike shows that offer diverse casts, *Laguna Beach* featured juniors and seniors in high school, with average to above-average means living in a virtual paradise. At best, the demographic similarities between the audience and the case would be slim, which means there would need to be another means of associating the characters with its target audience. Rose and Wood have proposed that reality television watchers are constantly negotiating a complex set of paradoxes when making sense of shows (2005, pp. 288-91). Some viewers enjoyed seeing exotic – but not *too* exotic destinations – while others saw these shows as aspirational, representative of how they wished they could be. “Audiences find the settings and situation of reality television programming novel enough to be stimulating yet familiar enough to permit and imaginary participation in them by the viewer” (Rose & Wood, 2005, p. 291). The question, then, becomes what the audience can relate to and/or how they see themselves in relation to the characters in the show.

It is here that we can see the convergence of consumption; the same cultural products that are being consumed within the show are also available to the audience. As others have pointed out,

consumerism is largely the dominant logic of contemporary culture (Bauman, 2007; Gabriel, 2013; Zukin, 2005). The things we purchase and consume help create our identities (Belk, 1988), and we see relationships with and through the things we consume (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Muñoz & O’Guinn, 2000). Finally, we’ve long known that cultural systems (McCracken, 1988; 2005; Holt, 2004) – including television (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997) – have given meaning to our consumption and that successful reality shows like *The Real Housewives* promote consumption (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Cox, 2014). In this way, we’re not necessarily looking for authenticity within the things we consume, but using consumption as a means to judge authenticity and, by in large, reality. In the case of *Laguna Beach*, consumption largely fell into one of two categories. The first is consumption of *The O.C.*, which was an overarching touchstone of the series and continually validated the show’s “real”-ness in comparison to the scripted television drama. The second method is consumption of brands and products that would be available to the viewing audience, thereby allowing viewers to see themselves in relation to the cast.

Consuming *The O.C.*

The O.C. was a drama airing on FOX from 2003 through 2007. As Bindig and Bergstrom write in their critical analysis of the show, *The O.C.* can be seen within teen soap opera vein of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Melrose Place* and *Dawson’s Creek*. Despite (or possibly because of) stereotypical presentations of race, gender and sexuality, the show was a ratings hit and, ultimately, influenced both ideological and aesthetic practices across the television landscape (Bindig & Bergstrom, 2013, p. 189-196). Further, *The O.C.*’s depiction of consumerism showed “brands and products as the extension of one’s identity” and presented “products as vehicles for love” (Bindig & Bergstrom, 2013, p. 192). This depiction of consumerism plays into *Laguna Beach* as well, starting from the teens’ ritualistic consumption of *The O.C.* As vividly shown in season one, episode six, “The Best Part of Breaking Up ...,” Lauren asks her friend Lo, “Are you coming over to watch *The O.C.* tonight?” to which Lo responds, “Duh.”

Later, Lauren and Lo gather with Morgan and Jen to watch an episode of *The O.C.* The caption introducing the segment reads, “Lauren’s House ‘*The OC*’ Night”, which helps create the foil between television shows. While the four girls are clearly here to watch the show, viewers of *Laguna Beach* don’t actually hear or see much of the show. However, the show is omnipresent to the teens as the following exchange indicates:

[Indeterminable Voice]: Everyone watches *The O.C.*

Morgan: Do you think so, or do you think it’s just interesting to us because we like, live it in?

Jen: It must be just us.

Lauren: No, whenever you go out of town — whenever you meet other people like when we were in Mammoth we met some guy whose ... I don’t know ... we were talking about home and he’s like ‘You guys live in the *O.C.*?’

Morgan: Yeah, totally.

Lo: And like when Dieter went to Ohio to go look at that school ...

Lauren: Oh, they were stoked on him.

Lo: They were *so* amped on him.

Jen: Cool, it’s like, the new pickup line.

Lo: It’s like, *I’m from the O.C.* [All laughing.] It’s goin’ down, it’s goin’ *down* in the *O.C.*

From this exchange it is implied that *The O.C.* helped place Orange County – and, therefore, Laguna Beach – on the map as an impressive destination to be from. Researchers have noted the mediating power on television shows on destinations (Kraszewski, 2017), including Orange County itself (Lukinbeal & Fletchall, 2013), but the importance of the exchange is giving a form of cultural capital to the *Laguna Beach* teens. Indeed, the fact that the teens realize the cultural capital and seem excited to be able to use it further highlights the symbolic consumption of *The O.C.*

The symbolic power and referential nature of *The O.C.* are spelled out in “A Black & White Affair.” During this first episode of the show, Lauren is showing her “best friend” and love interest Stephen the house her parents are building. The house sits on a hillside and offers an impressive view of the ocean. Stephen is taken by the house. “This thing is so nice,” he tells Lauren. “It reminds me of the houses in *The O.C.*”

In this instance, *The O.C.* stands for a particular lifestyle that is opulent and impressive. The point is driven home as Lauren takes Stephen through the construction site, indicating where her bed will be placed in her new bedroom, in addition to the location of her anticipated two closets. Consumer culture and materialism is not new to the teen genre and *The O.C.* was no outlier in this regard (Bindig & Bergstrom, 2013, pp. 87–93), however, Stephen’s use of “*The O.C.*” as a means of expression and description, implies that both he and Lauren (and, ultimately *Laguna Beach* viewers) have a common perspective on the show. In this way, *The O.C.* has taken on myth-like qualities (Barthes, 1972, pp. 109–59) as the linguistic use of the term implies an understanding between the two characters, as well as, meaningful to the viewers of *Laguna Beach*.

Another exchange between the teens at the watch party helped tie the characters in *Laguna Beach* to the fictional teens of *The O.C.* This happens first as a statement of goods, but later as a narrative structure employed by *Laguna Beach*.

Morgan: They break up in every episode and re-get back together.

Jen: They *are* going out.

Lauren: Oh, in this show! [Pause]

[Indeterminable Voice]: That’s not what you’re talking about.

Lauren: I meant real life.

[Pause, while watching.]

Lo: Oh, I like her Marc Jacobs necklace.

Jen: I like her hair; it’s how you wear it.

Morgan: I have her jeans.

[Something shocking happens on the screen and all react with surprise.]

Morgan: Oh my gosh!

Jen: *Da-yum.*

Lauren: [gasps] Ew, ew, ew! Ew — stop kissing!

This scene brings the “real” teens of *Laguna Beach* together with their counterparts of *The O.C.* As researchers have noted, teen shows and popular culture can help create identities through fashion and consumption (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, pp. 126-56; Warner, 2014, pp.75–79), and Lo and the others are no exception. They relate to the characters’ consumption choices (i.e. “I like her Marc Jacobs necklace.”), while also own some of the same mass-produced goods (“I have her jeans.”). They also wear similar hairstyles as *The O.C.* characters on the

show. Taken together, this exchange can be seen as indicating that the *teens* consume *The O.C.* like the audience of *Laguna Beach*, while also being similar to the fictional characters.

The final point of note in these exchanges comes in the form of the on-again-off-again relationship in *The O.C.*, which is compared to the on-again-off-again relationship between Stephen (whom Lauren is interested in) and Kristin. Morgan's summary of the relationship ("They break up in every episode and re-get back together,") sets up the scene, but can have a double meaning regarding Stephen and Kristin. This is made clear when Lauren is expressing her disgust at *The O.C.* characters and is shown on a split screen where Stephen and Kristin are reconciling over a round of mini-golf. It ends when Stephen tells Kristin, "I'm glad we got back together."

Again, the explicit references and watching of the show work in two ways. First, the teens on *Laguna Beach* can be understood as "real" teens who also watch the popular television shows. However, these teens are also the real-life foils to *The O.C.* characters, as they own the same clothing, wear the same hairstyles and live in houses that could be featured in the scripted show. In this way, the audience is forced to question what is real or authentic, and make sense of an ever-increasing referential chain.

Consuming Everything

Elsewhere, there were several examples of the *Laguna Beach* teens consuming various brands and branded activities. As such, if we see brands as a form of media creation (Kornberger, 2010, pp. 45–47; Lury, 2004, pp. 6–8; Moor, 2007, pp. 5–8), it is possible to see brands as part of the reality television's potential authenticity (Rose & Wood, 2005, pp. 287–94). The line between authenticity and branding has continued to blur, as things we generally deem as "authentic" have increasingly been branded (Banet-Weiser, 2012, pp. 1–14). Likewise, marketers have pushed authentic experiences as a way to connect to consumers (Pine & Gilmore, 2007, pp. 1–8). In this way, the experiences of the *Laguna Beach* interacting with and consuming brands can reflect viewers' experiences to make the show appear more real.

Such is the case with Lauren and Lo's shopping trip to M.A.C. in episode 2, "The Bonfire." Lauren's voiceover at the beginning of the episode explains, "I'm hanging out with my best friend Lo and doing what girls do when things aren't going their way – shop." And the cosmetics company gets a shout-out in the episode after the girls walk into the mall.

Lo: I love this place ... Which way is M.A.C.?

[Exchanging pleasantries]

M.A.C. Employee: So, what brings you into M.A.C.?

Lo: Makeup.

M.A.C. Employee: Makeup, of course, what a silly question.

Lo: I mean, should just get our makeup done like, for tonight?

M.A.C. Employee: Yeah, I'll — we'll just play around and we could do ...

Lo; [Interrupting] Here's the rule! Not too much ...

M.A.C. Employee: [repeating] Not too much.

Lo: Not too heavy.

Lauren: Isn't it the more orangey colors that bring out the blue?

M.A.C. Employee: Yep. You can do bronzes and coppers ...

Lo: I've never had ... let's do something like that! OK.

M.A.C. Employee: Alright.

Lo: But not too sparkly.
 M.A.C. Employee: What is tonight by the way?
 LC: One of our friends is having an open mic night at a coffee pub that he set up. So
 ...
 M.A.C. Employee: Cool.
 Lo: And we're going to sushi and to a friend's house.
 M.A.C. Employee: So, are you going out solo tonight or do you have dates?
 LC: We're always solo.
 M.A.C. Employee: No ball and chain.
 Lo: No — no ball and chain whatsoever!

The scene both name drops a familiar brand name to the viewers, while also showing Lauren and Lo consuming the product and experiencing the brand. The message about shopping for makeup at M.A.C. is clear, but so is the interaction with the M.A.C. employee. Presumably, this is an interaction the viewers of the show have likely had at the store, thereby making the scene more relatable. A similar situation is set up while, Lauren, Lo, Morgan and Christina are getting manicures and pedicures before prom and the camera zooms in on bottles of Maybelline's Wet Shine nail polish.

However, makeup isn't the only place where brand names get highlighted. In one episode, Kristin and Jessica decide to make dinner for themselves and for their boyfriends, Stephen and Deiter. As the girls bring home groceries to cook, the scene plays out as follows:

Kristin: Get out of the kitchen. You guys can't see what we're making.
 Stephen: Do you have a Lean Cuisine?
 Deiter: Organic cake!
 Stephen: Oh my God ...
 Jessica: Hey, shut up.
 Deiter: Fay-tah cheese? [Pause] Fay-tah chese?
 Kristin: [Laughing] I told you they don't even know, they don't even know what it is. Fay-tah, it's feta.
 Deiter: Do you know what this is? It's like, goat.
 Kristin: [To Jessica] Told you. [To everyone] You guys, just get out! You don't even know like anything about cooking. Just get out!
 Deiter: Hey — I'll have my pasta without feta cheese, please.
 Kristin: It doesn't go on the pasta, dumbass!
 Deiter: Hey Stephen?
 Stephen: Yeah?
 Deiter: Do you want to go to Jack in the Box?

While the exchange in joking, Stephen and Dieter drop causal references to Lean Cuisine and Jack in the Box – brand names viewers would be familiar with. This helps to make the situation seem more real since these are jokes viewers (or their boyfriends) might make.

Likewise, brand names get brought up in season one, episode three, "Fast Cars and Fast Women." As the opening narration explains, Kristin is trying to "score" a new car. First, Kristin has a back-and-forth with her brother about how her car, which was previously his car, is "old" and "falling apart" and how she needs to persuade their father to purchase her a new car. A later scene has Kristin announcing that it's a "great day to go car shopping," and she and her

friends visit an Audi dealership. Another brand mention plays out as they leave the dealership empty handed.

Sam: I hate going car shopping.

Kristin: So do I! Now I want a new car so ... and here's the old Isuzu.

Throughout the episode, Kristin's Isuzu SUV was prominently shown even as it broke down while driving back from the Audi dealership. After expressing that she doesn't know what to do, Kristin asks, "Should I call AAA?" And later shouts out the window to a friend, "My car broke down; I called AAA!" Car brands get pulled into the scene as Kristin and her friends block traffic when the SUV is unable to move. Other drivers are honking their horns as traffic slows behind them.

Kristin: Oh my God!

[Friend]: Notice how every person that honks is driving a really nice car?

Kristin: A BMW, Mercedes, Range Rovers ... yeah.

Again, the mention of the brand names – from Audi and Isuzu to AAA – helps to make the scene more relatable and could be something viewers have experienced. The references to and mentions of brands become more important for realistic portrayals as brands infiltrate more areas of our lives (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In the case of makeup and car brands, the fact that the cast of *Laguna Beach* consumes them can work to make the cast more relatable since these brands are known by and possibly even used by the audience. Since there is a very specific demographic of the *Laguna Beach* cast, the brand consumption can be seen as a means to help viewers identify with the cast, which is key for viewers to "participate vicariously" in the show (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 122)

Presenting a Stylized Teen Life

However, keeping in mind that reality shows are always a negotiation of real actions and fiction (Andacht, 2010), we must ask how this possible blurring can be read. This fact is even more important for *Laguna Beach*, since it purported to be "real" and blurred the lines through consumption of media products and other goods. As noted above, *Laguna Beach* stayed away from the confessional style and general "low production value, high emotions, cheap antics" often associated with reality shows (Kavka, 2012, p. 5). Moreover, as Bindig and Bergstrom note, the shows aimed to be more cinematic in an attempt to look more like a film and less like reality television show (2013, pp. 175–176). In practice, this means that the "real" cast of *Laguna Beach* appeared more like they were in *The O.C.* than in relatable, real world settings.

Much of this stylization came in the dramatizing and in other ways amplifying hallmarks of teen culture from after-school jobs to prom. U.S. teen culture usually include the hallmarks that became common among high schoolers brought by the post-World War II economic prosperity. As teens stayed in school longer, they developed traditions, like prom, and a distinctive lifestyle that revolved around schools, friends and dating (Mintz, 1997). Eventually, teens came to be seen as a viable commercial market (Massoni, 2010, pp. 109–40; Palladino, 1996, pp. 104–9), and the demographic has been the target of goods and media ever since (Bindig and Bergstrom, 2013, pp. 11–18; Hine, 1999, pp. 225–48). However, it is the teen rituals – parties, prom, graduation and heading off to college – that *Laguna Beach* featured more prominently and, as such, would be the where the cinematic stylizing would come into contact with blurred the boundary of fiction and reality.

Through the series, there are several examples that highlight unrealistic scenes and scenarios that allow reality to feel stylized or otherwise blurred. A prime example is the opening credits of the show, which played after a brief teaser of each episode. The opening features picturesque shots of Laguna Beach and of each cast member while Hillary Duff's "Come Clean" plays. In short clips, Stephen, Lauren, Kristin, Trey, Christina, Morgan, Christina, Talan and Lo are shown completing a variety of ordinary "teen" activities – from surfing (Stephen) and longboarding (Trey) to dancing (Morgan) and lounging in the pool (Kristin). Each scene shows the cast member in their best light, often while basking in a sunset glow or with some other cinematic editing. The music combined with the imagery of each cast member work to make the presented life of cast member more dramatic and stylish.

Several highly stylized (and likely constructed) scenarios take place throughout the series. In "A Black and White Affair," Lauren and her friends plan a semi-formal gathering of 20 to 30 people at a nearby hotel that the girls rented out for the event. Scenes highlight the hotel management showing the girls the rented suite for \$700 a night, and a spattering of girls getting ready at the hotel and dancing on the bed. The space is likely beyond what most teens would be able to afford – and be invited to; however, *Laguna Beach* makes these seem commonplace.

Another highly stylized event takes place between Morgan and Christina, after Morgan receives a response from her application to Brigham Young University. After an excited conversation where Christina tells Morgan that she got into a school, Morgan says that she received a response from Brigham Young, but she agrees to wait for Christina to open it. The girls then sit on the boardwalk overlooking the beach and the setting sun, as Morgan prepares to open the letter.

Morgan: I am like so nervous because, like, if I don't get in and I worked for this my whole entire high school

Christina: Aren't you so excited to open it?

Morgan: No, I'm nervous, ya know?

Christina: Yeah ...

Morgan: This is my only choice school; it's the only school I applied to. Like, if I don't get in, then I'm still going to go up there. I'm still going to be a part of the scene because I'm *not* staying here that's for sure.

Christina: Yeah ...

Morgan: I'm getting out of the bubble. Like, I want to be around those people; I want to be around people with the same standards and I want to get out of this like ... party scene ... and student kids screwing up on their parent's money, and ...

Christina: OK, open it!

Morgan: OK, ready?

[They shriek.]

Christina: Do it!

Morgan: OK [reading] Dear Morgan, thank you for selecting Brigham Young University for your undergraduate education. Your application has been carefully and thoughtfully reviewed, because of the high number of competitive students applying to BYU, we regret to inform you ... that we are unable to offer you admittance ...

Christina: Oh no ...

Morgan: What am I supposed to do now?

In this scene, *Laguna Beach* takes a memorable rite of passage – getting accepted (or rejected) from your dream college – and heightens the drama and scenery around it. The event would be memorable in its own right; however, the series plays up the event for emotion.

There are several other events that both manage to stylize teen lifestyles and may create unrealistic expectations of teenage consumption. In season one, episode four, “What goes on in Cabo...” the cast goes on a Spring Break trip to Cabo San Lucas, where the teens stay in the Mexican resort overlooking the water. Scenes from the trip show the teens swimming, drinking and overall having a good time, while upbeat Mexican music plays. A similar situation is depicted later in the season during the senior trip when most of the cast goes camping to Santa Catalina Island, a resort destination off the coast of Los Angeles. (Lo is unable to go due to the lack of parental supervision.) The cast takes a decked-out yacht to the island and sets up camp on a hill overlooking the ocean. During the trip, the teens kayak along the rocky coast and later hit golf balls off the cliff and into the ocean. Throughout the episode, Lauren pouts because most of campers are paired off while she is shown as the odd person out. Lauren’s loneliness is compounded by the sad music that plays over most of the picturesque shots.

Other events also exemplify the stylizing and likely unrealistic expectations brought on with the blurring of reality. In season one, episode two, Trey sets up an open mic night for Active Young America at a coffee shop. While Trey organized the event, it appears to be a substantial undertaking for a set of high schoolers, but the setting is matched by the grandiosity of the speakers. One of the organizers, who is not a regular cast member, is Polster, a friend of Trey’s, who compares Active Young American to “Women’s Liberation or Civic Rights.”

The second event, also organized by Trey, is a fashion show that highlights four designers and a plethora of models, one of which shows interest in Stephen. The runway show is accompanied by a rock music soundtrack while the after party places make to a slow rock song. Lauren leaves the after party frustrated, as a slow, sad song plays as she calls a friend to explain her disappointing night. The camera follows her as she drives into the distance.

Finally, prom is also another highly stylized event in the show, especially when the cast members are asking or being asked to the dance. While some of the cast, namely Lauren, had a planned or subdued invite, several other teens went all out for the ask. For example, Stephen constructs an elaborate hoax to surprise Kristin, while Deiter prints a massive sign and hires a limo to ask Jessica to the prom. Morgan gets asked to prom by Gary, who decorated her bedroom and wrote the invitation on her mirror, and Trey places lit votive candles that spelled out “Prom?” for his date.

Other scenes from prom, graduation and the final episode “Dunzo,” where the cast departs for college are equally stylized along more tradition cinematic means. The emotion around graduation is especially heightened as students are shown in their caps and gowns, while listening to student speakers and as Vitamin C’s “Graduation (Friends Forever)” plays over the scene. The song helps put a sanguine spin on a bittersweet event; one that most teens go through at some point in their life. It is here where the blurring of reality is most significant. Most teenagers will not start a “movement,” host an open mic night nor a fashion show, and the prom asks were all over-the-top. However, due to the way consumption helps to make the *Laguna Beach* teens the “real” counterparts to *The O.C.* characters, viewers can be forgiven for mistaking the real and the fake.

Implications

As with all docusoaps, there is a constant tension between what actually happened and what was passed off as “real” for story purposes. And, *Laguna Beach* is no different. In the years since, cast members have come forward to detail some of the ways the show was created (O’Keefe, 2014; Takeda, 2013; Zamora, Watson, Farber & Stryker, 2016). However, the show remains an important moment of reality television, consumption and convergence culture.

Following Kavka’s (2012) idea of reality television genealogy, *Laguna Beach* should be positioned as an important turn. The show helped to create the idea of a teen docsoap, which MTV would later capitalize on in other forms. Spinoff shows like *The Hills* and *The City* are unlikely to have existed without *Laguna Beach*.

Taking a wider view, it’s clear that *Laguna Beach* helped push forward the idea of a “real” show in relation to related fictional portrayals. Most prominently, *The Real Housewives* franchise was created with a similar intertextual association to both *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) and *The O.C.* (Zap2It.com, 2006). *The Real Housewives* franchise has been enormously successful, moving from its initial show based in Orange County to include New York, Atlanta, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., Beverly Hill, Miami and Dallas. As noted elsewhere, consumption is a key point in *The Real Housewives* series (Cox & Proffitt, 2012) – something that gets portrayed as “exciting, fun [and] empowering” (Cox, 2014, p. 79). Consumption here is a status symbol to be desired by all. *Laguna Beach* clearly marks a departure for the way docusoaps present consumption, which was later expanded on by *The Real Housewives*.

In this vein, *Laguna Beach* helped place metaconsumption as an element of convergence culture. If, as others have suggested (Rose & Wood 2005), audiences are always balancing the perceived authenticity of reality shows, then watching others consume similarly can make the portrayals more realistic. This is an intertextual convergence of lived and mediated consumption since the characters and the audience have the ability to engage with the same cultural products. Once these situations and experiences are understood as real, the rest of the show – the characters, the narratives and even the aesthetics – become more believable.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is here where *Laguna Beach*’s legacy is most notable. Not only did the show manage to bridge the divide and turn the “real” reality show into a metanarrative of itself, but the show helped center consumption as an integral component of life. This was especially relevant for teenagers, who are often the start of trends, but also can be extended to other demographic groups as well. The act of consumption – whether it’s of television shows or specific brands – is a condition of modern life and through the intertextuality with lived experiences, “reality shows” seem more real. With the convergence of mediated and experienced consumption, *Laguna Beach* marks a turning point whereby the “real” becomes stylized version of reality, yet one that is ultimately believable and consumable.

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