Will You Accept this Sincerity?
In the Social Media Era, Bachelor Nation Revises Sincerity

By

Karina Schechter

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Approved:

Dr. Scott Juengel, Ph.D.

Dr. Vera Kutzinski, Ph.D.

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I.   *Bachelor Nation Demands a "new" Sincerity*

Sincerity is the lifeblood of ABC's *The Bachelor* franchise. While this assertion may certainly sound ironic in light of the franchise's infamous proclivity for manipulation and misrepresentation, *The Bachelor*'s obsession with sincerity has fueled the show since its premiere in 2002, serving as a fundamental tool in its performance of romance. This sincerity generates the show's affective economy, anchoring viewers in the program's makeshift reality by providing something authentic to invest in amidst the show's fantastical buffet of normalized spectacle,[1] questionable rituals,[2] and counterintuitive norms.[3] The rhetoric of realism undergirding *The Bachelor*'s elaborately-staged entertainment is largely upheld by the sincerity maintained throughout a season. Indeed, whether one believes the show's purpose is to create love stories, ritualize heartbreak, or ignite drama, sincerity is a crucial ingredient in each season's respective success.

The Bachelor franchise presents a paradoxical site for an exploration into sincerity on account of the show's reputation for contrivance and its contestants' bald pursuit of fame (Weber 93; Maja et al. 18). However, while the broad culture of the show often makes a virtue of masking one's true intentions rather than owning up to the pretense and disingenuousness, these factors do not wholly obstruct the potential for sincerity to structure value on the show. But they may very well impede a reconciliation between the franchise's definition of sincerity and the version fans desire: an old and a new sincerity, respectively. The so-called "New Sincerity" represents "an ethos that encourages people's true selves, no matter how vulnerable that self may

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[1] "Normalized spectacle" e.g. contestants exiting the limo on "night one" wearing full-on animal costumes.
[2] "Questionable rituals" e.g. the tradition of "Fantasy Suites," wherein the lead has the opportunity to spend a night with each of their final three contestants.
[3] "Counterintuitive norms" e.g. the system of polyamory the show is founded upon, which directly foils the ideological conservatism the franchise otherwise caters to.

be," and builds upon postmodern tactics to "deploy ironic devices towards sincere ends" (Hart 3; Dunne 14). Note that while The New Sincerity responds to a postmodern aversion to what David Foster Wallace dubs the "sentimental and naïve and goo-prone," *The Bachelor* fandom's "new" sincerity, in conversation with Wallace's, responds to the franchise's tendencies to evade "impure" sincerity—that is to say, sincerity not explicitly aligned with the franchise's nostalgic, traditional, "old" standard that has been ingrained in its DNA since inception.

In order for *The Bachelor* franchise to deliver on its romantic promise, producers must cultivate authentic sincerity in an inauthentic environment. Over a two-month timespan, a conventionally desirable "lead" (a man on *The Bachelor*, a woman on *The Bachelorette*) incrementally moves toward a romantic relationship by rejecting two dozen spousal wannabes through a glorified process of elimination, ultimately culminating in a marriage proposal between the lead and their most promising candidate. To offset its gameshow premise, the franchise hyper-fixates on an outmoded, romantic form of sincerity, developing its own lexicon to lend particular credence and added weight to moments of sincerity in the hope these will obscure the gimmick itself. *Bachelorisms* are the franchise's trademark array of (often producer-fed) lines, employed on an episodic basis in an effort to bolster the casts' perceived sincerity. These include phrases such as "follow my heart," "open and honest," "[lead's name] knows my heart," "speaking my truth," "the one," and of course, the show's sincerity staple, "here for the right reasons" (Showler 9; Kaufman 196). The franchise's take on the ever-evolving concept of sincerity is one which habitually insists upon itself, harnessed more so as a rhetorical tool than an affective moral state. Per Patricia Spacks' investigation into sources of sincerity in poetry, it would appear *The Bachelor*, rather fittingly, shares much with Romantics:

> [I]n an obvious survival from Romantic tradition, *poets use "sincerity" itself as a rhetorical device*, insisting on the honesty of their direct self-revelation. The confessional poetry of perversity and madness *invites belief in the poet's sincerity but does not necessarily create it*. (Spacks 592; emphasis added)

Accordingly, in producing a rhetoric designed to "invite belief," *The Bachelor* stops short of "necessarily creating" sincerity—or, at the very least, a contemporarily accessible form of it (Fry). By prioritizing *telling* over *showing,* the show makes an "undergraduate" error and resultingly "falls into clichés [and] sounds like the bad movie," reaching an eventual affect deemed "perplexingly insincere" (Spacks 592). While the franchise seeks to capitalize on the nostalgic power of old romantic sincerities, this is insufficient to present-day audiences following decades of cultural ironization, a widespread awareness of the franchise's multi-tiered absurdity, and the show's near-constant undercutting of the very "sincerity" it peddles.

The Bachelor's "old sincerity" is posited via a hopeless romantic ideology, wherein the primary measure for a cast member's sincerity is whether they are solely there "for the right reasons"—namely, to find love and get engaged. In recent years, however, the concept of going on *The Bachelor* entirely "for the right reasons" has matured from fairly unlikely to nearly inconceivable (Sorren). The rise of social media influencing in the mid-2010s brought with it an incredible incentive to get on *The Bachelor*: followers.[4] Far surpassing the Warholian "fifteen minutes of fame" once anticipated from an appearance on reality TV (RTV), the social media takeover bolstered financial and celebrity incentives for *Bachelor* contestants (and alumni) tenfold. With the promise of $5000 in exchange for one sponsored Instagram post, broadcasting

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[4] While digital influencer marketing can be traced back to just before 2010, influencer campaigns skyrocketed year-by-year from 2015 onwards, cementing the marketing strategy as "the fastest growing trend in terms of communication with customers" (Wielki).

your love life on national television might suddenly appear enticing (Pasarow). So enticing, in fact, that one might go on the show solely for fame; thereupon throwing into question the "right reasons" (or, according to the franchise, the sincerity) of each and every individual on-screen.

But this social media ecology is altering the course of *Bachelor* sincerity in far greater ways than merely providing contestants additional "*wrong* reasons" to come on the show. Indeed, the Age of Instagram's unfurling of connectivity—in the case of the franchise, both between viewer and contestant, and viewer and viewer—is currently reshaping the lens through which *The Bachelor* is watched. Where hate-watching once abounded, a new sense of attachment and accountability is sprouting up in online communities. By following contestants on social media, viewers become privy to the personality and quirks the production glazes over in favor of highlighting drama, "right reasons" witch hunting, and the dutiful repetition of the same tired, trite lines the show believes project true feeling.

The fanbase, now employing social media as a platform for analysis and critique, air out grievances on their platform of choice: Facebook has more *Bachelor* groups than the site permits me to count; the show trends on Twitter every Monday night; the subreddit (r/thebachelor) boasts 170k subscribers. Social media has effectively become an audience megaphone, enabling fans to digitally congregate, share ideas, and institute change – a process Henry Jenkins terms "participatory culture." And indeed, within the past year (2020), the *Bachelor* fandom spearheaded several pivotal changes to the franchise via audience mobilization. Such is how Bachelor Nation inaugurated its first Black *Bachelor*, Matt James (Season 25, 2021), and

dethroned the show's host, Chris Harrison, for defending a contestant's past racism—the insurmountable media backlash rendered the fandom's 40,000+ signature petitions unignorable.[5]

Beyond hosting platforms for fan interaction, social media narrows the divide between viewer and contestant, giving way for a sizable source of ironic detachment to be eliminated from—or perhaps shifted toward the periphery of—the viewing process. Trolls aside, fans for whom the show was once more distant may embrace the opportunity for a closer glimpse into casts members' lives, which creates even greater opportunity for "imagined intimacy or, the more discipline-specific term, 'parasocial interaction,'" an extensively researched and well-proven phenomenon where regular viewers come to feel as though familiar media personalities are their friends (Greenwood and Long 278). It seems fair to say, then, that parasocial interactions facilitated by this social media feedback loop lend themselves to a more generous, invested viewing on account of greater attachments. This, along with clear and recurring proof of the fanbase's power to change the show, leaves viewers feeling a sense of responsibility—both to the contestants misrepresented by their edits, *and* on a greater social scale. After all, social media is a tried and proven site for activism, and when a franchise is as overtly white, heteronormative, classist, and misogynistic as *The Bachelor*, its fundamentally conservative and traditionalist ethos has received widespread and ever-growing criticism.[6]

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[5] On *The Bachelor*'s 25th season, Matt James (the first Black Bachelor) gave his final rose to Rachael Kirkconnell (white). Mid-season, evidence of Kirkconnell's past racist behaviors surfaced online, and host Chris Harrison defended her—while being interviewed by Rachel Lindsay (the first Black *Bachelorette)*, whom he repeatedly talked over and dismissed. To read more, I recommend *NBC News'* article, "'The Bachelor' host Chris Harrison speaks out after stepping aside amid racism controversy," and Rachel Lindsay's own piece on the matter, "Rachel Lindsay Has No Roses Left to Burn" on *Vulture*.

[6] Following ex-host Chris Harrison's interview where he exposed himself as a racist, the moderators of Reddit's *Bachelor* forum called for a boycott of that week's episode: "Like many of you, we were disgusted by Chris Harrison's *Extra* interview earlier this week and condemn his racism. We've signed the petition to have him removed from the show, but we also want to put our money where our mouths are in terms of supporting the show until our concerns as a fanbase are addressed."

The age of connectivity and its impulse toward attachments and activism have fertilized the grounds for Bachelor Nation—a catch-all term for the franchise's fanbase—to espouse a new ethic of care. Though still largely grounded in irony on account of *The Bachelor*'s very gamified premise, this shift toward care begets a craving for a more personalized, representative sincerity that expands the realm of the "old" iteration the franchise upholds. To accommodate social media's various impacts, Bachelor Nation's "new" sincerity builds upon and extends the pre-existing ideologies of The New Sincerity movement, which places utmost value on "how an author or text navigates innumerable layers of artifice and performativity in order to pass along an earnest message, idea, feeling, or value" (Balliro 1). This "new" sincerity takes itself less seriously than the "old" while simultaneously holding itself to a higher bar of social accountability. To elicit viewerly affect, the "new" fixates on portraying humanity in all its forms, emphasizing plurality, while the "old" capitalizes on symbolic rituals and circumscribed avowals of emotion. Pivotally, the "new" sincerity I posit stems from a desire to humanize and represent sincerely; it must therefore develop to include sincerity in representation, particularly as it pertains to the casting and on-screen treatment of contestants. That is to say, the sense of social obligation tied to social media renders sincerity a critical undertaking—one in which the franchise's "purposefully blind" traditionalist fantasy is deemed categorically insincere (Stephens 91). As such, Bachelor Nation is calling for a reestablishment in the franchise's ethos of sincerity *and* its aesthetic sincerity in efforts to overcome the social fragmentations it has naturalized since its onset. Sincerity thus reveals its "political" dimension.

II.   *The Tortured Logic Underlying* **Bachelor** *"Sincerity"*

Before launching my investigations into the clashing conditions of sincerity within franchise and fanbase, respectively, I want to contextualize the unique environmental conditions in which this affect is expected to blossom. In *The Bachelor*'s pilot episode (2002), the franchise's erstwhile host, Chris Harrison, sternly informs contestants and viewers alike: "This is not an ordinary relationship show—the stakes are considerably higher here. This is about something real. Something permanent. You know, the whole 'till death do you part' thing?" The show introduces itself as an experience of incredible romantic austerity, preparing contestants for a high-stakes, high-intensity journey focused exclusively on one thing: marriage. After staking this claim, the show proceeds to gamify relationships in accordance with pre-existing production deadlines, squeezing its allegedly prioritized relationship-building into a highly produced, oftentimes humiliating, emotionally ruthless formula.

The formula, which has remained unchanged throughout the show's nineteen years on air, forces contestants into thoroughly competitive and exceedingly vulnerable situations. Some constants of this formula include: group dates (numerous contestants on a collective date with the lead), cocktail parties (weekly opportunities to fight other contestants for private time with the lead), and rose ceremonies (a deceitfully pretty title for eliminations). Here, I would be remiss not to elaborate upon some of the show's more ludicrous group dates: on *The Bachelor* Season 25, the women were tasked with writing erotica featuring themselves and the lead – and then required to read these pornographic scenes out loud, in front of all the other women on the date; on *The Bachelorette* Season 13's "Irish Wake Date," the lead laid in a coffin while the men took turns eulogizing her; most brutally of all, on *The Bachelorette* Season 7, the men had to write "roasts" about someone on the show—and while most roasted fellow contestants, several took

digs at the Bachelorette's physical appearance, referencing her "flat-chestedness" and other vulgarities.

By enforcing such an austere tone, then turning around and putting contestants in ridiculous and often demeaning situations, the show communicates that a willful suspension of disbelief and sense of ironic detachment is okay for everyone – *except* the cast, from whom it demands "wholesale participation, a two-heeled jump motored by faith, not reason" (Showler 149). It comes as no surprise, then, that the franchise has long stood on wobbly affective footing, with one planted squarely in sincerity and the other firm in irony, or worse. Evidently, the bubble in which *The Bachelor* operates is aesthetically, functionally, and ethically distinct from that of contemporary American society (or any society, at that). In order for its alternate reality to resonate—by which I mean, go beyond surface-level entertainment and inspire invested viewer engagement—it relies on the construction of sincere relationships between its cast.

Though watching the show through a detached lens may certainly feel more natural to viewers on account of its outlandish premise, problematic relationship stunts, and our long-ingrained cultural inclination toward irony, the franchise insists upon its sincerity so intently that it feels crucial to dissect. This should begin with understanding sincerity through the eyes of the franchise. Bearing in mind the standard contestants are held to per Harrison's homily from the pilot episode, it is immediately clear that the cast is expected to come in with marriage, first and foremost, on their mind. For all the show's commotion over marriage, *The Bachelor* can boast exactly **one** couple still together and married and *The Bachelorette* a total of three, but the franchise hangs tight to this condition.[7] Its obsessive drilling of "the right reasons," which

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[7] Note: There are two Bachelors who changed their minds after getting engaged to their final pick in the finale. Both these men proceeded to marry their semifinalist instead—and both are still together and had kids. Further, there *were* four successful *Bachelorette* pairings, but one is in the process of divorcing.

translates to "the earnest desire to find one's soul mate," ties the sincerity of a contestant to the apparent genuineness of their devotion to the process (Cloud 419). Marriage does a lot of work here, both as the means and ends of the program's logic. Ironic now on several levels, *The Bachelor* demands a strain of sincerity that it affords a singular marker to—and a highly subjective, questionable one, at that—"the right reasons."

To the franchise, sincerity is equivalent to romantic tunnel vision, and key production decisions are made in accordance to this model. In 2016, for example, network executives made the fanbase-shattering decision to cast the polarizing Nick Viall, rather than fan favorite Luke Pell, as their 21st Bachelor. In an interview with Entertainment Tonight, Chris Harrison revealed Pell was dropped from the running on counts of lacking sincerity:

> 'At the end of the day, sincerity is huge to us. … Who's ready to find love and go on this journey, and who might have ulterior motives and might want to go in a different business direction with all this? […] It's not an indictment on Luke that he's not the Bachelor […] We can just only have one person and, at the end of the day, it's very important for us to have someone who is sincere. Who is sincerely going to go through this and, I hate to be cliché, for the right reasons try to find love?' (Zima)

Despite controversy, the network selected Nick—a "multi-dimensional villain" who the network openly acknowledged "may not have been every fan's first pick"—for the Bachelorship (Garber; Nordyke). Harrison justified the choice by citing that Nick went on two separate seasons of *The Bachelorette* and fell in love both times, only to land in second place twice, as evidence of his sincerity and affective merit.[8] Per Harrison: "It just got down to that final question of: Who is the

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[8] Per the show's sadistic setup, the "second place" contestant proposes at the engagement site prior to knowing whether or not they are the last remaining candidate. As such, Nick proposed twice and was rejected twice. For additional context regarding Nick Viall's arc throughout the franchise, his edits each season, and his slut-shaming

most deserving? Who is the most sincere? […] Viall has proven that he takes the show and his search for love seriously." Harrison's quotes make the franchise's stance on the topic unequivocally clear: the greater an individual's motivation for love, the greater their sincerity (and vice versa).

The franchise harps on intentionality as grounds for sincerity so extensively that audiences, seeing through this overcompensation, demand more. Of course, most fans understand the absurdity inherent to the franchise's "right reasons" requirement. Setting aside the unimpressive success rate of *Bachelor* couples, fostering a romantic relationship within the show's suboptimal conditions is a naïve expectation. A season is filmed in under two months, the lead is polyamorous for the duration of it, and nearly all interactions are mediated by production's invisible hand. The franchise's correlation of sincerity with "the right reasons" grows additionally confounding upon considering that contestants typically do not even know who the lead is until days before filming begins. To reiterate: the franchise expects people to apply for the show with the singular intention of finding love, *without even knowing who it is with*, or risk accusations of insincerity (Ringo 3:50). Significantly, this highlights how an affective disposition to love precedes the actual social-romantic conditions structuring the contest; feeling is prioritized before it has an object.

A painfully striking example of the very rational, real-world logic the franchise demands its contestants eschew was manifest on Chris Soules' run as Bachelor (Season 19). At the onset of his season, Soules—a (multimillionaire) farmer from Arlington, Iowa (population: 400)—made one thing unequivocally clear: he expected his bride to live there with him (Yahr). Arlington, of course, became a major plot point, especially when Soules disclosed there are no jobs there and

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scandal during *The Bachelorette* Season 10's "After the Final Rose" special, I recommend Megan Garber's article "The Bachelor Gives Nick the Redemption Edit" on *The Atlantic*.

the town's single bar closed because "technology has replaced people" (Stevenson). Of course, the show ended up taking the women to Arlington, and none of them were impressed. This trip further amplified tensions between contestants: "any slight Arlington diss could be interpreted as 'not being there for Chris,'" (in other words, being there for the "wrong reasons"), and lead to "criticism and punishment" (Stevenson and Cloud 419). The show assumes a disposition to love before one even knows the conditions of attraction.

Allow me to clarify a few more of the circumstances *The Bachelor* franchise demands its cast adhere to for the opportunity to compete against thirty other people in the hopes of finding love with a stranger. Through a contestant's lifespan on the show, they are not permitted access to the outside world: cellphones, computers, iPods, magazines, and books, are taken the day they arrive. Leslie Hughes, a contestant on Season 17, told The Daily Mail: "The only things I was allowed to keep were my journal and my Bible. We have nothing. We are completely cut off from the world. We have to talk to each other—we have nothing else to do." Further, Rose Ceremonies last until three or four in the morning, and producers exploit this exhaustion (and, often, drunkenness) in "confessionals" (one-on-one producer-led interviews) to acquire compromising content (Eidell; Kaufman 149). To top it off, contestant contracts authorize production "the right to change, add to, take from, edit, translate, reformat [...] in any manner Producer may determine in its sole discretion," and "actions and the actions of others displayed in the Series may be disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing or of an otherwise unfavorable nature and may expose me to public ridicule, humiliation, or condemnation" (Melas). As translated by entertainment lawyers, the contract means: "I can basically take your image and do whatever I want with it and I own it and you have no recourse" (ibid). Brad Isenberg, a former *Bachelor* production coordinator, openly admits the franchise's absolute control over contestant

lives: "The cast is told what to do all of the time. You're on a schedule: our schedule. Even if there's nothing happening, it's scheduled. It's part of being controlled" (Kaufman 118).

Upon encountering a show that brands itself as a romance fantasy of epic proportions— complete with fireworks, international traveling, diamond rings, limos, and a slew of other luxurious imagery, including the contestants themselves—viewerly expectations are primed for fairy tale romance. Exquisite circumstances should lend themselves to exquisite feelings, but the fairy tale affect of *The Bachelor* franchise wears off rapidly as production's transparency grows ever more apparent in its intentional nudge toward provocative expressivism. Conspicuously detectable in producer-motivated maxims, some of the most sincerity-coded Bachelorisms include: "This is the hardest decision I've ever had to make"—a staple at Rose Ceremonies delivered by the lead to stress the situation's intense emotionality; "I'm falling for you"/"I'm falling in love"/"I'm in love with you"—the franchise follows a clear lineage of emotional progression, usually with "love" being relayed in this order; and of course, "the right reasons"— one's chief claim to sincerity, often weaponized against other contestants. These *Bachelor* clichés are, unsurprisingly, in large part producer-guided; production maximizes the occurrences of these sentiments to emphasize high-stakes sentimentality and the sincerity of a contestant (Kaufman 196).

The inorganic methods through which these Bachelorisms spring is laid out in Amy Kaufman's exhaustive exposé, *Bachelor Nation: Inside the World of America's Favorite Guilty Pleasure,* in which she interviewed dozens of *Bachelor* franchise alumni, producers, and editors, and compiled her findings in what became this *New York Times* bestseller. The book includes extensive insights into producer tactics used to encourage, trick, and even force contestants into making grandiose emotional statements intended to elicit and exude deep emotion. Among these

were: trapping contestants in the interview room for hours on end, guilt tripping them, telling them they will be eliminated if they don't profess their feelings soon enough, and "emotional leveraging" where, according to Brooks Forester (*The Bachelorette*, Season 9), "[Producers would] get me to talk about something from my childhood, for example, or something really personal about a family member. Evoke this emotion out of you and then try to attach that to what's happening to the world of *The Bachelor*" (Kaufman 144-166). If that doesn't work, there's always "franken-biting" to fall back on—crafty sound editing that splices together audio from different sound bites to create new meanings (Kaufman 160).

The New Yorker asks: "How sincere is a show that professes to be about true emotions while manipulating its participants?" Dubbing anything about *The Bachelor* "sincere" feels like such a stretch that the claim itself seems frankenbitten. However, the franchise's investments in sincerity do not need to be sincere themselves to create the affect on-screen; that is entirely up to the conversations, relationships, and interactions they air. The sincerity discordance that presently dominates Bachelor Nation does not come down to the show's hypocrisies; the fandom is largely aware of those. The issue stems from diverging definitions of sincerity and how either side wants to see it expressed.

III.   *Situating and Deconstructing* **The Bachelor***'s "old" Sincerity*

As tends to be the case with critical terms sought to "refer to an author's state of mind," *sincerity* has long faced a revolving door of inconclusive redefinitions (Spacks 591). Both consciously and subconsciously equipped as a standard for judgment, sincerity duly finds itself prone to periodic critical (and personal) reinterpretations in the face of revised cultural attitudes and new modes of expression. Sincerity, in consequence, varies by context, and "cannot be applied to a person without regard to his cultural circumstances" (Trilling 2). It should come as no surprise, then, that the connotations surrounding contemporary understandings of "sincerity" have evolved broadly from the label's initial popularization in the eighteenth century, at which point its implications "were predominantly religious: dictionary examples show that the word was used to affirm purity of belief, genuine doctrine, freedom from theological duplicity" (Ball 1).   In other words, sincerity is historical and socially-constructed at its core.

While the term "sincerity" was only coined in the Victorian era, its ideology is widely understood to be rooted in Romantic creative theory (Barton). Entering the literary sphere, the concept arose with William Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs* (1810), at which point it lingered closely to its "pure" moral ancestry (Ball 1). Developing alongside Romanticism, the ideology of sincerity grew tethered to notions of "individual subjectivity," with its most influential legacy stemming from a profound captivation in "intense inner experience" – vocalized most recognizably by Wordsworth himself as, "The spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" (Ball 2). Already, sincerity provokes problems in critical assessments: can *spontaneity* exist, sincerely, if it is an established expectation of the model? Wordsworth qualifies his prior statement, carefully adding: "It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." This clarification is crucial as it insinuates the Romantics did, in fact, understand the psychological

wellspring of poetry as an ontologically discernable—albeit only tacitly delineated—facet of its "ultimate embodiment in aesthetic form" (Damrosch 638). The poetry of Romantic sincerity therefore wittingly results in a "deliberately artificial" product, distinguished rather conspicuously by "the tendency of metre to divest language, in a certain degree, of its reality" (Damrosch 638 and Stillinger 458).

To eighteenth-century scholar Jerome McGann, the legitimacy of a sincerity bound in crafted spontaneity warrants questioning. McGann considers Romantic claims of "spontaneity and artlessness" mere "illusions" on account of their masking a rhetoric: "Romantic sincerity only *presents itself* as unpremeditated verse; in fact it involves a rhetoric, and contractual bonds with its audiences" (McGann 117). Explaining the strategy further, he asserts, "The rhetoric of sincerity in Romanticism is a rhetoric of displacement": audiences are not directly addressed, discourse is "overheard," and an "illusion of freedom" is disingenuously fostered as though "the reader [is] not being placed under the power of the writer's rhetoric, as if the writer were relatively indifferent to the reader's presence and intent only on communing with his own soul" (McGann 117). Should one subscribe to McGann's ironized and skeptical take on Romantic sincerity as pseudo-unmediated with intentional "disregard" to audience, they might characterize Romantic sincerity as self-indulgent, perhaps even an inadvertent sleight of hand.

Does an emotionally-charged rhetorical masquerade held in the name of performing sincerity ring any bells? *The Bachelor*, though unscripted, maintains a rhetoric of sincerity in some ways aligned with the Romantics': stylized in nature yet presented as unplanned, all the while feigning indifference toward their respective audiences, both the Romantic ideology and the franchise's "old" sincerity fundamentally rely on rhetoric to cloak the performance underpinning their claims to it. I draw these comparisons cautiously, however, with awareness that *Bachelor*

producers actively exploit the show's rhetoric—particularly in their deliberate prompting of Wordsworthian "spontaneous overflow[s] of powerful feeling"—as a means to heighten emotionality and craft the resulting affect in the franchise's image. *The Bachelor*'s "old" sincerity has found itself miles astray from the "purity" and "absence of corruption or contamination" maintained by Romantic ideology (Balliro 10). However, the franchise continues using Romantic sincerity as a prototype for its affective attempts, rendering this already-outdated form of the term all the more inaccessible.

Dana Cloud's exploration into audience investment and detachment in *The Bachelor* sources the franchise's "obsessive expression of one's feelings"—clearly influenced by Romantic sincerity—as a means for viewers and cast members alike to determine "the credibility of the contestant" (420). The irony intrinsic to this, she points out, is in its resultant contest of "who can best perform [their] sincerity" (419). This performance, by the "old" sincerity's standard, is measured almost entirely by a contestant's devotion to finding love on the show; that is to say, being there for the ever-iconic "right reasons." Interestingly, much like *The Bachelor* quantifies sincerity through the gauging of "right reasonness" the Romantics appraised poetic sincerity in a comparable manner. To Romantics, poetic credence "gains value from being a genuine, true expression of feeling—from being *sincere*" as opposed to being "artful or contrived" (Balliro 4 and Abrams 319). Naturally, *The Bachelor* is both artful *and* contrived, but its distance from real life—and viewers' awareness of said distance—allows room for the Romantic conceptualizations of sincere expressivism to be conveyed. This would involve airing genuine moments of relationship formation, true and unmediated expression of feelings, and detectable earnestness in cast member confessionals.

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The way the franchise elects to portray these interpersonal dynamics and confessionals sheds light on its communicative priorities. Rather than utilize these opportunities to showcase the cast "steadfastly [striving] to sincerely express himself or herself spontaneously and genuinely," like "the 'good' [Romantic] poet" would, the show steers its representation of the cast towards what is explicitly defined as "'bad' [Romantic] poetry" opting instead to highlight "the simulated or conventional expression of feeling" (Balliro 4). Rather than airing spontaneous and realistic conversations, the show devotes most of its airtime to cast members echoing similar sentiments touting their obsession with finding love. While this has obviously not prevented viewers from tuning in, it has certainly imposed limitations on genuine investment, as Reddit user throwawayjoeyboots says:

> I will never ever understand why the producers are so scared to pivot from the cliché lines and recycled conversations each and every season. People love bloopers and normal off the cuff conversations. I'm so tired of the "rIgHt reAsOns" and "fIndiNg lOve" conversations.

Fans responding to the comment above unanimously concurred, saying things like: "The show would be so much better if they took themselves less seriously," and, "Agree, they cast interesting people and then turn them so boring in editing" (u/invadepoland; u/b2aic). The resounding sentiment is clear: in lieu of showcasing genuine, spontaneous interactions, *The Bachelor* produces copy-paste contestants and strips them of personality, using them as pawns to progress the show in accordance to its formulaic demands

Essentially portending *The Bachelor*'s sham-sincerity, the Romantics' "bad poetry" aptly describes the franchise's rhetoric, which consists of identical versions of superficially deep proclamations (purposed to emphasize one's "right reasonness") orchestrated to yield great

affective impact. In fact, a rhetorical analysis conducted on *The Bachelor* found "a total of 68 utterances of romantic rhetoric" (including "falling in love," "happily ever after," "our journey," "dream come true," etc.) throughout Season 15, with each episode containing instances of it (Hernandez 67). The franchise's apparently timeless insistence upon this self-serving rhetoric—to a point in which Bachelor Nation dubs these predictable lines *Bachelorisms*—inevitably situates its style of expressivism far astray from the original Romantic principles. It appears that in trying to manufacture Wordworth's passionate overflow of emotion, the show utterly negates the very sincerity is seeks to evoke.

Indeed, the "tried and true" nature of these Bachelorisms renders them *impure* and *contaminated*, Romantically-speaking (Balliro 10). These rehearsed lines, though more believable in the show's earlier seasons given their novelty, have been so oft-repeated that they've turned into parodies of themselves, emanating a whiff of popular therapy-speak (Schechet). While it stands to reason that viewers yearn for community and speaking *The Bachelor*'s private "language" attaches them to one—a Google search for "*The Bachelor* dictionary" will direct you to plenty of glossaries explaining Bachelorisms and the show's ritual oddities—viewers are increasingly demanding more from the franchise. The static nature of the show's rhetoric calls ever-growing attention to itself when considered alongside the U.S.'s progressing culture, the rapid acceleration of social media, and an increasingly connected (not to mention vocal) fanbase (Gonzalez).

Clear rhetorical misfires aside, *The Bachelor*'s "old" sincerity draws upon the Romantic form in yet another key sense: both place exceptional emphasis on "emotional truth" and "individual subjectivity" (Barton). As the Romantic era bled into the Victorian and its ideologies became articulated, sincerity's definition experienced yet another dilation courtesy of Romantic writer

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Thomas Carlyle (Barton and Balliro 4). Still employing sincerity through its Romantic ideals, Carlyle's 1840 "Lectures on Heroes" used the term as an indicator of *truth*: "the eye that flashes direct into the heart of things and sees the truth of them […] is what I call sincerity of vision; the test of a sincere heart" (*Lecture II)*. Carlyle's interpretation of sincerity further personalized understandings of "emotional truth" by grounding it in interiority, coming to be understood as "a poet speaking *their* truth" (Balliro 4; emphasis added). This phrasing recalls a previously mentioned Bachelorism, "Speaking my truth." In this case, *The Bachelor*'s individual-oriented positioning clearly reflects Romantic priorities of truth and individuality; it is in this derivative that *The Bachelor* locates its primary tool for communicating sincerity: "not empirical truth but *affective fidelity* to women's expectations about how love *feels*" (Cloud 418).

Capitalizing on viewers' affinity for personal affectations, the show often finds itself compared to the eighteenth-century romance novel, where "believable emotions" are of utmost importance to the "identification of viewers with characters" (Cloud 418). While this logic should line up with nineteenth century writers' conceptualization of "my truth" as a version of "reflecting how they really feel," it has suffered a recent perversion (Balliro 4). See, while the term's reappropriation on *The Bachelor* theoretically means the same thing, it is not deployed toward the same purpose. The novel and entirely disparate connotation "my truth" has developed no longer carries the Romantic ideals of reflecting individual perceptions of reality; nor does it pertain to demonstrating identifiable emotions. It has instead been revealed as a tactic to shroud insincerity, time and time again revealing itself to be a pretense, and therefore—like most of the franchise's grasps for sincerity—affectively counterproductive.

Take, for example, the battle of "my truths" dominating the first half of *The Bachelor* Season 15, originally catalyzed by Sydney Hightower accusing Alayah Benavidez of being "fake," citing

that she "turns it on" for the cameras. Likely motivated by the producers, Sydney approached the

Bachelor, Peter Weber, regarding Alayah's potentially being there "for the wrong reasons." Peter

handled this affair by asking every other contestant what they think about Alayah, who was

clearly (to both contestants and viewers alike) a front-runner. It was only when one of his other

front-runners, Victoria P., suggested Alayah lied to get on the show, that Alayah was

eliminated.[9] But she returned the following episode to "set the story straight." Alayah told Peter

she felt "blindsided" by Victoria P.'s assertion given their incredibly close friendship—she went

on to reveal the two knew each other prior to the show from the Miss USA pageant, and even

took a trip to Vegas together. Peter, taking this information to Victoria P., demanded the truth,

but she completely countered Alayah's story, saying, "I probably had spent, maybe, like

collectively three hours with her." When he inquired about the Vegas trip, Victoria P. suddenly

devolved into a blubbering, nonsensical mess, confirming they went to Vegas together yet still

denying their history, attempting to salvage the story with *her* truth: "I'm telling you that my

truth is the truth, and I have been so honest with you, and so vulnerable with you, and the most

difficult parts of me, Peter. […] Like I gave you my whole heart, every bit of it."

In a remarkably anticlimactic confrontation, Alayah addressed Victoria P. about her

misrepresentation of their friendship, but the latter held firm, incessantly reiterating that she was

only "speaking [her] truth." Because the season aired in 2020 with Instagram in full force,

Bachelor Nation easily uncovered a less subjective version of this truth: photographic evidence.

Instagram allowed fans to unearth myriad images documenting the women's friendship,

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[9] Peter had numerous front-runners, as referenced in the anecdote above, as well as in how his season ended… or, rather, how it just kept going. **Spoiler:** when his *clearest* front-runner, Madi, quit the show at Final 2, Peter got engaged to Hannah Ann in what was widely recognized as a proposal-by-default. A month later, they split up. Then, Peter briefly got back into contact with Madi. After that didn't work out, he entered a year-long relationship with Kelley, who he'd eliminated at the Final 5. For more on Peter's never-ending season: https://www.vox.com/2020/3/10/21152628/the-bachelor-season-finale-peter-weber-madison-hannah-ann.

including photos on Alayah's profile featuring Victoria P. as far back as 2018, along with regular complimentary comments from Victoria P. on Alayah's posts (Reality Steve). Further evidence of their longstanding friendship was posted by others in the pageant circle, confirming that the women were, at the very least, decently friendly. This means, of course, that Victoria P.'s "truth" that they knew each other for "three hours" was, in fact, a flagrant lie. Far from the Romantic notion of "my truth" reflecting one's true feelings, its reputation took a downward spiral as viewers began to understand it as a term exploited by contestants to "advance themselves" on the show (Yasharoff).

While the Alayah/Victoria incident is certainly not the only case of a "my truth" misnomer in the franchise's nineteen-year history, I chose this particular feud to highlight viewers' willingness and desire to participate in extra-diegetic franchise involvement. The fandom's capacity to engage with cast members' off-show narratives permits them to debunk and see through the franchise's rhetoric ad nauseum, yet the "old" sincerity refuses to budge – despite running counter to its own motive. Indeed, Bachelor Nation now views "my truth" as the embodiment of insincerity, widely resenting the once-Romantic phrase for its gross over-usage, shirking of accountability, and poor track record of relaying the actual truth (u/gentlesir123). On a top forum post made solely for the sake of ranting about this very Bachelorism, the most upvoted comment explains how "I'm speaking my truth" tends to conveniently come up when a contestant would rather "focus on how they felt and what their interpretation was (hint: it's always going to be self-serving) and ignore anything they did wrong […] because that's 'their' truth" (u/SillyRabbit2121).

Evidently, as the phrase now stands, the affects relayed through "my [Romantic] truth" and "my [*Bachelor*] truth" are not remotely equivalent; in the *Bachelor* context, it habitually falls

short of imparting sincerity on account of the deceptive connotations carried. Perhaps the most ironic aspect of the term's counterproductivity is the sheer fact that "my truth" earned Bachelorism status in the first place. While it makes sense for producers to promote the word choice given its alignment with the franchise's strain of sincerity, it immediately raises eyebrows in our irony-laden cultural context. Nevertheless, *The Bachelor* and the Romantics placing similar weight upon the notion of one's own truth is a notable marker of the "old" sincerity's foundation in a now-defunct form of delivering affect. I must acknowledge, of course, the function "my truth" serves in exaggerating drama and polarizing contestants, which is no doubt one of the show's primary goals. However, the end-point, to viewers, remains the same: a state of affective confusion that obstructs the path to sincere behavior. As Tangboy50000 says, "If I hear someone say "my truth" again, I'm going to lose it."

Like the Romantics, what *The Bachelor* achieves is a "deliberately artificial" product full of "powerful feelings." The key features that make Romantic sincerity so compelling, however—its earnestness, spontaneity, truth, and invitation into interiority—evaporate once they've been *Bachelor*-ified. The franchise's misread as to where and how viewers derive sincerity grows increasingly fatal as outside world progresses while the franchise remains locked in time. As Dana Cloud lays out, there is an epistemological split between how viewers watch the program: earnestly or ironically (418). Within our present historical context and its ever-growing emphasis on social progression and representation, *The Bachelor*'s exponentially out of touch "old" sincerity, leaves its viewers few options *but* watching ironically.

IV.   *Social Media's Effect on Affect*

Reality television at large has been uniquely impacted by the social media culture's rapid escalation. A new layer of "reality" has been thrown into the mix—digital realities—where RTV contestants can capitalize on newfound fame, interact with fans, and expand upon their on-screen portrayals. This phenomenon struck Bachelor Nation particularly explosively. Whereas in 2015, finalists could expect "anywhere from 30,000 to 500,000 new Instagram followers, they now easily surpass a million" and, on top of that, "all the media opportunities and brand collaborations that along come with them" (Bereznak).[10] *The Bachelor* is a tremendously follower-boosting franchise, and beyond simply giving contestants a categorical "wrong reason" to go on the show, it gives them one to *stay* on the show: indeed, influencing is a highly lucrative profession, and the amount one is paid (approx. $1,000-7,500 per post) is directly correlated to their follower account, which is, itself, correlated to screen-time (Jones). While this has the "old" sincerity shaking in its boots (wrong reasons alert!), it is far less offensive to the fandom, whose "new" sincerity is unimpacted by influencing and positively impacted by social media connectivity.

Social media is, in fact, the breeding ground of this "new" sincerity: these platforms are singlehandedly responsible for narrowing the divide between viewers and contestants, providing Bachelor Nation extended narrative sustenance, intimate relationships to contestants, and— pivotally—a gathering site (L'Hoiry). The existence of digital platforms fuels a narrative's sustained longevity; the end of a season no longer signals the close of a contestant's story, nor does it mark the termination of a viewer's interest in or ability to follow it. In today's social

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[10] Note: while digital influencer marketing can be traced back to just before 2010, influencer campaigns skyrocketed year-by-year from 2015 onwards, cementing the marketing strategy as "the fastest growing trend in terms of communication with customers" (Wielki).

media age, when a contestant leaves the TV screen, their stories are simply transposed onto a phone screen, where—contracts and NDAs aside—a contestant can finally reclaim control over their personal narrative after sacrificing it to production during filming. Because the show's onscreen narratives now follow its subjects offscreen, so, too, do the dedicated members of its fandom, who in turn "follow" cast members online to track narratives of interest (Sheil).

As fans grow increasingly privy to the off-screen lives and personalities of contestants (as portrayed on social media), they find themselves susceptible to parasocial interactions. While no academic studies have been conducted specifically on Bachelor Nation's attachments, a poll conducted in the r/thebachelor in April, 2020, asked: "Do you think The fandom of this franchise (including this Sub) takes parasocial relationships with Contestants too far?" The outcome was a resounding <u>yes</u>: 1700 subscribers voted "yes," 117 voted "no," and 97 voted "it's complicated" (u/Sometimes1233). It comes as no surprise, then, that fan frustration abounds toward *The Bachelor* for neglecting to robustly represent its cast—one might say, fans feel deprived of the cast's multitudes. On *The Bachelorette* Season 17, for example, Hunter received a "villain" edit: the show routinely portrayed him as aggressive and overly cocky, going so far as to falsely edit footage to make it look like he deliberately torpedoed over another contestant during a football group date. Upon the show's airing, Hunter posted several Instagram stories elucidating some things his edit failed to show: for example, he has Tourette's, which explains why the franchise had abundant footage of him snorting (i.e. it is *not* because he is cocky or unhygienic; and, editing turned up the audio in those moments), he is a recovering alcoholic, and he was actually great friends with everyone in the house. Several contestants confirmed all this, and the *Bachelorette* herself Tweeted, "Remember you only get to see a portion of who these men are.

[…] So I encourage everyone to think twice before commenting negative things about these men" (@katiethurston).

Bachelor Nation was outraged by the franchise's grotesque manipulation of Hunter's character. A few top comments on Katie and Hunter's posts include: "Why can't [producers] do better with their editing and treating the contestants right?" (@yslwej); "The devil works hard but the bachelorette producers work even harder" (@Vivid-Drummer); "Something is wrong with this franchise […] This is getting tedious. I would love to see romance and people falling apart naturally because the woman they truly love is falling for someone else…… […] Why am I watching this?" (@CreatureoftheWeek). Social media's sympathizing powers swell to full effect when the fandom realizes a contestant has been done wrong by an insidious edit. Where the question used to be, "Is *The Bachelor* real?" Concerns have shifted as viewers now wonder, "If the show is going to blatantly over-produce, why can't it at least be done compellingly?"

Reddit user thebiggestgay, awarded comment of the day, aptly summarizes the fandom's latest ethical qualms toward the franchise:

> The Bachelor/ette could be a […] heartfelt, sometimes dramatic exploration of human beings exploring what connections are possible in a strange and novel environment. *Instead, it's poorly produced, cliche, shitty tropes replicated over the real lives of actual people, whose reputations and sometimes lives are ruined for ever-diminishing returns*. I enjoy the show as a silly weekly ritual to share with my friends, but honestly I can't see myself engaging with it for much longer. *It's really hard to be at peace watching the way people's lives are utterly exploited for such shitty television*.

While tracing the exact source of Bachelor Nation's newfound grievances against the show is impossible given the real-time nature of these developments, it does not at all seem like a stretch

to attribute these fandom-wide outcries to social media's concurrent proliferation. Viewers have long been aware of *The Bachelor*'s problematic tendencies yet submitted to urges to tune in nonetheless; such is what inspired Dana Cloud's *irony bribe*, "a strategic mechanism of a cultural text" that allows audiences the pleasure of simultaneously indulging *and* reacting against "a patently ideological fantasy" (415). Essentially, she posits a sort of cultural cognitive dissonance wherein viewers perceive the show as "real" and "not-real," "and therefore worth viewing and worthless at the same time" (ibid). Cloud's irony bribe—note: she coins the term in 2010, prior to social media's insurgence—articulates the rationale behind viewers' willingness to overlook the show's nonexistent ethical boundaries. Based on social media-facilitated fandom evolutions in recent years, the detachment fundamental to accepting this bribe has lessened as cast members take increasing control of their voice post-show.

My insistence upon Bachelor Nation's decreased propensity for ironic detachment, stemming in large part from the sentiments widely echoed across forums, is further underscored by their aggregate impact on the show. This thesis could not have been written in 2019, or any year prior to Tayshia Adams' casting as the second Bachelorette of color in the fall of 2020. NBC News— and the fandom itself—attribute the fandom's unrelenting demands for improved POC representation as a key motivator in the franchise's pick (Sjodin). Prior to Tayshia's crowning, the most radical shift the fandom could claim to have influenced is "[reducing] the number of cliffhangers" (AdAge). Until this point, Bachelor Nation had not yet solidified themselves as producers; they had not yet realized the immense power in *participatory culture*.

Indeed, social media has instituted a seismic paradigm shift in the *Bachelor* franchise's operations, as it now "[gets] defined *top-down* by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms and *bottom-up* by decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms [via participatory culture]" (Jenkins;

emphasis added). This convergence explicates the fandoms' elevated involvement in the production of media content and implements a "new perception of consumers as active participants in cultural production and reception" (Glaser and Georgi 16).[11] In addition to blurring producer-consumer lines, it "transforms the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 23). This rise in audience interactivity is rooted in a strongly-held, culturally-based yearning for participation in the development and transformation of content (Cover, "New Media Theory" 173). Accordingly, the ingrained audience desire to surpass mere viewership and become active media contributors lends itself to a culturally-driven understanding of media evolution, wherein fandoms can harness their collective voice in the name of "popular demand for democratization of control over the text" (Cover, "Digital Identities" 91).

When a fanbase mobilizes effectively enough to: 1. Rile up a press storm so intense it got a prominent host fired – the Reddit-originated "Petition to Remove Chris Harrison from the Bachelor Franchise" received 40,000+ signatures; 2. Push the show to cast its first Black Bachelor – following a fan-led diversity campaign's "Petition For Anti-Racism in the Bachelor Franchise" receiving 165,000+ signatures; and 3. Get an extra season of *The Bachelorette* in the 2021 viewing cycle – starring another Black lead; there is no more denying the fanbase's power as shadow producers (Li). Bachelor Nation, now aware of its unified capacity to hold the franchise accountable, may very well be phasing out its era of ironic detachment. As the fanbase continues honing and accumulating its voice via social media, it seems promising that its

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[11] "Participatory culture" is a less capitalistically-coded equivalent of the heavily-corporatized "*Web 2.0*," a term which: relays an implied improvement over the first stage of the World Wide Web, emphasizes user-generated content, and is dedicated to interactivity. For additional info, refer to the "Executive Summary" introduction in Henry Jenkins' *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*.

influence—presently most concerned with activism and representation—will gain even more traction.

Social media bulldozed the franchise's previously stable, ultra-conservative traditions by forcing popular voice to be heard (Wynne). While franchise executives may be rattled and the show's presentation slightly altered following the first upwelling of fandom-led, activism-oriented franchise renovations, more remains to be done. Representation in several forms remains a key concern of this mobilized Bachelor Nation, but countless other, more "internal" aspects of the show—namely, the processes it holds sacred in the name of maintaining its outdated and hypocritical "old" sincerity—inspire critiques as well. Whether the fandom's desired changes are *necessarily* in the name of sincerity is not relevant; the core of their structural concerns certainly gestures in that direction, even if it has yet to be decidedly articulated. While this sort of ignition may seem minor, it does not take long for fire to catch within Bachelor Nation.

The New and "new" Sincerities

Following the footsteps of all sincerities before it, the New Sincerity's definition is

constantly in flux, varying per application, medium, and tolerance of irony. The term's

popularization in the 1990s and early 2000s is largely credited to David Foster Wallace's

musings that irony serves "an exclusively negative function as it deconstructs the existing culture

without introducing anything new to it" (Sokolov and Shabova 191). The "New" of the New

Sincerity "signifies it is a *response* to postmodern irony and nihilism: not a rejection of it, not a

nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity" – instead, in a dialectical shift, the New Sincerity

integrates culturally beset inclinations toward postmodernism, choosing to "operate in

conjunction with irony" (Buckland 2). The movement fixates on "connection" and "wholeness,"

"whether it's a unity of purpose" or "a directness of expression," its primary aim is to create "a

sense of connection and understanding that looks to overcome fragmentation" (Balliro 14).

The Bachelor fandom's "new" sincerity follows a similar trajectory: arising in response to

insufficiencies in the franchise's "old," the "new" iteration does not reject the ritualistic qualities

of its predecessor, but aches to see it presented through a less systemized, regulated valence.

Embittered by the "old" sincerity's routine neglect of personality in favor of clichés, a post of the

day back in February, 2020, reads: "The editors choose to present everything in the most simple,

stale way by sidelining any comedy at the sight of romance. And when drama heats up, the

editors ignore budding romances to give ample screentime to the redundancy of it all," with

another commenter complaining that the cast "seem to have so much more personality outside of

the show. How do they continue to edit the lead to a shell of a person?" (u/stateofalec;

u/singlethreadofgold).

Bachelor Nation's "new" sincerity, driven by cravings to understand and invest in cast members while they are on-air, the "new" places emphasis on personal voice, individuality, quirks, and the banal. Fan exposure to contestants as people, rather than caricatures, in the Instagram age, has incited a desire for personalized edits; out with the stereotyping, in with the genuine, flawed individual. This includes individuals who do not fit the show's traditional image: white, thin, heterosexual, wealthy, etc. The fanbase's vision of sincerity, borrowing from the New Sincerity, strives for a similar "connection and wholeness" in the form of a revised *Bachelor* landscape; one that tells stories, drives connection, and repairs the cultural damages it has caused. A key facet of the "new" is owning its flaws and striving to improve:

> The old sincerity's near fatal injury was a generally perceived rupture between what is said and what is meant. The new sincerity, by contrast, stylises this rupture, not in order to cringe at its discharge but rather to seek to do what can be done, if anything, in the way of healing. (Dunne 14)

Dunne's quote above, though fashioned toward the New Sincerity, applies perfectly to *The Bachelor*'s "old"/"new" divide as well. The "new" mode acknowledges in humanity the good, the bad, and the nuance, turning toward connection to fill in its gaps.

Further, the "new" hopes to abolish the lazy crutches the franchise fell on before, demanding conversations that *show* why a relationship is strong rather than *tell* us that it is; this involves abandoning the pre-established *Bachelor* rhetoric that says relays nothing of expressive consequence. Crucially, the fans' iteration does not take itself nearly as seriously as the "old," placing meager value on "right" or "wrong reasons" as long as a cast member's interactions prove compelling:

I don't have a problem with contestants coming on the show as an actor (Greg), a musician (Connor C), […] wanting to build a platform (Thomas). They can be there for their platform/for exposure AND focus on building a relationship with the lead. One doesn't have to exclude the other. Drop the BS, all I want is sincerity in their interactions with the lead. [In real life] we all have jobs/careers/interests AND we manage relationships. (@lifeasatourist)

The fandom does not place merit in a contestant being more or less desperate for love, it asks only for an open heart.

In a practical application, the "new" sincerity wants to see organic interpersonal moments that reveal deep intrinsic truths. This means following the New Sincerity in its criticism of "ritual's acceptance of social convention as mere action without intent, as *performance without belief*" (Seligman 1079). For example: the "new" does not support the "old's" ritual of playing a "Personal Tragedy Card" during the nighttime portion of one-on-one dates; the show's expectation for a mutual gut-spilling feels forced, motivated, and unnatural (Game of Roses). On a *Bachelor* forum entitled "Crappy Dates To Mimic Real Life," dozens of users pitched ideas for dates that would better reflect how a contestants' relationship with the lead might operate *outside* the bubble, so "they can see how they handle stress, disagreements, etc" (u/BenevolentGrouch). Rather than sticking to the franchise's luxury aesthetic, fireworks, and never-ending glitz (in other words, all talk and no substance), ideas people pitched included: "assembling an Ikea bedroom set," "preparing Thankgiving dinner," "developing a monthly budget," and other sorts of everyday activities wherein one's most honest self is revealed ("Crappy Dates").

There are no shortage of changes these progressive, "new" sincerity-leaning fandom members hope to see, and they vary broadly in terms of visibility, impact, and affect. Some even

deconstruct the show's very purpose, believing the removal of a proposal at the end will put less pressure on relationships and allow them to flourish naturally. I noted the fandom wishes that appeared broadly and cross-platform, the most relevant of which include: LGBTQ representation (by far #1); body diversity; contestant friendships; humor; awkward conversations; dates focused on bond-building; better vetting from background checks; de-centering whiteness all-around; fewer clichés; personality-based editing; no expectation of engagement; the list goes on.

Bachelor Nation's "new" sincerity wants to abandon the "old's" hyper-stylized tradition—not necessarily rejecting the show's staging, but also no longer relying upon it to elicit affect. The show's romance, like its sincerity, should be derived from genuine relationships rather than carried by aesthetic, formula, or rhetoric. At its core, however, the "new," borrowing from the New, deeply seeks to overcome fragmentation—and, in doing so, arrive at a point where the irony bribe is no longer a viewing necessity. To drive this "new" sincerity mission, participatory culture seems to be the best and only course of action. At present, its priority is amending the show's most flagrant perversions of truth—misrepresentations, maltreatment, and problematic editing of non-white cast members (Kaufman 103)—before moving inward toward its dialogue, activities, and minutia. Already shedding the franchise of one problematic symbol (Chris Harrison) and applying enough pressure on the franchise to invite previously unsought voices to play the lead, the franchise's "old" sincerity knows it has competition.

The question now is whether the presently-mobilized portion of Bachelor Nation will retain momentum, and how long it will allow negotiations to continue before a single-episode boycott turns into a permanent halt in viewership. It appears participatory culture is winning—more recently premiered RTV shows, such as *The Circle, Love Island*, and *Too Hot to Handle* (just to name a few), lean into many qualities of "new" sincerity listed above. While the franchise may

view some of these changes as too "liberal" for their traditionalist roots, visible representation is not a political act—it is a reality of life, especially in this more "aware" America. Truly, it appears to be the only way this franchise can hope to repair its legacy in the long run.

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