

Reality TV's dreadful role models

The August 2009 issue of *Essence* magazine features an insightful analysis of embattled relationships between black women. In “Black Women Behaving Badly,” author Kierna Mayo suggests one cause behind the eye-rolling, finger-wagging, in-your-face cattiness could be the delight millions of households get out of seeing such pugilistic attitude on various reality television shows. Mayo further noted that while most adults see it as entertainment, it doesn't quite register the same way for young black girls who see the women as role models.

I believe I witnessed the manifestation of this in the fights that took place on Aug. 6 outside the Kentucky International Convention Center following the annual Russ Bus back-to-school event. Local TV news stations broadcast a tearful teenage girl

involved in one of the seemingly all-girl fights, the result of missteps during the concert that could have been handled with “Excuse me” and “That's all right” rather than erupting into fistfights. The option to be polite and understanding was ultimately disregarded as loud discord and negativity prevailed.

And in a sense, it worked: The outrageous behavior got the girls some camera time.

Not that 15 minutes of fame — or



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infamy — is what the young ladies were going for. As my mom commented after we watched the most graphic coverage of the day, a camera's presence can evoke unusual behaviors from otherwise normal people. And the type of behavior among black females that creates fodder for the cameras is widely seen, often glorified and easy to imitate, while its alternatives are just the opposite.

Everyone loves to hate the mean girl, and drama builds ratings. I stopped watching “America's Next Top Model” when I realized, all else being equal, Tyra sends the nice girls home as early as possible. Watching the show, you believe she's basing her decisions on the photo shoots, but as executive producer, she can't afford to be a fool; she must consider who causes conflict in the house just as carefully as she considers the photos.

Another case is that of DeShawn Snow from “The Real Housewives of Atlanta,” who has said in interviews

that she was dismissed from the show because she wasn't obnoxious enough. On the other hand, one of her more outspoken former co-stars recently began a book tour promoting a memoir that reflects her on-air personality.

On Aug. 6, Facebook status updates laid blame for the Russ Bus event everywhere: on event organizers for poor planning; on Russ Parr for inviting artists who don't promote education; on an unnamed person for allegedly stoking neighborhood rivalries; on the media for ignoring several hours of conflict-free fun at the event; and on the actual kids who participated in the fights.

To all of these factors, I would add that we live in a culture that values being famous for being seen, not necessarily for being talented. Add to that the fact that the women who display the most socially unacceptable behavior seem to be seen the most on reality TV, and it's not hard to see how a teenager could think outrageous

behavior is really a talent, or at least a cultural norm to aspire to.

When we discussed the matter, my dad lamented that few, if any, reality television producers see the value in bringing viewers a house full of multi-dimensional black women whose full range of human emotions could grip millions every night.

But that's only part of the cultural shift that's needed.

We must rethink what is valued and expected. Resisting the temptation to retaliate against someone who embraces negativity takes an amount of self-control that few adults manage to achieve.

Yet, it is possible. And if it's promoted enough, it might be the next outrageous behavior trend that gets noticed. ♣

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