ABSTRACT

SHEENA MORIA YOUNG. ‘Josh Made Some Very Bad Mistakes’: Rhetorics of Morality, Obedience, and Abuse. (Under the direction of Professor Casle Fedukovich.)

The study of rhetoric often includes study of religion, gender, and media. These genres interact with each other and with rhetoric itself to explain how gender, religion, and media are used to communicate. As rhetoric has adapted to include the use and study of increasing media and technology, the messages shared using media and technology have become subjects of rhetorical analysis. Within this situation, we find reality television and twenty-four hours news sources. And, when individuals take advantage of the benefits of living publicly, the disadvantages of their personal lives also becoming public proves a specific challenge.

This analysis examines the public nature of the Duggar family, who chose to share their personal lives on national television in 2004. Several television specials and a long-running series, 19 Kids and Counting!, were shown on the TLC cable channel. The persona created and shared on this show was one of a friendly, devout, loyal, and overwhelmingly benign Christian family. However, the family hid several instances of sexual abuse and their connections to controversial religious leaders. This pattern of abuse was not made public until 2015, when tabloid InTouch Magazine released an article containing copies of police reports that focused on several specific abusive events.

This project focuses on the rhetoric of the family’s responses to the exposure of abuse. By using Celeste Michelle Condit's definition and of public morality, I determine how the Duggar family's morality is defined. With the additional framework of Sharon Crowley, I focus on the Duggars’ use of commonplace statements to determine the origins and specific meanings of those statements. Finally, I compare the message that the Duggars perceive themselves to have given to the context of their statements.