James Donaldson, otherwise known as “Mr. Beast”, is a highly influential American Youtuber, philanthropist, and businessman curating his branding and events to families and younger audiences. Unlike traditional celebrities, Mr. Beast represents a completely new kind of media power: the influencer-entrepreneur who is able to turn online attention into large-scale productions, businesses, and cultural influences. Well known for producing high-stakes competitions with significant cash prizes, Mr. Beast has built this reputation for blending entertainment with the inclusion of philanthropy acts involving helping ordinary people or giving contestants life-changing amounts of money. With each production being greater, elaborate, and more complex than the last, Mr. Beast has been incentivized through social media outlets to test the limits of entertainment, audience engagement, and participant endurance. As such, this created a pathway to one of his greatest achievements, the “Beast Games”, with season 1 premiering on Amazon Prime Video on December 19, 2024. The competition, featuring 1,000 contestants and a grand $10 million prize, was filmed in mid-2024, with weekly episodes airing every Thursday until February 13th, 2025.

However, these productions have raised serious questions about whether influencer-led entertainment is being held to the same legal and ethical standards as traditional television and film .Reports and allegations tied to the *Beast Games* production with primarily concerning the participant treatment, working conditions, sexual harassment, and safety, raise important

questions at the intersections of law, ethics, and digital media productions on the broader spectrum. These concerns are important as contestants in competitive entertainment are not just background figures; they are real individuals with physical and emotional well-being that can be impacted by the conditions and environment around them.

From a legal perspective, this paper will examine whether the production of the show may have violated or insinuated important principles of labor laws, contract law, and negligence. Some of the key questions include whether contestants were properly informed about the risks they were taking before agreeing to participate, legal issues in if production had a duty to provide safe working and living conditions for the contestants during filming, and liability as although Mr. Beast is known primarily as a YouTuber, *Beast Games* was connected to Amazon, which makes it necessary in considering who should be held responsible if harm occurred (the creator, the production team, the platform, corporate partners, or some combination of all of them). Ethically, this paper will also unravel questions about the treatment of people as entertainment. While audiences may enjoy watching people compete for large prizes (not only in *Beast Games*, but that entertainment genre as a whole), ethical concerns arise when the need for views, profit, and spectacle becomes more important than a contestant's well-being.

Note: The majority of the allegations will be sourced by lawsuit filed in the state of California.

Misclassification of Contestants as Non-employees (Independent Workers)

This is one of the strongest parts of the case as on page 7, complaints state that "Defendants wrongfully and willfully misclassified" contestants even though they

should've been legally classified as employees. It also says that the arrangement was actually an "employee arrangement" where Amazon, Off One's Base, and Mr. Beast were employers. California's Labor & Workforce Development Agency explains that AB 5 uses the ABC test to decide whether a worker is an employee or independent contractor. Under the test, the hiring agency must satisfy conditions and prove the worker is free from control, works outside the usual business, and is independently established in that type of work (California Labor & Workforce Development Agency, n.d.) . The lawsuit argues the contestants were not independent workers since production controlled where they went, ate, wore, slept, and even communicated; which with this level of control aligns with functioning more like employees than voluntary contestants.

Failure to Pay Minimum Wage and Overtime

California Labor Code section 1197 states that the minimum wage fixed by state or local law is the minimum wage that must be paid to employees, and paying less than that is unlawful (California Labor Code § 1197, 2026) . Furthermore, labor code 1194 also states that any employee who receives less than minimum wage or legal overtime compensation is entitled to sue in recovering the unpaid wages including interest, reasonable attorney fees, and costs of the suit itself (California Labor Code § 1194, 2026) . The Lawsuit in page 8 and 10 states that defendants hired the contestants to work as contestants on a reality competition show and that their work was "the entertainment product" being marketed and sold for profit. In addition, contestants were also required to be present on specific dates and times "around-the-clock" at locations controlled by the defendants. If the contestants were required to work under production control for long

periods and were not getting paid the legal hourly minimum, the lawsuit argues that this would violate California minimum wage law and overtime law.

Sexual Harassment and Hostile Work Environment

In the lawsuit, the defendants claim that the production failed to provide a safe and healthy workplace and that female contestants suffered a pattern of sexual harassment. Todd Spangler reports the complaint cites instructions from an alleged “How to succeed in Mr. Beast Production" employee handbook with one of their tips and guidelines being “If talent wants to draw a dick on the white board in the video or do something stupid, let them… Really do everything you can to empower the boys when filming and help them make content. Help them be idiots” (Spangler, 2024). In addition, one of the female plaintiffs identified as “Contestant 5” said in their statement that “I wanted to join because I was a fan of MrBeast and his videos made me smile during the COVID-19 pandemic. I expected to be challenged, but I didn’t think I would be treated like nothing — less than nothing. And as one of the women, I can say it absolutely felt like a hostile environment for us. We honestly could not have been respected less — as people, much less employees — if they tried.” (Spangler, 2024). Not only is this legally important as California Government Law 12940 states that employers can be held liable for harassment and/or failing to take reasonable steps in prevention measures, but it also raises a serious ethical concern. If the production truly promoted or tolerated a “just let boys be boys” mindset in their employee handbook, then the situation becomes significantly larger than a mere isolated misconduct; it reflects a leadership failure in setting professional standards. In addition, it also begs the question, how far is an

individual/company willing to put their participants/employees at risk for financial benefit if immaturity and misogyny is promoted and incentivised writing?

Similarities to Other Situations and Recommendations

Netflix' *Love is Blind* produced by Kinetic Content is another example of how digital media production is often a toxic landscape. In 2022, former contestant Jeremy Hartwell sued Netflix and Kinetic Content alleging the "inhumane working conditions" he suffered including lack of proper payment, food breaks, and labor protections (Jones, 2022) . The lawsuit claimed participants were misclassified as independent contractors so they could avoid minimum wage and overtime obligations; which is very similar to the *Beast Games* lawsuit since both cases center around whether reality-TV participants are actually employees when producers control their time, movement, food, sleep, and participation. Originally, the way *Love is Blind* handled it was mostly defensive at first with Kinetic Content denying claims and said the lawsuit lacked any merit. However, Reuters later reported that Netflix and the production companies agreed to pay $1.4 million to settle a proposed class action claiming that the *Love is Blind* contestants were employees who should have been paid minimum wage under California law (Wiessner, 2024)

In tangent, the dangers of reality television becomes especially serious when producers design shows around manufactured tension and pressure, competitions, repetitive and extreme exhaustion, and life-changing prize money. Jelle Mast article "The Dark Side of 'Reality TV': Professional Ethics and the Treatment of 'Reality'-Show

Participants," *International Journal of Communication*, highlights this issue further as it provides insight to how *Beast Games* allegations, *Love is Blind*, and other reality-TV shows are not simply production mistakes. Mast identifies major ethical concerns such as intrusion, humiliations, misrepresentation, and appropriation, along with the burden of responsibility on program makers in preventing harm is more malleable and less of a concern in relation to the audience (Mast, 2016). The system as an entirety is also inherently exploitative in profiting off of the discomfort of contestants, as the reality show hires un(der)paid nonprofessional actors, their personae, reputations, and experiences, are all commodified and sold to the viewers of the program (Mast, 2016) .

Changes in Law and Organizational Policies

In conclusion, As touched upon numerous times throughout this paper, the ethical and law issues in these are not detached problems. This is a conundrum in regards to reality-TV as a whole which stems from countless shows such as *Love Island, Real Housewives, The Bachelor/Bachelorette, Kid Nation, The Biggest Loser, Naked and Afraid, American Idol/X Factor, Jerry Springer/Maury* style talk shows*, COPS/Live PD, Temptation Island,* the list goes on. Specifically, there needs to be written laws that apply for all states in digital media productions and policies for how media should be managed and portrayed. Manufacturing situations and arguments, embracing power imbalances, using pain and emotional manipulation as entertainment, hostile work conditions, creating false narratives for viewer interpretation, should not be an available avenue for profit in this landscape. This calls for not only policies that either block or severely limit what is allowed to be broadcasted for the safety of the contestants, but harsh punishments and repercussions for organizations who don't abide by these rules. In addition, having clear distinctions between what counts as an independent worker

v.s. an employee. However, in specific to *Beast Games*, one of the more extreme problems that needs to be resolved immediately is their treatment of women. Nowhere in their guidelines should they promote “boys being boys” for work culture, profit, or a mixture of the both, and such clauses in writing is more than evident that their leadership needs to be evaluated and revitalized sincerely.

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