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Viewers' Perceptions of Reality Programs

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Viewers' Perceptions of Reality Programs

Abstract

This article describes a series of focus group interviews of young adults about reality programs. The interviews were conducted to investigate audiences' understandings of the nature, realism, and gratifications of the programming category. A central element defining reality programs was the perception that the behavior of the cast members was a reflection of their own will and personality and that their actions had consequences in terms of the outcome of the show. These factors also contributed to perceptions of the shows' realism. Participants reported enjoying the programs because of their humor and their unpredictability, which seemed to contribute to the creation of suspense and to greater involvement. Implications for further research are discussed.

Viewers' Perceptions of Reality Programs

Reality programming has been one of the biggest phenomena of recent television seasons. During the summer of 2003 the four major broadcast networks planned no fewer than 25 reality programs and almost every major cable network seemed to be experimenting with at least one (Carter & Rutenberg, 2003). Research on these programs, however, has only begun. Much of the previous research has focused on crime dramas such as *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted* (e.g., Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Eschholz, Blackwell, Getz, & Chiricos, 2002; Oliver 1994; Oliver & Armstrong, 1995; Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001). However, reality programs have now expanded well beyond the crime-drama format. Even conservative conceptualizations of the programming category encompass shows that range from *Resident Life*, which followed a group of medical residents at a Nashville hospital, to *For Love or Money*, which presented an elaborately engineered scenario in which a group of women vied to be selected by a bachelor who they could then reject in favor of a million dollar prize. Viewers are now able to select from a range of programs that are likely to offer audiences different gratifications and to contribute to different outcomes than the crime shows that were the focus of most previous research.

The current study sought to contribute to the investigation of this expanded range of reality programs by examining how members of the programs' target audience perceive and evaluate these shows. The study consisted of a series of focus group interviews that addressed three issues, each of which is central to the development of future work in this area: 1) viewers' understandings of the attributes that define reality programs and distinguish different types of reality programs from each other, 2) viewers' perceptions of the "realism" of reality programs, and 3) the reasons viewers choose to watch these programs. The background and implications of each of these issues are discussed below.

Conceptualizing Reality Programs

One of the challenges of studying this programming is identifying the attributes that define reality programs and establishing which shows qualify as one. These tasks have become more difficult as the shows that are at least presented as reality programs have become more numerous and more diverse. Although the term "reality program" is used widely, there is no standard definition. Some researchers have defined the category broadly to encompass news, talk shows, and documentaries (e.g. Meng & Lugalambi, 2003; Potter et al., 1997), whereas others have used the term to describe a narrower range of shows that are distinguished from other forms of non-fiction programming. Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003), for example, suggest that today's reality programs are characterized by a set of specific attributes that include being filmed without a script, having a narrative, being intended to function as entertainment, featuring people as themselves rather than actors performing a role, and being filmed in real living or working environments rather than on a set. The popular press, however, often applies the term to shows that do not meet all of these criteria, including talent shows such as *American Idol* (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2003; Pennington, 2003) and clip shows like *Shocking Behavior Caught on Tape* (e.g., Seal, 2003).

The expansion in the range of reality programs also means that the shows included within this category can be very different from each other. This diversity is suggested by the way that industry observers describe the programs. The "Reality Television" listing of the Yahoo! Internet site directory (2004), for example, sorts the programs into categories including "talent shows" and "law enforcement programs." News articles about reality programs often identify their subject as a subgroup of programs (Carter, 2003a; Lyall, 2003), track new trends within the programming category (Carter, 2003b; Stanley, 2003), or explicitly identify different kinds of

reality programs (e.g., Pennington, 2003, p. F1). Recent research also offers evidence of variation across shows in audiences' perceptions of the programming category. Nabi et al. (2003), for example, had respondents sort a list of television programs into categories and then calculated the dimensions on which the programs were classified. They found that although reality programs clustered together on a real-versus-fictional dimension, they varied widely on the second dimension that seemed to represent appropriateness for prime time.

Given this diversity, it would be unreasonable to assume that all of the shows labeled as reality programs are watched for the same reasons or wield the same type of influence. Researchers are taking into account the possibility that the antecedents or outcomes of reality program viewing may vary across shows by investigating the covariates of viewers' reactions to either specific shows (e.g., Nabi et al., 2003) or to sub-types of reality shows (e.g., Crook et al., 2004). For example, Nabi, Finnerty, Stitt, Halford, and Quintero (2004, Study 2) sorted reality programs into categories on the basis of a factor analysis of viewing patterns and then examined predictors of enjoyment of different types of shows. Leone, Peck, and Bissell (2004) examined third-person effects in relation to three specific reality programs. There is, however, no uniform set of sub-types of reality programs. Different researchers have sorted or selected the programs using different criteria, making it difficult to compare results across studies or to integrate these results into a coherent set of findings.

Given the growth of reality programming, therefore, two of the most important needs in relation to the study of this topic are a means of delineating the boundaries of the programming category and an understanding of the characteristics that distinguish different types of reality programs from each other. The conceptualizations need to be informed by common usage. One of the goals of the current study, therefore, was to investigate the ways viewers conceptualize

these programs in order to facilitate the development of a definition and a categorization scheme that takes audiences' understandings of the programming category into account.

RQ 1. What attributes do audiences perceive as characterizing reality programs?

RQ 2. What attributes do audiences perceive as distinguishing different types of reality programs from each other?

Perceived Realism

The potential importance of reality programs is not based solely on their popularity. The shows also claim researchers' attention because of their potential to offer unique insights about the way audiences can make sense of media texts. One of the most unusual features of the programs is the nature of their realism. Few would claim that reality programs present an unmediated documentation of reality. However, the status of these programs in terms of realism is particularly ambiguous. Most of the shows ostensibly portray people that really exist and events that actually occurred. However, the action plays out in a context where the people know they are being filmed and the events of many of the most successful shows (e.g. *Joe Millionaire*, *Survivor*) are set up by the producers for the explicit purpose of creating a show. These elements of artificiality are not lost on viewers (see Hall, 2003; Nabi et al., 2003). In addition, the typicality of many elements of the programs' action can vary radically across shows and across elements within a show. *Survivor*, for example, presents situations that are unlikely to be within the realm of most people's experience, whereas *COPS* portrays events that are more common. Either show could present characters whose emotions or behavior would be seen as typical by at least some audience members.

Not only does this characteristic connect the shows to larger trends of post-modernity and of the collapsing boundaries between news and entertainment, it also has specific implications

for the potential effects of the programs. Perceived realism has been advanced as a moderator of media influence within a variety of research perspectives, including cultivation theory (e.g., Potter, 1986) and Austin's message interpretation process model (e.g., Austin, Pinkleton, & Fujioka, 2000). However, as both Hall (2003) and Busselle and Greenberg (2000) have pointed out, realism judgments can be complex and multidimensional. Muddy conceptualizations or measures that fail to comport with the way audiences judge realism can confuse these research programs by attenuating observed relationships. A better understanding of how audiences make sense of the realism of these shows would contribute to the investigation of how these programs may affect audience members' beliefs and attitudes. Another issue that this study sought to investigate, therefore, was the nature of audiences' perceptions of the realism of these shows.

RQ 3. How do audiences evaluate the realism of reality programs?

Reality Programs' Appeal

Yet another issue that researchers have been seeking to address deals with the type of gratifications that audiences receive from the programs, which is central to predicting who will watch the programs to what effect. Although there are a variety of well-known economic and organizational reasons that networks favor reality programs, the nature of the appeal the shows hold for audiences is less clear. Recent empirical investigations of the appeal of reality programs as a programming category include Nabi et al.'s (2003) work, which investigated the extent to which a variety of viewing motivations were endorsed by reality program viewers. The most prominent elements of the programs' appeal were their perceived novelty and entertainment value. However, as the researchers point out, the finding that the reason viewers claim to watch these programs is that they are entertaining is of limited use in that it explains little about *why* the programs function to entertain. Another way in which one can advance the study of reality

programs, therefore, is to explore the attributes of the programs that contribute to audiences' enthusiasm.

RQ 4. What attributes make reality programs enjoyable?

In summary, this study sought to further research into audiences' interpretations of and responses to reality programs. It pursued three issues that are both interesting in their own right and have the potential to help researchers address specific challenges related to this area of study.

Study Description

These issues were investigated through an open-ended data gathering method, focus group interviews. Four interviews involving a total of 33 participants were carried out in June and July of 2003. The participants were recruited from introductory communication classes at a Midwestern, urban university and received nominal extra credit for taking part in the study. The groups ranged in size from six to 11 participants. Responses to anonymous, post-interview questionnaires indicated that 67% of the participants were women. The average age was 23 ($SD = 5.64$). Seventy-three percent identified themselves as non-Hispanic White and fifteen percent identified themselves as non-Hispanic African American. The remainder included participants who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino, Native American, Asian or some other race. The mode of weekly television viewing time was nine and a half hours. The age and education level of the participants indicate that most of them were representatives of one of the most highly sought after audience segments – young, middle-class adults.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained the procedure and guidelines, including the presence and purpose of the audio recorders. Then, participants were asked to introduce themselves to the group and to identify the reality program that they were most interested in discussing. After these introductions, I asked for the names of any other shows that they thought

of as reality programs or which they had heard called reality programs. When a participant mentioned the name of a specific program, I wrote the name down. In smaller groups they were written on large index cards and placed on the table. In larger groups they were written on a blackboard. The names were visible throughout the discussion and other program names were added as they were mentioned. This display served as a visual aid to help the participants consider a wide range of programs when other issues and questions arose during the discussion.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured. I prepared a series of questions and issues to be addressed, but the order in which the issues were discussed and the wording of the questions varied across groups. The questions included whether the shows could be sub-grouped, what audiences got out of reality programs, and what about reality programs was real.

I made notes of the tone and general tenor of each interview immediately after it was completed and transcribed each of the interview tapes. As specified below, I used the research questions to identify specific portions of the interviews or types of discussion that were to be the focus of each element of the analysis. I read through the interview transcripts in their entirety several times and marked or coded comments that were related to specific themes or topics. As suggested by Knodel (1993), coding became more specific over subsequent reviews of the transcripts. On the initial review, I marked portions of the discussion relating to general topics associated with particular research questions. On later reviews I sought to identify increasingly specific themes within each topic. New patterns that appeared consistently across the interviews were noted on subsequent reviews in cyclical process like that described by Morgan (1988).

I then sorted the information into an overview grid (Knodel, 1993) that summarized themes and relevant quotations as they were expressed in each interview. In creating this overview, I took into account the reception of specific comments within in the context of the

discussion as a means of evaluating the validity of specific ideas. Ideas that were greeted enthusiastically by the group and that triggered concurring comments were seen as having been supported by the other participants. Once the initial themes were formulated, I examined the related quotations in order to identify and clarify their features. As specified by Krueger (1994), the transcripts were reviewed again to compare the overview with the volume and tenor of the material that was not relevant to the dominant themes.

The Attributes of Reality Programming

The first goals of the study were to investigate audiences' perceptions of the nature of reality programs and to explore how they distinguish between shows within the programming category. In order to pursue these goals, I focused on the programs that the participants offered as examples of reality programs and paid particular attention to programs whose membership in this category was questioned or contested. Examining the characteristics that were seen to disqualify a show from being a reality program allowed me to investigate the way the participants defined the programming category. I also attended to participants' responses to my requests to identify subcategories of reality programs, as well as to any comparisons or equivalencies between shows that were made by the participants. By attending to the shows that the participants saw as similar to each other, I sought to identify the attributes that were seen as meaningful in terms of distinguishing programs from each other.

The participants identified readily examples of reality programs, which suggests that they recognized the term and associated it with particular shows. During the initial part of the interviews in which the participants were asked to name the show they most wanted to talk about and to name shows that could be considered reality programs, the groups named an average of 21 programs. By the conclusion of the interviews, the average number of programs that had been

mentioned by the participants was 36. Programs that were mentioned in every group included *For Love or Money*, *Joe Millionaire*, *COPS*, and *The Real World*.

However, the boundaries of the category suggested by the participants' discussion were porous. Within each group, some programs were introduced provisionally. A participant would mention a show and ask if it counted as a reality program. Participants also debated whether specific shows counted as reality programs. The types of shows whose status was suggested to be uncertain in more than one group included talent shows (e.g., *American Idol*, *Fame*), competition-focused shows where the contestants changed from one episode to another (e.g., *Fear Factor*, *Dog Eat Dog*), home-improvement shows (e.g., *Trading Spaces*), and shows made up of skits featuring hidden cameras, stunts, or practical jokes (e.g., *Punked*, *Jackass*).

In addition, the participants' conclusions about what counted as a reality program and about the attributes that characterize reality programs were not always consistent, either within or across groups. This was most evident in discussions about the relationship between reality programs and game shows. In one group, for example, *Fear Factor* was deemed a game show because those on the show were "getting a prize." However, the group determined that *Survivor*, which also awards a cash prize, should be considered at least "a reality game show" on the basis of a variety of attributes including the fact that there were "no actors," "no real script," the cast is "reacting to the situations that they are in," and "they supposedly have to get their own food." Many of these attributes do not contradict directly the program's status as a game show, a programming category that also features non-actors' unscripted reactions to the situations they find themselves in. However, these features highlight elements of the program that are not particularly salient in reference to traditional game shows. Although unscripted, the behavior of contestants on traditional game shows is highly constrained and the personalities of the

contestants are of relatively little consequence. The contestants appear in at most a handful of episodes, rarely speak to each other, and have highly formalized interactions with the host. Each season of *Survivor*, in contrast, follows the same contestants/cast members over many episodes. Although the show has sequences involving fairly straightforward competition, it focuses on the interpersonal relationships of the cast members, which affect directly the game's outcome. The game play of *Survivor* takes place in a context that highlights the unscripted nature of the show and the cast's status as non-actors to a greater extent than that of traditional game shows.

The relationship between reality programs and game shows was constructed somewhat differently in other groups. One group identified a subgroup of reality programs featuring "competition stuff" that included *Fear Factor*, *Survivor*, *Dog Eat Dog*, and *The Amazing Race*, "where you try and kill yourself and get this money." Some of these shows take place in a studio, whereas others are set in exotic real-world locations. All ask the contestants to engage in a combination of unusual physical and mental challenges. This formulation suggests that reality game shows differ from other game shows in the extremity of the feats the contestants are expected to perform. In yet another group, a participant suggested that competition elements, rather than disqualify a show from being a reality program, actually make it a more typical one. The participant argued that *Insomniac*, which features a comedian who explores cities in the middle of the night, was not a reality program because it did not have these features.

A lot of them seem to be kind of like a game show type where they're competing - the ones that might not be are like *Real World* and a couple others - but, I mean, the other ones seem like . . . they're trying to outplay someone else or be more talented or better.

Insomniac is just this funny guy going around making jokes.

Competition elements did not entirely define reality programming for the participant in that *The*

Real World qualified without them. However, having the competition component was seen to bring a show closer to his understanding of a good example of the programming category.

The inconsistencies in the participants' analyses of the nature of reality programs suggest that they are not seen as a hard-and-fast category. The participants seemed to conceptualize reality programming as a cluster of shows. Programs that were seen as like the shows that were typical of the programming category were less likely to be questioned than were those that were seen to be different. The contrast between the groups in the evaluation of the characteristics that define reality programs, therefore, may be at least partially attributable to differences in the programs they were using to anchor the category.

These discussions suggest that competition elements are salient to participants' evaluations of particular programs, although the role they were seen to play was inconsistent. Another attribute that was associated with reality programs was that they tended to focus on negative circumstances or behavior by "point[ing] out people's problems" and "highlighting like the worst in people." The programs were also described as being different from other shows because they were relatively unpredictable. Although "you have like the basic sense of how the show's going to go, . . . anything can happen."

Perhaps the most central element in determining strength of a particular program's membership in the programming category, however, was the nature of the show's relationship to the real world. The understanding that the program was non-scripted, which carries the implication that the behavior of the cast members is self-determined and a true expression of their own personalities and wills, was implied repeatedly to be a determining factor of whether a show should be considered a reality program. As described above, the lack of professional actors and the unscripted nature of *Survivor* was seen by one group to distinguish it from traditional

game shows and move it into the reality program category. Other groups said that reality programs differed from other shows in that they were “unscripted” and did not have “real actors” performing a role, but rather “just anyone off the street.”

The centrality of the idea that reality programs are unscripted was also illustrated by the debates surrounding prank or stunt shows. For example, *Punked*, which features practical jokes played on minor celebrities that are filmed by a hidden camera, was questioned because it was so specifically planned beforehand. “Really there’s a whole skit behind that and there’s a whole dialogue . . . too.” This was qualified by another group member who injected that the script didn’t include “those that don’t know what’s going on.” Another group advanced a similar perspective when they determined that this show, along with *Jackass*, was a reality program “because it uses like your actual reactions of people, like how they react. I mean, their part’s not being scripted.” The participant went on to give a specific example. “Like the guy jumping out of the car trunk at the gas station. People there are reacting. They don’t know. It’s their actual reaction.” The show was seen to qualify as a reality program at least in part because of its inclusion of spontaneous behavior and comments of the non-actor bystanders.

The ideal reality show seemed to be an unscripted presentation of real people’s experience. The greater the perception that cast members could determine their own actions and speak their own minds, the more like a reality program a particular show was seen to be. As will be discussed in more detail below, participants claimed that there was little that was “real” about these programs when asked directly about realism. Nevertheless, this criterion specifies a particular relationship between the show and the real world. Like news, reality programs were expected to document directly specific real-world events.

Reality programming, therefore, does not seem to be defined primarily by a specific type

of content, but rather by the approach that is taken to that content. Shows covering a wide range of themes and topic areas count as reality programs provided that the actions of the cast members are not believed to be scripted. The likelihood is further increased if a show also has other attributes such as being unpredictable, being competition oriented, or focusing on shocking events or behavior. This conceptualization of reality programming is supported by the participants' ability to sort the programs into distinct content-based groups, which suggests that the theme or format of a show does not define the programming category. The participants referred to clusters of shows that seemed to be distinguished from each other by a variety of characteristics, including the show's objective or prize, the format, the extent to which the producers constructed or manipulated the situation, and the message.

The most frequently discussed of these content-based program categories was that of "dating shows," which were referred to spontaneously in each group and included shows such as *Blind Date* and *Elimidate*. The shows that were described as belonging to this category were syndicated, half-hour long programs that tended to run late at night. They featured a different pair or group of non-actors in each episode, who were followed over the course of a single date. Each episode features footage from the date interspersed with interviews of the daters.

One group went on to distinguish explicitly these dating shows from a set of programs that included *Joe Millionaire*, *The Bachelor*, and *For Love or Money* on the basis of both their format and their content. The new set of programs also dealt with relationships and dating. However, they were serials that stretched over a pre-determined number of episodes and ran on major networks in primetime. They took place in luxurious settings, featured a ritualized series of courtship and elimination rituals, generally awarded a cash prize, and often featured a "reveal" or surprise plot twist. "You could name it as a Cinderella Story," one participant claimed.

"There's money involved," another continued, and "they're long, drawn out." Another group discussed a set of "specialty" shows that contained many of the same programs. The existence of this subcategory was further supported by the fact that programs designated as being part of this category were cited in several groups to explain the premise of other shows within the category, which suggests that the similarity between the programs was salient to the participants. *For Love or Money* was described as being like *The Bachelor*, as was *Joe Millionaire*.

As described above, shows with strong competition elements were discussed differently than either of the dating or specialty dating programs. There were other content-based groupings of programs that were specific to one interview group. These included the categorization of *Paradise Hotel* and *Temptation Island*, each of which focused on the shifting romantic entanglements of attractive young couples in exotic settings, as a distinct set of shows characterized by "basically exploiting sex" and "trying to get people to cheat on each other." The message and purpose of these shows was seen as distinct from the specialty dating shows whose ostensible goal was the promotion of relationships. This group also put *The Real World* and *The Osbornes* together because they are "just watching someone's lives." The lack of staged activities or of obvious intervention by the producers set these shows apart from the others. The degree of elaboration with which different subgroups of programs were described varied across the interviews. However, the participants' ability to sort the shows into distinct clusters suggests that reality programs are seen by the audience to reflect several different distinct themes, ideological messages, and content areas.

Realism

In order to investigate the ways in which audience members evaluated the realism of reality programs I attended to their responses to the specific questions about this topic, as well as

to any elements of the discussion about how a program related to real life. As has been the case in other studies (Meng & Lugalambi, 2003; Nabi et al., 2003) when asked directly, the participants tended to indicate that reality programs were not particularly real.

Events and people portrayed on the shows were described repeatedly as atypical. For example, the realism of *The Crocodile Hunter*, which features a zoo owner famous for capturing crocodiles with his bare hands, was dismissed because the central cast member was so extraordinary. "It's not really reality. He's the only guy that could really do that." Similarly, in discussing TLC's line-up of reality programs one participant said that, "they're real, but they always pick the strange ones, like it's people who are having the weird weddings . . . and they have the people having like seven kids or something on the *Baby Story*." Another participant complained that there was "just too much drama in a half-hour in most of these . . . shows to me. Whose life is this? I hope no one else's life is like this." In each case, the participants indicated that the events on the show are uncharacteristic of most people's experience. It should be noted, however, these participants tended to accept that the events portrayed on the show were real in the sense of being direct representations of specific things that actually happened. The Crocodile Hunter wrestles reptiles, the woman on *The Baby Story* had seven babies, and reality program cast members lead unusually eventful lives. The shows were seen as real in this sense.

The further comments of the participants suggest, however, that their understanding that what they see on the screen happened in front of the camera is affected by the shows' production processes. The participants also indicated that the shows were edited to present the most exciting version of the events and to imply that events were related when they were not. "In *The Real World*," one participant explained, ". . . all this stuff will happen in like three weeks and they'll put it into a half an hour, like this made this happen, but it really didn't." In another group, a

participant described the conflict-ridden Osbornes as having been “kind of pushed in that direction with editing and stuff. . . . They’re filming probably 20 hours a day.”

Furthermore, as discussed above, a central element that helped define the reality programs as a category was the understanding that the cast members were not performing a script. This aspect of the shows was also apparent in discussions about what made programs unreal. Debates about the reality of the program often centered on the question of whether they were staged or set up, that is whether the outcome was engineered by the producers. The realism of *The Osbornes*, for example, was challenged on the basis that the family was in some way inveigled into exhibiting the cursing and fighting that punctuate the show. "I think they make them try to do that," one participant insisted. Syndicated dating shows were cited repeatedly as being "set up," because the participants had been instructed to act in a certain way. "One of my best friends was on [one of the shows], . . ." a participant claimed. "No one's heart is really getting broken. . . . They're like "get to know each other" and like "know what, like, to bitch each other on" . . . so to make conflict in the show." When producers were believed to have determined the outcomes of program or the cast members’ behavior, a show was condemned for not being real.

Although this type of off-screen manipulation seemed to disqualify a program from being realistic, the participants’ comments suggested that they recognized other ways in which the production process affected the events shown on the screen while still seeing a show as real in some ways. When asked what was real about reality programs, for example, one participant responded, "they don't have a real script. [The cast members] have to do certain things at times, but it's just kind of like a freelance." A similar perspective was apparent in another group.

Participant 2: [The producers] set the stage. They give you the basic make-up. It’s kind of

like you're ad-libbing as an actor and you're given full autonomy to act as silly or as smart as you want or as stupid as you want.

Moderator: So, do you think you get to see people as they really are on reality programs?

Participant 2: Negative.

Participant 7: The camera always adds something different.

Each of these examples acknowledges that the producers stage events, but suggest that the behavior of the cast members within the context of those events is real.

In the quotation directly above, the participants also suggest that the very presence of the cameras had the potential to influence the cast members' behavior. This observation was also made in other groups. "I think people act differently," one participant explained, "when they know they are being filmed." Another argued that the reality of the programs was failing because cast members were becoming more self-conscious and strategic about how they presented themselves on the shows. This, he averred, would make the programs less popular. "I just think that people will look at it and say . . . this person is not being real, there's no point in watching it. This isn't reality. I tuned into see a reality show, and this isn't somebody being real."

The comments about staging or fixing the programs suggest that the amount of agency of the cast is perceived to have been central to evaluations of the show as real. The producers were free to set up bizarre situations as long as the cast members' responses to those situations were undetermined. The debates about the cast members' potential sensitivity to the cameras suggest that one of the reasons that the lack of scripting is important is that it implies that the cast members' behavior was a true reflection of their own will, personality, and character. When their behavior becomes self-conscious, it is no longer real. These perceptions also have implications for the appeal of reality programs, as discussed in more detail below.

The Appeal of Reality Programs

In order to investigate audiences' perceptions of the reasons that reality programs are entertaining, I attended to the features the participants mentioned when discussing the programs they liked as well as to their answers to direct questions about why reality programs are popular. The participants cited a wide range of reasons to explain their enjoyment of the programs and the programs' popularity. Some participants, for example, described enjoying the exotic locations and activities portrayed on the shows. One participant spoke of liking the interactions of *The Real World*, while another appreciated *The Amazing Race* because of the messages she felt it conveyed about endurance.

An element that was mentioned repeatedly was the shows' perceived novelty. One participant explained that, "with a lot of these shows, the main thing is just, basically the fact that it's different." In another group, the participants said that one of the reasons that shows such as *Survivor* and *Real World* were popular was that "it's hard to come up with a new idea. It was totally original." The programs are not, however, entirely original. Most of the elements that characterize reality programs have precedents and, as the analysis described above indicates, many reality programs are seen to be closely related to other types of programming. However, the participants' further comments suggest why these shows were seen as novel and how this factor may contribute to enjoyment of the shows. One participant explained his enthusiasm for the primetime specialty dating shows by comparing them to other types of programming. "I watch a lot of movies. . . . A lot of movies are very, very predictable. And this, even though it's crap, it's not predictable so." Another member of the group completed the sentence. "It's more entertaining, yeah." These comments suggest that one of the reasons the novelty of the program is important is that the resolution of the plot or the outcome of the story is difficult to guess in

advance.

This lack of predictability, in turn, seems to contribute to at least two other elements of reality programs' appeal: suspense and the opportunities they offer for cognitive involvement. The issue of suspense was framed in one group as "addiction" or feeling that you had continue to watch in order to find out how the show concluded. When asked why the programs were so popular, the response in one group was, "I think you get addicted." Someone else elaborated, "because it's different." The participants went on to explain that once you started watching, you would come back to see how the show ended. In another group it was explained, "people love the suspense of trying to predict who's going to win." In both cases, not knowing the ending is described as contributing to the enjoyment and continued consumption of the program.

This comment also alludes to the way in which the program's unpredictability can facilitate involvement. Some participants seemed to approach the shows as a game in which the goal was to guess the outcome. The participant quoted immediately above, for example, continued by describing watching one of the primetime, specialty dating programs with her friends and trying to figure out who was going to be eliminated next.

Last night . . . a couple of my friends and I were watching *For Love or Money*, and you know, it's like, . . . "OK, who's he going to kick off?" . . . We were trying to figure it out and we're like, "well maybe they're going to kick off Erin, but no, they could kick off Lauren," and . . . it just makes you feel like . . . you have some sort of control, . . . but you really don't.

Another participant reported enjoying *The Mole*, in which a team of contestants attempted a series of cooperative challenges in order to win prize money while trying to identify the cast member who has been instructed to undermine their efforts. You can "play at home," he

explained, by trying to identify the saboteur.

Reality-program watching also seemed to fulfill a social function for many of the participants. For some participants it was a means of interacting with friends, as is illustrated by the description of watching *For Love or Money* quoted above. Another participant talked about watching the same show and wishing that "my best friend was there so that we could just keep ripping on it. . . . I called him up and he was just cracking up." In both cases, the programs provided an opportunity for social interaction. Even for those who claimed to find the content of shows silly, they were said to provide "something to talk about around the coffee pot" at work.

An even more frequently mentioned explanation of why reality programs were liked was that they were comedic. This element of the shows was discussed in every group but one, and a wide variety of shows, including *COPS*, *Joe Millionaire*, *American Idol*, *Elimidate*, *The Osbornes*, *Cheaters*, and *For Love or Money* were described as "funny" or "hilarious." One participant, when asked what one got from the shows, responded that "you laugh at it." Another (Participant 2) justified her enthusiasm for *COPS* by saying that it is "just funny." She went on, "I was watching *COPS* one day and this is no lie. It was a domestic disturbance, right?"

Participant 5: That's every episode . . .

Participant 2: Exactly, it's true. And the cops went in there and you know, "What's going on here?" And the woman was like, "my husband threw a cheeseburger at me." And they showed the cheeseburger.

Participant 5: I saw that one! I swear to god.

Participant 2: Yes, and the cheeseburger's, the lettuce is over here, the tomato over there . . .

Participant 5: I seen that one. It was as funny as hell.

Part of the humor comes from the contrast between the rather grim situation the viewers expect and the less serious incident with which they are actually confronted. It is exacerbated by the careful display of physical evidence to portray strewn cheeseburger toppings rather than the guns, knives, or drugs with which the convention is normally associated.

However, this description also suggests something that was characteristic of other discussions of the humor of the programs. These people are seen as silly, not only for throwing food at each other but also for calling the police about it. One could argue that the program, or at least the audience's reaction to it, makes light of a serious social problem. Nevertheless, part of what the participants seemed to find funny was watching people they saw as behaving badly. This seemed to be particularly true when a cast member's pretensions or dishonesty was revealed. *Cheaters*, which gathers evidence on individuals that their partners suspect of cheating and then engineers dramatic on-air confrontations, was also described as "hilarious." Another participant, enthusiastically supported by his peers, declared that what he liked about the talent show *American Idol* was "seeing Simon [one of the judges] yell at the really bad singers because it's so awful. It's like, you don't have friends or family to tell you that you can't sing?" In both cases, the fun is in seeing someone be called out humiliatingly.

This element of enjoyment seemed, at several points in the discussions, to include a strong element of schadenfreude, of taking pleasure in another's misfortune. This is perhaps illustrated most strikingly by a discussion of an incident on *Survivor* in which a cast member, who presented himself as something of an outdoorsman, had to be evacuated after falling into the campfire and burning his hands. A participant commented that the show allowed you to see "just how stupid some people are about stuff." Another jumped in,

Participant 6: Like that guy who fell on the fire. You never blow onto a fire.

Participant 1: That was a great one!

Participant 6: If you breathe in, you're going to pass out, and you fall in the fire. I mean, I felt sorry for the guy, but it made me laugh.

Participant 4: It made you laugh!?

Participant 6: It did.

Participant 4: His skin was falling off!

Participant 6: It made me laugh. It's just that, like, I would go on camping trips, and everybody was like, . . . "never get in front and blow on a fire. . . . You're just going to inhale smoke, and you'll pass out, and you'll fall on the fire." There you go. That's what I'd been told for like 10 years.

This participant felt he had the knowledge to avoid the cast member's mistake. A source of some of the enthusiasm that viewers feel for this type of content may be that it allows a sense of superiority over the beleaguered casts. When viewers are able to feel that they have the knowledge, the integrity, or the good sense to avoid the misfortunes they see happening to others, it may enhance their own self-esteem. The exchange also suggests there is variation between people in the extent to which this gratification was salient to them.

There were also some programs that were cited as not entertaining. The nature of these shows contributes to the argument that being able to enjoy someone else's misfortune is an element of the programs' appeal. When the cast members' difficulties evoked discomfort rather than glee, either because they were undeserved or because the audience identified too closely with the cast member, the programs were no longer enjoyable. For example, a participant described herself as having "a problem with," a show called *Anything but Love* and described an episode in which a woman moved across the country to surprise her long-distance boyfriend with

news that she could move in with him. He demurred. In another group the same show was cited as being excessive and being “just a lot of public humiliation.” A participant described the show: “there are these girls . . . and they’re doing anything they can to get their [ex-boyfriends] back and it seems that every time they just don’t.” These embarrassments are larger-than-life versions of a typical dating hazard, rejection. It may have been difficult for the participants to achieve the distance necessary to see these episodes as funny or ego enhancing.

Another aspect of the programs that was described repeatedly as troubling was *American Juniors*, a talent contest featuring children. In one group, enthusiastic discussion of the joys of watching the “bad singers” on *American Idol* turned to *Juniors*, about which the participants were considerably less enthusiastic.

Participant 2: I don't particularly care for how the parents put pressure on their kids. I mean, not everybody is going to be a singer . . .

Participant 5: They're ten. They have 30 more years to

Participant 2: Right, to figure out what they want to do . . .

Participant 1: And these kids, it can even just roll right off their shoulders, if their parents didn't put so much pressure on them.

Participant 2: Exactly

Participant 1: When they do put so much pressure, that's when the kids are devastated . . .

Participant 2: Um-hum, just like Michael Jackson.

One of the participants went on to argue that, with adults, “it's their own choice, . . . but the little kids, that's kind of sad.” Although the parents are judged with derision, the contestants on the program could not be seen as deserving embarrassment because they could not be held responsible for their presence on the show. Therefore, it was difficult to feel superior to them or

to derive joy from their downfall.

It should be noted that the stance that the programs are funny or amusing offers gratifications itself. This position allows audience members to distance themselves from a programming category that is often charged with pandering to the lowest common denominator. In saying that they laugh at the programs, they deny taking them too seriously and strike a pose of knowing condescension.

However, there were suggestions of an element of enjoyment that required that the viewers identify with the cast members rather than feel superior to them. A participant compared reality programs to other shows, which were seen as “the happy ending stories, and they make you feel that life is supposed to be like that, and at least this way you see that your life isn’t that bad because it’s not like the perfect movie.” Reality programs, it is implied, function as an antidote to the unrealistically optimistic images of life portrayed by Hollywood and can help one feel more content with one’s experience. Furthermore, it was later argued that one could relate more closely to the cast members because the programs featured regular people rather than actors. Their successes, therefore, could inspire the audience by implying that they too might be able achieve their goals. *American Idol*, it was explained,

gives people hope. . . . Like you always think that, oh, it's always so unattainable to be famous, to be able to . . . follow your dreams of being a singer or an actor or whatever, and, you know, you see these people who from your hometown who are just, you know, normal people [that become successful.]

The discussion of these gratifications was much less common than talk of the stupidity or mendacity of the cast members. Furthermore, these comments were rarely left unchallenged. The dreams the participant said were inspired by *American Idol* were described by another group

member as "unrealistic actually." Yet another went on to remark that,

honestly . . . one of the best parts of watching [the show] is when . . . they show all the auditions and it's absolutely hilarious to watch these people who think they can sing and dance and they get up there and they don't . . . know what they are doing.

It is unclear whether consideration of the inspirational aspects of the shows made up a modest portion of the discussion because they made up a modest proportion of the audiences' reactions or because admitting to them, particularly in a group context, entailed a loss of face. Emotional investment in these programs unlikely to be judged as cool.

It should be noted, however, that these gratifications, like that of *schadenfreude*, require viewers to compare themselves with the cast members. Therefore, they are likely to depend upon the belief that the cast members have agency, that their behavior is a reflection of their personal will and character rather than the whimsy of a scriptwriter or the demands of a plot formula. This perception allows for the audiences' ego-enhancing feelings of satisfaction when they see behaviors that are silly or disingenuous, for ego-soothing feelings of affinity when they see problems comparable to their own, and for a sense of inspiration when the cast members do well.

In summary, elements of reality programs that contributed to their appeal included the relative unpredictability of the programs' resolution, which seemed to facilitate involvement in the program and to allow for the generation of suspense. Another important element was the perception of the programs as humorous, which seemed to be associated frequently with watching others being caught behaving badly.

Discussion

This study sought to further research into audiences' interpretations of and responses to reality programs by investigating target audience members' perspectives on three issues: the

nature, realism, and appeal of reality programs. In interpreting these findings, I first discuss the constraints of the methodology and then the implications of each of the research questions in turn.

Focus-group interviews have well known advantages. The open-ended technique allows for possibility that concepts that are salient to the participants but which have been missed previously by researchers can be introduced. In addition, the social context of focus groups encourages the participants to respond to one another's comments, which provides a means of evaluating the extent to which others see particular ideas as valid.

However, the method does have limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Specifically, the potential of open-ended interviews to portray audience members' responses to media texts is inevitably constrained by their awareness of and ability to articulate their own thoughts and impressions. The participants in the current study may have been unaware of some of the reasons they like reality programs and may have failed to remember or to consider others. Nevertheless, audience members' take on these programs is a vital aspect of understanding the programs' social roles. Furthermore, understanding of how viewers tend to approach these shows can only strengthen one's ability to study it. An accurate grasp of what audiences bring to mind when they are asked to evaluate a "reality program," for example, can help researchers write effective survey or interview questions.

It is also important to remember that focus group interviews are shaped by the social context. Individuals' comments are affected by the presence of their peers. However, media consumption is intrinsically a social activity. Even when audiences watch alone, they interpret television programs through criteria they have developed through interactions with others. Although the social context may shape participants' comments, it does not necessarily invalidate

them.

Finally, focus group samples are selective. The participants of the current study, who were educated, relatively young, and primarily middle-class, represent a reasonable place to start this investigation in that they are a target audience for the programming. The shows are likely to have been tailored to their tastes and interests. However, caution should be used in generalizing the results to other audience groups. It would be worthwhile to consider in further research whether other audiences interpret and respond to the shows in a similar way.

Conceptualizing Reality Programs

Despite these constraints, the study advances understandings of how audiences' conceptualize and respond to these shows and offers meaningful guidance for future researchers. Perhaps the most fundamental contribution of this work is to the attempt to conceptualize reality programs in a way that is consistent with the audience's understanding of this category. The results suggest that audiences' perceptions of the nature of reality programs are somewhat fluid, in that they are grounded in perceptions of specific shows. This suggests that the elements of at least some audience members' understanding of the category are likely to vary as the most prominent exemplars - and thus the conceptual anchors of the programming category - shift. Viewers' judgments about many of the secondary attributes that characterize reality programming may differ when their most salient program is *Trading Spaces* as opposed to *COPS*. One implication of this is that researchers using survey or interview techniques should avoid asking exclusively about reality programs in general. Without some gauge of the type of programs the respondents have in mind, it will be difficult to generalize the results appropriately and any contrasts with other research findings will be difficult to interpret. Researchers may want to consider either specifying the type of reality programs that the respondents should

consider or measuring the shows that the respondents are watching in order to provide a means of controlling or evaluating the type of programs that ground the respondents' perceptions.

The fluidity of the category may raise the question of whether it is appropriate to conceptualize reality programs as a distinct programming category. However, the results suggest that the designation is both appropriate and useful in some contexts. Although audiences perceive reality programs as a category without definite boundaries, the shows have a central defining characteristic: the nature of their realism. The shows are united by the perception that the behavior and speech of the cast members is unconstrained by a pre-established script, and therefore reflects in some way the cast members' personalities, skills, and values. If one were to define reality programs in a way that comports with viewers' understandings of the program, it would be as shows that portray people whose behavior is not predetermined by a script and which has the potential to reveal their true natures. The centrality of this factor to audiences' perceptions of reality programs does not seem to be unique to this group of viewers. A recent study of British reality program viewers (Hill, 2004) found that a focus on real people in real-world contexts was also central to their understandings of these programs.

When a theory or hypothesis suggests that this or a closely related feature of the programs contributes to the way they are selected or function, it is reasonable to conceptualize the programs as a category. For example, the current research suggests that the perception that the shows are unscripted can contribute to many aspects of audiences' enjoyment of the shows. Since the programs are not seen as being driven by traditional formulas, suspense seems to be heightened and there are greater opportunities for cognitive involvement. Similarly, the audiences' understanding that the cast members' behavior is a reflection of their personal character may contribute to the joys of both downward and upward comparison.

However, this research also suggests that there are contexts in which it would be inappropriate to approach the programs as an undifferentiated genre. The contrasts in the subject matter and theme of reality programs suggests, for example, that the preferences or personality characteristics that are associated with viewership or enjoyment are likely to vary across programs. Furthermore, the implications of the programs' lack of scripting and non-professional casts may vary according to the content of the shows. For example, seeing the cast members as real people is likely to contribute to *schadenfreude* when the cast is seen to behave poorly, whereas it is likely to contribute to a sense of inspiration when they do well. If one is interested in outcomes that are likely to be driven or influenced by the theme or the plot it is essential to conceptualize and measure variables at a level of specificity that would allow one to identify the effects of specific types of programs.

The current study also identifies criteria that could be used to divide reality programs into sub-categories. Elements that the participants saw as important in distinguishing these shows from each other included the prize or objective of the show, the format, the theme, and the amount of producer intervention. Particularly distinct sub-categories included the elaborately engineered prime-time, "competition shows," which award a cash prize and tend to extend over a dozen or so episodes, and the relatively unstructured, half-hour long "dating shows" where each episode follows a different couple on a date. "Specialty dating" shows such as *Joe Millionaire* and the *Bachelor* seem to make up of a distinct category of their own, in that they combine the elaborate set-ups, the multi-episode story-line, and elimination rituals of competition shows with the themes of dating shows. Several of these categories are similar to those developed using other methods. For example, the "competition shows" discussed by the participants in the current study overlap with the programs that make up the category of "game shows" that Nabi et al.

(2004) derived from a factor analysis and the category of “challenge shows” that Crook et al. (2004) derived intuitively from a list of popular programs. Both studies also include a category similar to the “specialty dating” category developed here. The similarities provide further evidence that the criteria suggested in the interviews reflect meaningful differences in the programs and may be a useful means of categorizing reality programs into sub-categories.

Evaluating the Realism of Reality Programs

This research also has implications for investigations of media realism. Previous research has identified a variety of different criteria can contribute to audiences’ perceptions of a text’s realism. Two of these criteria are typicality, or the perception that a text portrays events or characteristics that are representative of a particular population, and factuality, or the perception and a media text accurately represents a specific, real-world event or person (Hall, 2003). Both of these conceptualizations are relevant to reality programs. Participants discussed the typicality of reality programs, but tended to argue that the cast members and situations they portray are strikingly unrepresentative. They were more likely to accept the factuality of the programs, albeit on qualified terms. They tended to expect reality programs to portray non-actors whose words and behaviors were unconstrained by scripts or formulas. This perception helped define a particular show as a reality program. However, they acknowledged readily that the situations in which the cast members behaved were often contrived and that the presence of the camera may have influenced the cast’s behavior.

Experimental researchers (e.g., Atkin, 1983; Geen, 1975) have investigated the impact of factuality on a media text’s ability to influence audience members and found that materials that are labeled as non-fiction tend to have a greater influence on audiences’ behavior than materials labeled as fiction. However, this work has conceptualized factuality as an either-or judgment.

This study challenges this dichotomy and suggests criteria that audiences may consider when deciding where to locate a particular text on this continuum. When they made this evaluation, these viewers took into account a variety of factors including the potential for the camera to affect the cast member's behavior, selective editing, and the staging of events.

Although unusual, reality programs share characteristics with other genres. For example, they are similar to the type of news stories that Boorstin (1964) called pseudo-events in that they document happenings that actually occur, but were created specifically for the purpose of being documented. A worthwhile avenue for future research would be to consider whether audiences use similar criteria to evaluate the factuality of other types of materials.

The Appeal of Reality Programs

The participants cited a variety of elements of the shows as contributors to their appeal. Some of these elements have been addressed in other research and others have gone relatively unmarked in the scholarly literature. The study found novelty to be frequent contributor to audiences' enjoyment of reality programs, which is consistent with Nabi et al.'s (2003) results. The current participants' comments suggest that novelty contributes to enjoyment of the shows because it makes the outcomes of the show less predictable, thereby increasing suspense and involvement. As discussed above, both aspirational identification and schadenfreude contributed to some viewers' enthusiasm for the programs, and each of these elements may be intensified by the perception that the cast members were real people. This is consistent with the findings of a recent study by Reiss and Wiltz (2004) in which viewers who liked a larger number of reality programs were found to value status more highly than those who liked fewer of these programs. The researchers argued that the differential appeal of the programs indicated that a key element of their attraction may be that they allow the viewers to feel superior to the cast members and

that they offer viewers a fantasy about regular people gaining celebrity. In the current study, the prominence of aspirational identification and schadenfreude varied across programs and across viewers. This type of variation may account for the contrasts in findings across different studies that have sought to establish the antecedents of reality program viewership (e.g., Crook et al., 2004; Nabi et al, 2004). Future research may want consider further why some viewers tend to appreciate seeing people behaving badly, whereas others appreciate seeing people do well. The perceived humor of the programs was also highly salient to these participants. This element of the programs does not seem to have been considered in previous research and merits further investigation.

Reality programming is a highly visible element of popular culture and plays an influential role in today's broadcasting system. The current study contributes to the conceptual groundwork needed to study this phenomenon by identifying the characteristics that members of the target audience use to identify reality programs and by describing how the programs are seen to relate to the real world. It also provides an additional perspective on the criteria that can be used to distinguish different types of reality programs from each other. Finally, it advances understandings of the appeal of the programs by exposing the potential importance of humor and by suggesting mechanisms through which programs' novelty and the use of real people may contribute to the programs' appeal.

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